

# Hell is Empty I: Daed

"Daed." His pupils strained to maintain any semblance of stability. They flittered back and forth as he spoke. "He was the man who, how would you say? Enslaved?" I assured him he had the right word. "Yes, my sister and me. My father had been killed, mother had debts."

"And she used you to pay off the debts to Daed?" I said.

"Well, part of the'debt--and not to Daed, to another man... he sold my sister and me to Daed and took my mother in as a maid." His eyes turned towards the floor. "We go by truck many miles. Laid on the floor with the other cargoes"

"What country did they bring you to?"

He broke eye contact and began to scrape some of the dirt off his worn boot as he spoke. "I do not know. They separated me from my sister quickly." He looked back at me. "I do not know what happened to her."

"What kind of work did they have you do?"

"Brick-" he stopped to hack up phlegm. He spit it on the concrete floor. He coughed once more before completing his sentence. "Brick-making, for as long as the sun was up. Every day for 10 years"

"Local authori—the police didn't care or was the facility far enough away for them to not notice?"

"No, they knew it was there." He gave a false smile. "We were being paid, but we paid too." He stopped smiling. "...for room and board. We paid more than we get paid."

He smiled again, but this time real, and wide, impressed with his own rhetoric.

"How did you get away?"

"I escaped when I was... 17? I waited until the sunset, the supervisor liked to sneak a smoke at the end of his shift. I don't remember much from that night. I just saw him walk away from the workers, off behind a small hut..." His eyes moved away from the floor as he lit a cigarette, and then his eyes met mine.

"I pick up a brick. I follow him, heart..." He opened his hand, stretched out his fingers and snapped them closed, and repeated, mimicking a heartbeat, "in my throat. I hear CRACK! and then the next ting' I remember was running off the grounds.. and the blood on my hands." He showed his palm and smiled, real, and wide.

"What was the crack?"

"Might be skull, Might be brick. I do not know." He took a deep drag from his cigarette.

There was a silence. He got up from the small plastic chair and walked towards a small shelf nestled in a corner. From it, he picked up a glass bottle of an unmarked liquid, it was clear, but obviously not water. As he looked at the bottle, I took a look around the room. It was claustrophobically small, with plaster walls and a tin roof. There were no windows, only one small wooden door you had to duck to pass through. The silence was disturbed by what sounded like a dispute somewhere in the distance. My acquaintance

put the bottle back down, walked to the door, opened it, and yelled into the dark.

"Lete stori!" There was a muffled response I could not hear very well, and quickly said "kuua" as he shut the door, I heard some yelling in French followed by three gunshots in quick succession. The dispute was settled.

I tried to seem unconcerned and continued my line of questioning. "So how did you end up here?"

He didn't answer right away. He returned to his glass bottle, but this time, retrieved it and brought it to the table. He took a last drag and put his cigarette out on the round wooden table we sat at, it was wide and poorly rolled and as he pushed it against the table it shredded leaving him putting out the smoldering tobacco with his calloused fingers. He poured some of the liquid in the paper cup I had been using for water, dumped out what was left of his and refilled it with the unknown liquid. It would be rude not to drink with him and I had no interest in risking a dispute, so I was obliged, at the least, to take a sip. It reminded me of gasoline, the burn would stick on my tongue for hours. I was having trouble adjusting to this place.

"I caught a ride from the coast heading here. I stayed in the back of the truck with the other cargoes. When I got here, here... There was civil war, the borders had no guards. When I arrived in country, my driver was shot and I was... forced... to join the local militia."

I didn't have the gumption I thought I did before arriving "in country". I pulled a water bottle from my pack and

attempted to wash away the burn. He looked to me and allowed me to light a cigarette before continuing.

"My time with them.. profitable. Every town we went to, I take trinkets and loot and bury it. I stole gov'ment uniform at first chance. When coup fell to pieces, I turn my vest, I throw away gov'ment uniform and leave unnoticed."

"No brick this time?" I said with a quiet smile. He laughed and drank.

"No brick this time" he repeated back with a wide smile of gold, white and yellow teeth. He took another drink, and then laughed again before smacking his open palm against the table—"CRACK", and the roaring again. He continued, in better spirits than he had been all night.

"I went from burnt town to burnt town, collecting my caches. I bought a small covered truck after the first, surplus from the now ending war... And while on my way to the second, found a family walking the road. Three sons, a daughter, and a pregnant mother. Their village had been burnt to the ground by some of the last rebels. I pull over, and the mother ask if." He mimicked their *educated* accents with a smile "might we have a ride to a village where my sister lives". He stopped smiling, "I said yes and we drive. The mother ride in the cab with me, the children in back, there was plenty of room, there was no other cargoes. We spoke in the cab. She say to me, her husband was killed. She traded her son to the rebels to end some debts, she was now on the run from the rest."

"Where were they trying to go?"

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"Away. I told her I could get her and her family out of the country."

"Generous."

"No. I took her to Daed."