

## Hell is Empty II: Alan

"Sorry mate!" I heard, accompanied by a swift smack on the back. "Ro'bots made me late as all-hell"

"Robots?" I said, taken by surprise.

"Ya man, AHEM-, dem' traffik lights" he said, clearing up the confusion and his throat. He looked a bit ragged, like he had cleaned off the dirt from his shirt and face but the stains remained. Stains not above, but deep within the fabric. He was more lanky than I remembered him, like someone had put a white dress shirt and a patchy beard on a skeleton. He looked down the clean, shiny, bar, "Mate, two whiskeys. Double, straight" He held up two fingers with a stern face until the bartender acknowledged the order. He wiped some dirt off his hand onto the bar and turned back to me with a friendly grin, "How have you been man! It's been- so-long!" He got up, pulled me off the stool and gave a big hug. I could feel the smile stretch ear to ear and to my own.

"I've been well enough, and yourself?" I said as I sat back down and finished my drink in preparation for the obligatory next.

"Well enough? But you're here to see me, well enough? You're good man, tell me you're good. Don't have me trek all the way out here for-well enough" the beaming smile turned to a coyote's smirk.

"I'm well enough, Alan" I said as the drinks arrived. He gave a quick hit to my shoulder that reminded me that this was no skeleton and I showed a resolve that reminded him that this was not the child he had met so many years ago.

"À la tienne" He said, looking through my eyes behind me to some other place, raising his glass with his poor French.

"à la vôtre" I responded with mine and we drank and we spoke and we smoked for some time. Our English stood out—Alan was a big personality for such a little bar. He caught some stares from the stool behind him, it was as if he had eyes in his neck, as if he could feel the breath change in the air, he knew someone was looking at him and he turned immediately to meet the gaze.

"Chech-sa-e-cha" Alan said with a slur and a smile to the occupant, struggling to say hello in his broken Polish. He turned back to me immediately, "If the Poles are so friendly why did they make it so hard to say hello!" He laughed as he swiveled again, running his fingers through his beard.

"Cześć, hello." the man responded, first in a clean Polish, and then in English with a German accent. He had glasses and skin pale like Alan's, but not so stained, he stretched his hand out in formality. Alan grasped his hand, and the man winced, "A Kraut? You a German, man?", he did not let go.

The hands shook up and down no less than twelve times-- Alan grasped it like a dog tugs a rope. The man spoke as Alan released, "Yes, I am from--"

"I used to work with Germans, I don't like working with Germans...", apparently all Alan heard was yes. "They don't have a sense of humor, you know" he turned to me for an agreement he knew he wouldn't get and then sat back on his stool putting himself at the center of the three of us.

"So I will tell you, one day, I'm in Pretoria now", He was. "I get a call to come in--they're gonna pay me hazard to work a road leading to Beira" he got a blank stare from the German, so he clarified, slowly "you know man, MOE-ZAM-BEAK, Mozambique, AF-ree-kah"

He took a drink and re-lit his cigarette. "There was bandits, so I'm gonna get paid some boss hazard pay to sit in the back of a pick-up truck for a month. So I get sent out, I get gear, a nice bullpup—a long-rifle. They tell me you're gonna be a marksman, this is your security team, and it's a bunch of Germans. None of them did any work before, they did some peace-keeping in Afghanistan and in Kosovo? Most of them- it was their first time in Afrika, and spoke like no English man."

"So I will tell you, we're driving one day", He knocked his hand on the bar twice, and to his surprise, got some sort of echo, "ah, not wood? Well anyway, I--", he knocked again, "on the truck cab. Let's them know I see something.. I see something movin'around" He got real quiet.

He whispers now, "You know, so I see what I think is a bushie' crouchin' way up down the road, and the pick-up starts slowing down. I think, ah, that's a bandit', a lil' snake in the grass. So I tell my kraut there to confirm the shot, cuz' you know, he's there to confirm every shot on anything not shooting at us. So as he puts the binoculars up to his eyes..."

*CLOP-CLOP*, he banged his palm against the bar, surprising the German, the bartender, myself and everyone in between, and he begins laughing. "So I hit the cab again, my kraut friend throws up, you know, because he's like, looking at this bushie through the zoom when he gets knocked, like real bad man, I think I hit the jaw—real nasty spot man." He gave himself a good smack in the face. "We drive up, and it turns out, not a bandit at all. Just some guy taking a shit off the side of the road. So I look to my boys and I say *Talk about getting caught with your pants down.*"

He stopped to laugh, “Not ONE of them laugh man.” Nobody was laughing.

“Oh mate, my man, my friend, let me get you a napkin” Alan said, alerting the German to the fact that his beer had spilled on his trousers, he grabbed a handful of napkins from behind the bar, while he laughed nervously to ease the tension, “friend, that’ll never come out if you don’t dab it quick.”