

Metal Heads: A Novel

by Tom Maremaa

Part I

The orange sky melts away.

Shadows fall and twist in the wind. I'm on patrol with three of my buds, there to retrieve the body of a fallen comrade, Bill's body, we're told. They got him, used him, then dumped his body in a ditch and said, "Hey, he's yours now. Go get him." No Marine is ever left behind. Ever. Ramadi is a hornet's nest for the asking and we're feeling all the pain of a million bites, a million stings. The triggers of hate are all around us.

Out of the shadows we're greeted by a pair of private contractors, men who got word of Bill's release, men working security for one of the internationals. The taller of the two steps forward and I'm overwhelmed by his dominating presence: he stands six feet six at least, a big, mean-looking beast of a man with scars and tattoos and a smear of black stubble covering his cheeks and jaw. He's wearing his full battle rattle, flak vest and Kevlar helmet. Over one shoulder he's got weaponry, an M-16 and a Mossberg 12 gauge shotgun, good for clearing out insurgent houses, both loaded and ready to pop; over the other a samurai sword, gleaming in the twilight.

"Name's Travis," he extends a cold hand. "Protection's my game. What's yours?"

We introduce ourselves, me, Lance Corporal Witherspoon, and my buds, one of whom is blunt: "What're you protecting, sir, if I may be so rude to ask?"

"Why gold, of course," he snarls. "Black gold."

We nod knowingly, cracking smiles as we walk toward the ditch where Bill's body is lying in wait, eyes behind our heads. The enemy is out there, lurking in the dark narrow passageways between buildings, ever vigilant, always ready to pounce and light up—open fire. A quiver of fear snakes down my spine, then coils

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around in the pit of my stomach. Are we in a kill zone, or what? We start to cough, our throats parched and dry to the bone from breathing razor-sharp particles of sand blown across the desert by a summer wind, a northwesterly they call the *shamal*. The stench of death, foul and unforgiving, fills the night air.

"That's pretty skanky, Mr. Travis," I blurt out stupidly.

"You have a problem with that, soldier?"

The man's face turns beet red, his eyeballs glazed. He must be high on something. He looks as if he's going to waste anybody and anything that stands in his way. I feel his anger rising to a boil, turning into a fierce, unstoppable rage. He can't contain himself, a contractor gone mesmerotic.

I back off and pull away. The moon's first light appears as we haul Bill's body out. Bill's badly mutilated, chopped up. My bud says, "Bill was, dammit, a football player, a linebacker with a future, president of his class, a brave man. He didn't deserve this. An angel. It's not right what happened."

"Know who did it," interjects Travis. "We know. We'll exact revenge. Privately. You with me, soldier?"

We nod again. Knowingly.

They call me Spoon. My name's Jeremy Witherspoon, actually. And I've got a story to tell, one you might find hard to believe, but believe me, all of it's true. I swear it is. You've got my word on that, as Dad used to say with a wink and a smile when I was growing up. My gulliver wounds got me here, in recovery, chilling out from the war. Taking it one day at a time, hanging on by the skin of my zoobies, I'm waiting to go home so I can put the memories of my unspeakable actions, unthinkable deeds behind me and move on. That's before Skank shows up, before Kamal and his daughter Leila come into the picture and before I can figure out what's really going down in the Body and Repair Labs at St. Richard's.

Speaking of the war, I did some pretty baddiwad things over there; I mean, things I don't really want to talk about right now. There's a lot about the war nobody, but *nobody* wants to bring up, or

should know about. I'll tell you if you promise to keep what I did a secret, at least until I'm ready to come clean myself. Fair enough?

I'm one of the tthis, one of the metalheads on the ward, Lance Corporal Witherspoon with a steel plate attached to his skull, sir. That's me, all right. Just in case you don't know what I'm talking about, bear with me while I explain. I've got what they call medically, according to the docs, a *Traumatic Brain Injury*. Can you dig it, mon? That's what happens when your gulliver gets jarred and all shaken up by an explosion from a roadside bomb.

Inside your skull there's all that gray matter, billions of neurons and synapses connecting nerve cells, the dance of life, the docs tell us, and when you get hit by one of those improvised devices, it may blow off your hand as it did mine outside a Baghdad café, but worst of all, it'll rattle your brain, move what's inside your gulliver from side to side. *A violent, uncontrollable shaking*, the docs call it. Your gulliver feels like it's had scrambled eggs with a side order of burnt toast for breakfast. Hey, I'm not joking. The explosion creates a lot of pressure, pounds and pounds of it like a steam engine, and sometimes your skull swells up until it's bigger than a watermelon. That's when the docs have to perform surgery and cut a swath of your skull open to relieve the unbearable, mounting pressure. After they've cut it open and let the insides breathe, for God's sake, they'll patch it up with a metal cover, a plate, held tight with metal screws twisted into your skull. You won't feel it because there's no feeling when they work on your gray matter. But you'll feel the cutting of the skull and the drilling for the screws.

One doc here even cut a chunk of skull out of Major Pink's gulliver about the size of a sliced cantaloupe, replaced it with a metal cover, and then performed surgery on the dude's abdomen, where he found a cavity below the ribcage where he could store the chunk, so the body could nourish it until the swelling went down in his gulliver and the chunk could be put back in its place. Meantime Major Pink, good man that he is, soldier of the night in Fallujah, is walking around with this big metal plate on the exposed part of his gulliver. That's the way it is for me too, why we're all metalheads

here, although my chunk of skull was blown away. You could say I've got a big hole in my gulliver, though my senses and cognition seem to be okay, at least they were before Private Contractor Skank made his appearance known and changed it all. I'll get to that part of the story soon enough.

If you do the arithmetic, you'll viddy our numbers keep mounting and counting up: each day a new shipment of tthis arrives at dawn in the house of pain, most of them with serious body parts missing, all feeling the angst, knowing something's not right in their gullivers. Welcome to the club; pleased to meet you, returning soldier. There's some *healing* to be done and we can do it. Be *patient*. Your turn will come. That's the mantra, anyway.

