

TINKER'S
PLAGUE

STEPHEN B. PEARL

SAMPLE



CHAPTER ONE

KNIFE HEALING

The boy sprinted along the crumbling asphalt road, his twisted left arm flailing in his haste. He scrambled over a wooden gate and ran to an ancient van sitting in a field. A tower of interlocking pipes topped with a windmill rose from the van's back corner. Thin-film solar panels covered its roof and sides. Gasping, the boy wailed, "*Tinker!*"

The van's back door opened to reveal a man dressed in light, hemp clothing. His blond hair peeked out from under a wide-brimmed hat.

"What is it?" he asked, donning a pair of mirrored sunglasses.

The boy tried to explain, but all that came past his cleft palate was a babble.

"Slow down. I can't understand you," said the tinker. Stepping from the van, he touched the boy's shoulder. "Take some deep breaths and try again."

Trembling, the boy obeyed.

"It's me maw, she's a dyin'. Meb says she needs a doctor, like in Gridtown, but we ain't got none. Youse a tinker, Meb says maybe youse can 'elp. Da says 'e'll pay. Please, Tinker, save me maw."

"Meb, the midwife from the village sent you?"

"Yeah."

"You're Greg Thomson's boy. I remember you from last year."

"Yeah. Please, Tinker, youse gotta 'elps me maw."

"Is your mother having a baby?"

"Yeah. Meb ses it's what's killin' 'er."

"Damn it, I told Thomson to stop having kids. All right, run to the James' place. Have one of them hitch my team and bring my wagon to your house. I'll grab my med kit and go straight there."

"Thank youse, Tinker, thank youse." The child sprinted toward the main road.

"Damn Thomson! How many monsters will it take for him to accept the obvious?" The tinker entered the van, emerging seconds later with a pack on his back and a laptop computer in his hand.

Could be a malpresentation, or an umbilical tangle. Probably a foetal malformation knowing Thomson's seed, he thought as he started down the road.

Five minutes later he approached the farmhouse of the Thomson clan. Its worn, vinyl siding had torn from the walls in many places, exposing the styrofoam beneath. Boarded-over windows made its two stories seem taller. The outbuildings looked ready to collapse. Despite the warm, spring day, smoke flowed from the chimney.

"Tinker," called a well-shaped girl with delicate features standing on the porch. She wore a homespun shirt, leggings and leather sandals.

"Where's Mrs. Thomson?" asked the tinker.

"I'll take you." The girl led the way into the house. Dim light entered around the boards covering the smashed windows, highlighting years of filth and neglect. Deformed children stared at the tinker as he passed them.

"I'm Meb's granddaughter, Carla. Thanks for coming. Grandma said Mrs. Thomson's in a bad way. She said it's a malpresentation, but she can't find an arm or leg to turn the baby." The girl pulled a strand of her long, ebony hair away from her dark-blue eyes.

"I'll do what I can. By the way, I'm Brad." He removed his sunglasses to reveal piercing, blue eyes.

Carla led the way up a creaky staircase to a room containing a narrow bed and a birthing stool. A woman, with grey-streaked, black hair and a distended belly, lay naked on the bed. Her body was covered with bruises. She screamed, displaying that she was missing several teeth. A handsome, grey-haired woman, dressed in a cream smock, massaged the pregnant woman's abdomen and spoke soothingly. A fat man, in a tattered suit, sat on a stool in the corner. He chewed on the end of an unlit pipe and scowled.

"Grandmother, the tinker's here," said Carla.

“Brad, thank all the Goddesses you came. Damn lucky I spotted your windmill on my way here. I’m in over my head,” said the grey-haired woman.

“Carla told me. Let me have a look.” Brad set his laptop on the floor and removed his pack.

Mr. Thomson rose from his stool and moved to stand in front of the tinker. His harsh features reflected hatred and distrust. Brad noted the discolouration spreading over the shorter man’s bald scalp.

“I’s don’t trust youse, Tinker,” snarled Thomson. “Youse save me Emily and I’ll pay. Youse don’t and I’s don’t. And no funny business.”

“Get out of my way. This wouldn’t be happening if you had half a brain.” Brad pushed past the shorter man. “Okay, Emily, I’m going to check some things.”

“It hurts, it hurts. *No!*” She screamed as a contraction ripped across her belly.

“Meb, my stethoscope, please. Thomson, rip the wood off the window, so I can see what I’m doing.” Brad gestured to a sheet of plywood nailed to the wall.

Muttering, Thomson complied.

Minutes later the examination was complete. Brad returned his portable sonogram to his pack and prepared a shot.

“This will knock her out and stop the labour. The foetus is already dead.”

“Youse got to save me child, Tinker,” snapped Mr. Thomson.

“It’s dead. I doubt that it was ever really alive. It looks like a lump of flesh, more tumour than child. I told you, Thomson, your seed is poisoned. The water from your well is a mess.”

“Tinker lies. Water’s water, youse drinks it. All youse tinkers wants is to sell them phoney stills. I’ll not—”

Thomson’s tirade was cut short by his wife’s scream. Brad pressed a needle into the woman’s vein. Seconds later she was unconscious.

“Thomson, bring in a table. The only way to save her is to remove the growth.”

“She’ll still be a woman when youse done, won’ts she?”

“If by that asinine statement you mean, will she be able to have children? No!”

“Youse lie, Tinker. ’ealers cleans out growths and women ’ave babies. I’s knows a woman from Brookville ’ad it done. Alls youse want is to take away me manhood. Make it so’s I’s can’t ’ave no more children. Youse won’t.”

“Listen to me, Thomson. Maybe a healer could leave her womb strong enough that she could deliver normally next time.

I'm not a healer, I'm a tinker. It's going to push what I know to the limit to save her life. Get me that table, or your wife is as good as dead. As soon as that sedative wears off, she'll start pushing again. It won't take her long to burst her uterus."

"Er whats?" demanded Thomson.

"The sack the baby's in," supplied Meb.

"The growth's in," corrected Brad.

"I'll get youse table," snarled Thomson as he stamped from the room.

"What are her chances?" asked Meb.

Brad pulled a data cube from his med kit and inserted it into his laptop. "With a healer, ninety-nine to one she'd live. With me, maybe fifty-fifty. If I'd taken an extra surgical elective at the Academy, she'd be better off. Get some blocks and ropes, so we can elevate the table's foot. Boil some towels, and see if there's a clean sheet in this place. Also, check that my wagon's arrived. I'll need a power cable from it for my instruments."

"I'll have Carla throw it to me." Meb left the room. Brad pressed several keys on his computer and began reviewing texts on surgical technique.

Fifteen minutes later Meb returned and, leaning out the window, caught an electrical cord and pulled it into the room. Shortly after that Thomson entered, carrying one end of a battered table. Carla carried the other.

"The towels are boiling, and Jeremy is bringing up a clean sheet," announced Meb.

"Good. The blocks and ropes?" asked Brad.

"I'll fetch them." Carla ran from the room.

"Thomson, you're with me. I need a pack mule." Brad snatched up his laptop and left the room.

Thomson followed, stopping at the door to Brad's wagon. A heavysset, older man, dressed in homespun, wearing a broad-brimmed hat and dark sunglasses, waited by the battered van.

"Hello, Tinker, Greg. How's she doing?"

"Not well, Mr. James." Brad scanned the pasture where his four mares grazed.

"I locked down your windmill before moving her and loosed your team while I was waiting. Do you need anything else?"

"Not that I can think of. Thanks for bringing my wagon, but for now you'll have to forgive me." Brad climbed into his van.

"Certainly." Mr. James started toward the road.

Brad emerged carrying a toaster oven, spotlight, electric razor and portable respirator. "Take these to your wife's room. Tell Meb to prep the gear. I'll be up in a minute."

With a grunt Thomson moved to obey.

Reopening his laptop, Brad sat on his rear bumper and continued to review his data cube. When he returned to the impromptu operating room his surgical tools were in the toaster oven, and Meb was shaving Emily.

“Meb, you are a wonder.” Brad lifted the unconscious woman onto the table and secured her in place with the ropes.

“Do you think she’ll come to?”

“No, but once she’s open, we’ll have to tilt up the table. It will make her guts fall up out of the way. Tell Thomson to put a rag over his ugly mug and get in here. We’ll need Carla to slide the blocks in place when he lifts the table.”

“I’ll tell them.”

“Good. I’ll intubate her and set up the respirator while you do that. Last thing I need is her puking into her lungs.”

“I wish I knew how to intubate. Who would have thought a tube down the throat could save so many lives?”

Minutes later Meb returned with Thomson and Carla.

“Youse ready to do somethin’ now, Tinker?” snarled Thomson.

“Once you’ve tied a cloth over your mouth. There’s no point in saving her with an operation to have her die of an infection.”

Thomson snorted but tied a damp, clean handkerchief over his mouth and nose.

“Meb, scrub with me. You’re my sterile nurse.

“Carla, you’re my grunge nurse. That means you deal with any dirty stuff. Clear?”

“Clear.”

They scrubbed. Meb moved to stand between the instruments in the toaster oven and Brad.

“Here we go,” said Brad. “Bloodless scalpel.”

Meb passed him the end of the fibre optic tube. Setting it against Emily’s abdomen he pressed its button. A flicker of laser light pierced the flesh, which peeled back to reveal the fat beneath. Brad extended the cut to just above the mons veneris.

He cut through other layers of flesh, dragging them aside with retractors.

“Carla, shine the light into the wound. Meb, a regular scalpel. I don’t want to risk burning the intestines when I open the peritoneum.” The knife cut clean, and the uterus bulged up from the incision.

“Taweret! It’s huge,” swore Meb.

“Worse than that. It has to come out.”

“What? Why?” demanded Thomson.

“Those white things piercing the muscle wall. They’re claws. The foetus is a mutation. I can’t separate it from the

surrounding tissue. Meb, I'll need four clamps to seal the uterine arteries.

"Thomson, lift the foot of the table."

"Youse can'ts take 'er... 'er... the sack baby grows in!" snarled Thomson.

"I can and will. I pray the creature in there didn't do any more damage than I can see. Now lift this damn table!"

Teeth gritted, Thomson obeyed while Carla placed the blocks.

"Carla, wipe my brow. I'm sweating like a pig." With hands held steady by an act of will, Brad clamped the uterine arteries and separated them with the bloodless scalpel, cauterizing the wound. Two more cuts and the fallopian tubes separated. Drawing the bloated uterus to one side, he cut its connection to the bladder, then the cervix, and lifted it out.

"That has it." Brad glanced around the room. Thomson leaned against the wall, white as a sheet. "Get out of here Thomson, before you faint!"

Silently the farmer shuffled from the room.

"I have to close now. Curved needle, with the white thread. That's the one the body will absorb."

"Good work." Meb passed him the needle.

"I'll believe that when she's back on her feet."

When the operation was over, they returned Emily to the bed and removed the intubation tube.

"She'll probably sleep for a few more hours, but she mustn't get up for at least a week," explained Brad as they moved his equipment into the hall. "Can you get one of her kids to watch her until she wakes up?"

"I'll see to it. I tossed your power cable out the window."

"Thanks, Meb. Did you save the uterus?"

"Yes. Are you going to do what I think you're going to do?"

"Probably."

"I want to be there."

"What are you two talking about?" asked Carla.

"I've been after Thomson for years to stop fathering children. His seed is polluted."

"He tries to spread it around enough. He's been after me since I turned thirteen."

"I can't fault his taste," remarked Brad.

Carla blushed.

"Now, Brad. Carla is my granddaughter. Have the decency to seduce her behind my back," interrupted Meb.

"Grandmother!" Carla's blush deepened.

"Tell me, Meb, are all the women of your line beautiful, or does it skip a generation?"

“Brad, if I were twenty years younger.” Meb grew serious. “We should confront Thomson. I worry about his oldest girl, she’s just entering puberty, and with Emily infertile...”

“He’s that twisted?”

“Yes he is! Nick wanted the town council to take his children from him, but we don’t think anything has happened yet. Even if he fathered a child on his daughter, how could we prove it without gene testing?”

“If we can scare Thomson off long enough, he won’t get the chance.”

“What do you mean?” asked Carla.

“That rash on his scalp. Skin cancer. Not breeding wasn’t the only advice he refused to listen to. He doesn’t wear a hat in the sun, and he refuses to get a still to clean his water.”

“I saw it too. My guess is in six months, Emily will finally have a proper chance to heal.” Meb shook her head.

Brad stared at the floor. “I noticed the bruises. Men like Greg make me embarrassed for my gender.”

Meb looked at Carla as she spoke. “Fortunately, they are the exception, and women can be every bit as bad.”

Carla rolled her eyes.

Brad shrugged. “Carla, if you would move my gear to my wagon, your grandmother and I have an unpleasant task to perform.”

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