

The first thing I knew was the stench.

It was a heavy, vile mix of piss, shit, blood and unwashed bodies, along with a dusty, stale taste that filled my mouth and throat.

The next thing I knew was the agony.

“My leg! My leg!”

Strange hands pinned me down as I thrashed in the bed, twisting in unfamiliar, yellow-stained sheets.

“Give him morphine!” A heavily-accented voice shouted nearby.

“There’s worse than him,” said another. “Strap him down and give him paracetamol.”

Morphine? Paracetamol?

What language were they speaking?

I fought as they tied me down, struggling for release, before I saw my leg.

Except I didn’t have a leg.

Just a stump and a pool of blood.

I screamed anew and the world went black.

When I came to things were better, although not by much. The pain wasn’t as bad, but I was still tied down and my throat was so dry that, when I went to call out, all I could do was moan.

“You’re awake.” It was the same heavily accented voice I’d heard earlier; it belonged to a man with dark hair and a few days’ growth on his chin. The edge of the tattoo visible on his neck marked him as a non-insurgent local.

“Here.” He helped me up but didn’t untie me, then offered me a cup of water. I wanted to gulp it, but just sipping was exhausting.

“Where am I?” I croaked when I could speak again.

“You’re in a hospital,” he replied.

I looked around; it was not like any hospital I'd ever seen. It was a single hall, stinking hot and covered in dust, with rows of old beds. They had buckets underneath them, which accounted for the foul smell and were surrounded by clunky, electric machinery. Electricity was a filthy, out-dated energy source that I'd never seen except in museum displays. At the end of the hall, a wooden cupboard with glass-panelled doors displayed obsolete equipment: rolled bandages, manual syringes, metal instruments and medicines with strange names like *Nurofen* and *Panadol*. There were no medi-bots, no medication patches, no sign of tissue regeneration printers or limb cradles to reprint and repair my leg.

At this thought, the pain returned with a vengeance.

"Can I have *NervStun*?" It was a common, topical pain-killer which suppressed nerve-endings for twelve-hours.

The nurse raised an eyebrow. "No *NervStun* here; I've got paracetamol -"

"Is that the same?"

"It's a painkiller - but it's not as fast acting and it's older."

"I thought you said this was a hospital!"

"Do you want pain relief or not?"

I took it, only because I was clearly not getting anything else. It was primitive; with no medication patch, I had to put two large pills in my mouth and then wash them down with water. The coating on the pills was vile and I gagged. The nurse gave me another drink.

"You gonna untie me or what?"

"That's up to the doctor."

"Where's he?"

"*She* is busy with more important cases and will come and see you when she can."

I bristled. "Do you know who I am?"

The nurse rolled his eyes. "Course I do: there's a million of you in Tigris City."

He turned away and I manoeuvred myself back down onto the bed, furious.

The doctor took more than an hour to show up. She was a short woman with an olive complexion and dark hair. She had a sharp nose and a steady gaze, but no identification tattoo, so she wasn't from this part of the world.

“Good afternoon,” she said. “I’m Doctor Rodriguez, I work for *Médecins Sans Frontières*.”

I nodded; I’d heard of MSF and knew they operated in this country, although generally they were a pain in the arse. They were the bleeding heart type who believed in human rights for insurgents as well as innocents. It was quite sickening.

She had me untied and told me that the Military Governor in Tigris City had been informed I was here. I then asked the more pressing question.

“What happened to my leg?”

“You stepped on a landmine.”

“What?” I was confused; the insurgents were not using landmines.

“A landmine,” she repeated.

“That’s impossible; my boots are mine-resistant.”

Mine-resistant boots were basic military gear. One of the best things about the Tech Boom of 2053 was the advances in weaponry; using magnetic charges, military scientists had been able to design landmines that posed no danger to their own side and could be laid without risk to combatants. There had been no accidents from landmines for the past thirty years.

“The landmine you stepped on was from the early 2000s,” she said and I flinched.

“Mine-resistant boots are redundant on mines laid before 2053.”

“Well who buried it?!” My mind was in a tailspin. There was obsolete technology all over this country but none of it worked.

“You did,” she replied and I snorted.

“Like fuck we did!”

“Not *you* personally. Western Coalition troops laid it sometime after 2001; they’re fairly common out here.” She gave me a look of abject disgust.

“Well what happens next?” I wanted to know. This woman was clearly against me and the sooner I got away from this filthy ‘hospital’ the better.

“The Governor is sending an army medical team to evacuate you.”

“Well, they can’t get here soon enough.”

They arrived two days later. I wasn’t sorry when they loaded me onto a stretcher and I finally got *NervStun* on my leg.

“Not to worry, Corporal Jones,” the major said as we took off for Tigris City, “there’s limb cradles and tissue printers already being set up for you - you’ll have your leg back in no time.”

I settled back and closed my eyes.

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A week after Corporal Jones was evacuated, a supposed insurgent strike on the ill-equipped mountain hospital left all patients and staff dead. The military claimed they’d been forced to nuke it, as the insurgents had explosive repelling technology. Dr. Rodriguez had apparently refused to leave her patients and MSF’s demands for an independent investigation went nowhere. In his office in a heavily fortified building in Tigris City, the Military Governor of the Middle-Eastern Tigris Region, usually called METR, signed off on the cover story.

Corporal Jones never heard anything of it.

Why would he?

He was like most young soldiers, they’d never been told what had really happened here in the decades since 2001. They didn’t know about oil, dictators or weapons of mass destruction. They didn’t know the truth about METR and the days when it had still been called Iraq.