

VEGARD FOTLAND

Far Beyond the Seams

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## One foot in the grave

Breath. As if I was drowning in the desert, scorching the inside of my lungs like embers. No longer empty. Suddenly filling with cold stale air. I didn't know if I was choking or living. Living. I was living. For the first time in what seemed like forever, the surrounding flesh was my own; movable, cold, prickling.

I gasped for more air, but there were none. What little had been in here with me was taken with my first drag. I was choking again. I flailed around to get some sense of direction and realized, I was in a wooden box. The sense of self was fleeting as I felt my sight return to darkness. I struck upwards against the seemingly mildewed and rot eaten wood. A crack. No light. The adrenaline was pumping a hole through my chest, as I struck the wood again. And again. And again. Until my knuckles bled. Until my bones cracked. Until what little oxygen inside me was no more.

The wood cracked open and a mound of dirt fell on top of me. It filled my dry mouth, but with what might I had left I started digging. Pound after pound, I dug through the dirt. Inching my way towards a hopeful something. Then, in the

darkness of giving up, my hand felt the slight breeze of cold wind as it pierced the dirt. Freedom was within my grasp. I seized. Clenched my fist around a nearby piece of cold and wet crabgrass. I pulled until the fibres in my muscles were aching, screaming for repose. The crabgrass released their roots, but with the last of my all I dug my hand into the ground, my nails breaking against the coarse compacted dirt. The pain did not even enter my mind. It was pure desperation. Pure will to live. With a final push, my second hand broke free of the dirt, grabbed a hold opposite of the other and pulled my head free. I could yet see as the dirt was plastered on my eyes, but I could feel, breathe, take in the wind. I coughed up what must have been a buckets worth of dirt from my mouth and throat. Thick globules of sticky saliva infused dirt. I could breathe once again. With my body buried, and my hands in a resting position, with the dirt filling the creases and crevasses, I gave in to the exhaustion and lay there. I was safe.

After a minute of mindless repose, I started the arduous task of getting the whole of me out. After some minutes of struggle, I emerged like a newborn baby calf. Just as unstable and weak in my legs. I stumbled a bit as I started picking the dirt from my eyes. My hands were shaking. Trembling with each grain plucked. Sore and pulsating i managed to get the last piece of coarse dirt from my dry eyeballs. I could see.

A barren waste of misty, desolate wetlands. Beside my now collapsed hole, a small wooden plank with a name halfheartedly carved into it.

“Vosh”. Is that me? I thought. Come to think of it, I couldn’t recall anything. It was as if I was born anew. My mind was churning thoughts like an engine running on fumes.

Nondescript, lightning, flashing and disappearing in fractions of a second, but my memories were none. A blank canvas.

Looking around gave me nothing. Looking down gave me worry. I was clad in dirty, mildewed leather armour with a large open rift over where my heart was. It stank, like that of a cat's corpse in an alleyway. It was hard to tell what was underneath, as the clothing felt more like an excess layer of skin than a separate item entirely. As if I had never worn anything else. It was hard to tell anything. Was I wounded? Everything hurt, so locating a single part of my body felt impossible.

*"Okay, first thing first"*, I thought to myself. There has to be some sort of explanation somewhere. I patted down my clothes to no avail. Seemingly nothing hidden as far as I could tell at the time. So I started to dig up my own grave. Maybe I was buried with something. Spending longer than I would have liked, and expending more energy than I could afford, I dug out the site. As my hands tore through the mix of loose and compacted dirt, my bloodied fingers touched something. Something metal. I started feeling it out with my fingers to see if I could get a grip. Long and somewhat cylindrical. I managed to find perch on the object and started pulling it up like a gardener to a weed.

The dirt gave its grip on the object and I fell backwards, making a bosom sized indent in the earth below. In my hands lay a long, double cylindrical, metal object attached to a finely carved and sanded wooden handle of sorts. The cylinders were hollow and betwixt the metal and wood were a set of mechanism. Though I could not bring to mind any former experience with this object, I knew what it was. I knew its intent. This was a weapon of sorts. Neither a sword for cutting, nor a bow for piercing, this thing was special. On the back of the wooden piece there was a letter finely carved, now filled

with dirt, making out the letter “V”. Vosh. I am Vosh. And this thing was mine.

As I aimlessly looked around, I realized something perturbing. I had no food, no water, no shelter and no idea where to go or why. My stomach felt empty, as if it had been unfilled for years. My throat was so dry, no sound came out when I tried to speak. I could feel the vocal folds in my larynx struggle to close and move. Dry and cracked like a masons foot in hot summer months. I needed water. I had but taken my first breath, and I was already dying.

Shallow puddles of black water scoured the surrounding place. No matter how much I wanted to bend over and suck up every speck of it, I somehow managed to bar the thought. *I would shit myself to death within days*, I told myself. The only way to survive this was by being smart, keen, careful and resourceful. From my situation, I could only portend that I was not the most careful nor smart person. Most smart or careful people don’t end up six feet under. Or at most they manage to get buried in a graveyard.

As I started to walk in a completely random direction, I could feel tensing sharp pinpricks in my foot. No doubt about it. Something was broken or cracked, and everything was bruised and brittle. Left foot then right foot, step after step, sagging with every rhythm I crept across the wet fields. No brushes, no plants, no animals or birds. Wet dirt and crabgrass was all my eyes could see. Upon new misty horizon bare new wondrous views of wet dirt and crabgrass. To this day, the sight of crabgrass annoys me. On rare occasions, I would see tall shadows emerging in the mist. Obscured and hauntingly tall. Stretched out like a man waiting for a hug. Dead hollowed



trees. Every time I got excited. Every time a new tree.

For seven hours I walked. Till my right foot was so swollen I could barely feel it anymore. Till there was no more sweat to produce. Till my sight was blurred and unfocused. Till I finally saw a structure in the mist. A cabin. Run down and broken. Maggot infested wooden walls and no door. Just as cold as the outside, but less wet. Had I any fluid to expel, I would have cried a river and drowned in it. Making sure to not make too much noise, I entered the door frame and looked inside.

Standing still, like a statue, seemingly not even breathing, I saw the back of a humanoid. It was upright, naked, hands limp, and facing a wall at the opposite end of the entrance. Its skin was tattered with skid marks and bruises, and it seemed paper thin, like that of an old man. It had weird proportions, its hands were long and its torso elongated. I felt a cold static run down the back of my neck. Something was off. I looked over my weird metal and wood stick. Seemed heavy enough to do some damage. As I stepped towards the creature, one of the planks beneath my feet creaked with the intent of spoiling my light steps. The creature jerked around and looked at me. Its eyes were hollow, its mouth agape, showing white teeth with black plaque. I took a step back at the ghastly sight, but before I could adapt to the situation, it lunged at me. By sheer coincidence, I swung wildly at it with the stick. Teeth and blood went scattering across the oak wood floor. The jaw of the creature was ajar and crooked, hanging loosely as if I had broken it, but it did not seem to react as if it were in pain. It lunged at me again. What little teeth it had left lodged itself into my shoulder. I released a painful wail as I stuck my fingers into its eye holes to force it off me. My fingers felt a cold chill as if the cavity was frozen solid. I ripped it out of my shoulder,

some of its teeth still halfway stuck in my flesh. I stumbled backwards. It located me again and lunged as i managed to poke my stick into it mouth. I touched a small lever on the stick by mistake and a loud booming explosion went off. Flashing lights. Blood and flesh splattered the foyer like a painting. I was covered in thick crimson. There was a sizable hole in the wall on the other side. I stood there. Still. In shock.

*What in the ungodly abyss was that?* I thought.

The cabin stood before me, a foyer full of closed doors. I decided to keep a light foot while traversing the interior, as any more of those things could have taken up residence here. As I crept further into the cabin, slowly opening doors, being careful to listen before turning the handles, I soon realized I was alone. The whole cabin was empty. Only some makeshift furniture and past rodent sanctuaries made this their home. Yet no rodent or man was here today. Until now.

The cabin, which appeared to be an old hunting cabin, was mostly consisting of larger rooms with old bed frames stacked closely and a single general area for keeping warm with a long defunct stove. I managed to find a smaller room with a cracked and broken bed frame and a mold eaten mattress. I spent what energy I had left to take a bed frame from another room, and replace the broken one. As the final piece of rubble was out of the room and the bed was as ready as it was ever going to be, I lodged a piece of wood between the door handle and an old commode. I was not about to waste my life on a tiny mistake. Before I even realized, I fell back unto the hard and smelly bed. My head hit the wood beneath the thin woollen mattress. I did not care. I fell asleep.

## Head in the Clouds

Breath. As if my throat was coated in wax. Static and lifeless, yet full of electric vibrations. I was standing in the middle of a street. Rows upon rows of white stone wall houses with red tile roofs. Speckled cobblestone roads twisting between the many paths that lead to them all. And there I stood. Naked and afraid. If it was a dream. It was unlike any dream I had ever had. The moon and sun, with darkness and light, raced above, flickering the scenery before me. Down a long and wide road stood a figure tall and beautiful. Cold fluorescent eyes with no eyelids. Tentacles sprouting from the top of its head. Lean but grandiose, showing every bone and fiber of muscle at once. Skin like that of a brass bull. Mouth, silent and still, perched beneath a mask like structure that seamlessly blends into the rest of the head. And large translucent wings like that of shimmering water.

It did not feel evil. Neither did it feel good. A more complicated tone of creature. Yet, I ran. Quicker than I ever have. Quicker than anyone ever will. Yet, I did not move an inch. As if my feet did not touch the ground, I was stuck. The

earth beneath started trembling, and I turned around to see the large, stoic creature open its mouth. No sound came out, but the mere thought of its words cracked the ground I stood on. Its thoughts sent waves through the air that changed the very beat of my heart. It was the demiurge. Creation incarnate. Every particle of its being caved into itself, spawning endless possibilities and infinite outcomes. It is hard to explain the effects of such a being.

As the ground beneath me shook, cracked and split in ways I cannot even comprehend, the being reached out one of its massive elongated hands. From afar, it felt thrice as big, but as it got closer, its true size was tenfold that of mine. It came closer. Closer. Closer. Reaching for me. The air waves created by the hand fell me to the ground. Face first into the dirt, I managed to pull myself over just in time to see the being bring its finger to my forehead. It tapped it gently. Like that of a calm summer breeze.

A voice echoed in my head. Words, phrases, sounds, images, some I knew, most of them gibberish. A cacophony — no, a symphony, all at once. The pain was immense. Like a thousand hammers hitting a single anvil. I clenched my face, teeth showing, eyes closed.

I awoke gasping for air. It felt as though I had slept for ages. It had probably not been more than a couple of hours. As I looked around, cold and shivering, dazed and confused, my eyes lay upon a shimmering spectre in the room. Cold fluorescent lights emanated from a ghostly visage. Not connected, but disparate. Like that of something fragmented and faded, but still here. Still present.

I arose from my fetal position and gently walked over to it. It

faded. Gone within a matter of seconds. As I blinked, the space before me was naked once more, as if it was never there. I was not sure if it had actually happened or not. It was too late to start doubting. Something was here. But what?

I quickly grabbed my boomstick making sure to not touch the lever function. I started the process of leaving the ramshack abode as swiftly as I had entered it. As I came into the foyer of the cabin, I blinked, and the space before me split open, like a tear in reality. Pure black and white filled the immediate space, and I saw the confrontation I had with the creature replay in front of me. It was an exact replica of the scuffle, just from the point of view of the creature. For the first time, I could see my face. Golden brown, lean and bony, pock marked with disparate scales covering my cheeks. I was glistening, unnatural, alien. I also looked terrified, screaming like that of a small child.

"I do not look like that" I said aloud.

The phenomena kept playing as my past self put the weapon into its mouth and pulled the trigger. And just like that, everything was back to normal. Colorful, yet colorless. I looked around to see if I could see what had caused the weird rift in reality, but saw naught. I was alone. As alone as alone can be.

I searched through the cabin once more, just in case something had escaped my gaze. Lodged behind an old commode, something gray and shiny caught my attention. Half a pair of scissors. They were bent, not very sharp, and rusty, but by god was it all I had.

The adrenaline had faded, and only now did I realize how hungry I was. That's the thing they don't tell you about hunger, it fades and comes back, and when it hits again, it hits tenfold. My stomach did not growl, for it had nothing to growl with.

It was nausea. A nausea so intense that it would fell me to the ground. I could not keep walking in random directions with no food, I would pass out and die face first in the wetlands. I needed something to eat.

It was then, in a fit of intense cramping pain, that I grabbed my stomach and touched my leather armor. Leather, I thought. That's some sort of biodegradable animal make. I went over to the defunct oven and made a small crevice in the old ash and dust. Then found the driest wooden furniture I could locate and together with some of the rodent nesting managed to create a small, unlit, bonfire. I found one nominally stick shaped wooden scrap piece and started to spin it into a wooden board. It took time. A long time. At first nothing. Then the friction created smoke. Then small sparks that instantly died. I placed some of the kindling in the now darkened wooden hole I had made and continued. Slowly but surely smoke emerged, and sparks thereafter, now landing in the kindling. I blew on it. It died. I repeated this for almost an hour until finally one of the embers caught the kindling just right and ignited a small flame. I carefully carried it over to the other kindling and lit the bonfire ablaze.

As I started pulling off my leather armor, it felt almost fused to my skin. It burnt as I slowly peeled it off my body. Some pieces of skin loosened and stuck to it. It singed with every inch. I had no proper clothes underneath the armor. It was skin against leather. As I got my torso out of the armor, I noticed some peculiar markings covering my body. Sure, my skin had taken on the texture of the leather imprints, but I also had weird cuts and scars all over. Some creating patterns and nonsensical symbols. Like a canvas for a sadistic minds. I did not have time to care. I needed to get this leather eatable. Using the bent and

dull scissor part I had found earlier, I started cutting. It was hard as it barely managed to cut into the tough treated leather. But I persevered and managed to scrape up some pieces of skin infused leather bits. Then I hid the scissor part in my boot. Just in case.

One by one they started to simmer. First they shrank and charred. Then they started to flake. One by one I took them off the heat with a stick, waited for a bit, then started the process of chewing it. It was not a smart decision, I spent more calories chewing and getting them digestible than they were giving me back, but then again we already established, I'm not very smart. It was more about feeling anything in my stomach. Just the sensation of swallowing and producing saliva. It gave me just the tiniest bit of tepid hope. Saddest thing is, I enjoyed it. Once I had swallowed the last bit of charred leather, I left the cabin. I didn't stop the fire. Irresponsible as it may; I just didn't have the energy.

The outside was as foggy and wet as I left it. The surrounding crabgrass taunted me with their wet blades of grass gently brushing against my pants. *Oh, what I'd give to be a crabgrass sucking up the water from the dirty, putrid ground right now*, I thought. As I crept towards the ever foggy forward, the ground beneath turned from compacted dirt, to mud, and then — swamp. One would expect the sound of mosquitos or other bugs to be present, but no, not a single insect made this bog its home. It was abandoned. Much like my will to continue. Still, I continued for hours.

After what must have been seven hours of dragging my feet against the mud, I saw something move in the distance. Shapes emerging from the fog. The faintest of shadow turned into several moving shapes. There was nowhere to hide. My instinct

was to throw myself in the ground and cover myself with mud. Maybe hold up a tuft of crabgrass as diversion. Though such action would surely get me killed, or worse, laughed at.

The shapes pierced the grey fog. One by one, they stopped before me. The foremost person held up a hand covered by thick black leather gloves

“Hold it!” He shouted.

The other shapes, some of them visible, some of them still obscured, stopped. The man in front wore dirty, but well-kept leather and steel armor engraved with weird flowing patterns, like a garden of flowing vines. He had a leather cap on his head, but beneath its rim I could see short bleach blonde hair. Two other persons were visible; one of them a shorter woman with tight, darkened, leather armor, it was bulging in places, as if it had trouble keeping her muscles in place. She had greasy and short red hair, halfway covering her eyes. The other was a bone thin, young, man clad in a faded and worn-thin gambeson. Upon his nose sat a pair of spectacles, the left lens had some small cracks scattered across its right side. He held a contraption in his hand, something reminiscent of mine, but more complex in design.

I held my hands up and spoke quickly.

“I do not mean any harm!” I shouted, my voice struggling to create certain vowel sounds.

The blonde haired man looked me up and down and took a step forward.

“However, I am armed, dangerous, and not worth the nonexistent gold I don’t have.” I continued, as my eyes darted back and forth between the various members of their posse, grasping my boomstick tight.

The blonde haired man, smiled and said wryly.



“Yes, you seem very dangerous. Were I raven or rodent, I would flee for my life”

The other shapes chuckled with him.

Quickly, and without much understanding of how, my muscles flexed, and I whipped the boomstick down, cracked back a lever on the right side and pointed it at him, all within the span of a second. The man with the similar contraption quickly pointed it at me in response. I hesitated for a moment.

“No witty retort or well groomed hair is gonna stop my will to breathe, brother.” I snarled, my voice trembled, both from lack of water and from the adrenaline pumping in my veins. I could barely keep my frame steady.

The blonde man gestured for the lanky man to lower his contraption, and so he did.

“Don’t worry, friend. There is no need for bloodshed. You are obviously trained with firearms and judging by the fact that you have survived partially naked in the Perished Marshes for what seems like months.” He stopped and looked back at the woman, “Well, you could be useful to us.”

I kept the pointy end fixed on the blonde man. “Useful to you how?” I asked.

He took a step towards me, hands out in a disarming fashion, “Our numbers are dwindling with each excursion. We need skilled people. People who know their way around a weapon. People who can survive the Mistlands. People who can kill Memory Husks. In return, you get food, water, shelter and best of all, as much Bogbrine as you can stomach.” He said — his slight, but kind smile was disarming my hostility.

I lowered my firearm, and considered it for a couple of seconds. He had superior numbers, superior gear, more food and resources, and to be frank, he was not partially naked in

the middle of nowhere.

“Yeah alright, fuck it, I’m in. You don’t happen to have some of that food and water on you right now?” I asked, tone obviously desperate.

The blonde haired man turned to the woman and said, “Jessabelle, go get some of the pemmican and purified water from the rations.”

Jessabelle nodded and answered “Yes, Erdifestrus, sir.”

As Jessabelle walked into the fog Erdifestrus turned to the lanky man, “Melchon, go get Sisessa’s gear, she wont be needing it anymore.”

Melchon nodded silently and dissapeared into the fog as well. A smile forced itself upon my face. I felt, safe. I walked over to Erdifestrus. He held out his hand as I approached. I shook it with determination, sadly without much force. “I’m Vosh” I said and smiled.

His eyes widened. Then furrowed, “Alright. Interesting name. Is that a taken name or a given name?” He asked quizzically.

I looked down, curled my lips, “As given as any name can be I suppose.” I answered.

There was a spell of silence. Erdifestrus did not meet my gaze.

“Anything wrong?” I asked.

He looked up, caught off guard by the question, “No, nothing. Just an interesting name is all.”

The name had stirred something in him, but I was not gonna dig and potentially ruin the coming salvation of food and water. I was curious, of course, but I deemed it a stupid thing to pry about in a time like this.

“So, Erdifestrus. What brings you and your band out here?” I asked.

He looked at me, while fidgeting with the left pinky finger of the leather glove, "Scavenging mostly. Looking for supplies, survivors, useful tidbits of any kind." He spat out a thick ball of saliva on the ground and continued, "Scouting the land is almost impossible in the fog, but there are some minor landmarks, so we try to create paths and such through the Mistlands." He finished.

Jessabelle came back with a leather coated canteen of water and something wrapped in waxy cloth. I decided to not ask too many questions as I wanted to keep the fact that I felt as clueless as a newborn to myself. I unwrapped the cloth. Inside was a fatty mix of dried berries, meat and grains mixed with white animal fat. I started drinking and eating like a small child. Way too fast. I threw some of it up again. I ate that as well. The feeling of cold water running down my throat was, to this day, the best feeling I have ever had. The fat from the food coated my mouth and throat. The berries gave a nice sweet edge to the bland fatty meat and the grain was nice and filling.

Jessabelle laughed, "How long has it been since you've had actual food, lad?"

I stopped drinking for a second, just enough to answer, "Feels like millennia" and continued to stuff the food down my gullet.

Melchon pierced the fog with a set of clothes, a suit of leather armor, a gambeson and a dagger. Gave it to Erdifestrus. Said nothing. Then left back into the fog.

Mid chew I managed to say "Not much of a chatter?" as I looked at Erdifestrus.

"No. Melchon keeps mostly to himself and his tinkering, but he is very — valuable." He said and looked at my boomstick, "you two might actually fit surprisingly well together."

I looked at my dirt covered, tattered, boomstick, "Well then,

maybe he can help me get it back into shape” I said.

Erdifestrus came over to me and handed me the new gear. I nodded a thank you too him. Without much thought I started taking off my pants. It peeled my skin, same as it did with the torso. I let out a whimper. Erdifestrus immediately stepped right up to me and without much hesitation or ask, started helping me. I could feel his breath on my raw skin. The gentle but firm hand guiding my leg through the lower strap almost infused with my bloody ankle. Through whimper and relief he managed to get the pants fully off. The awkwardness of this stranger being so close to my body quickly subsided as it made the whole ordeal much easier.

“Thank you.” I said a little miffed, looking him close in the face. His face seemed emotionless as he had started helping me into the new set of clothes and armor.

“I’d do the same for any member of my party.” He said and fastened the strap on one of the leather shoulder pads.

I could feel my cheeks blush. It was an intense moment. I had felt dying for so long; hours upon hours of slow realization that I was about to die holding my own stomach, and here stood this rather strong, well kept, blonde man — and he was helping me. With the tender care of a mother. And the strong willed determination of a father. The funny thing about my amnesia was that I had no memories, yet the images of a mother soothing a child, and a father swinging a pickaxe were so clear to me. I don’t know if the people I imagined were my parents, and I was reliving their image, or if they were figments of a dying man, but they were clear. They had purpose. They were real to me.

Erdifestrus finished putting a leather cap on my head, adjusted it a few times before stepping back.

“There we go. Good as new.” he said

Just like that I was clad, fed and born anew. A soldier for an unknown cause.

I took him by the shoulder and grasped my fingers tight, "Thank you, Erdifestrus. I was on the verge of death. You could have left me to die in the darkness, or killed me outright. I will not forget it" I said.

Erdifestrus looked down at my hand, then back at me and chuckled, "It's the mark of a great man to give mercy to the meek. I'm not a great man. I am barely a man at all." He took a step closer to me, and I let go of the hand, then he continued, "I need soldiers, scavengers, mechanics, farmers. I need a corpus of people capable of collectively getting through this. You start aiming that thing at whatever I point at — in return I will defend you with my life. As from this moment on you are family. The blood as thick as any cousin, brother or son. "

I swallowed, "Yes, sir."

He winked at me, turned around and spoke to the rest of the group, "Listen up people, we have a new member of our intrepid cast of soon to be maggot feed. Their name is Vosh. They will function as a spotter for now, until they can be fully tested and fitted. They have your back, and you have theirs. Is that understood?" He put emphasis on the last line. The whole group responded in perfect unison, "Yes, sir."

Erdifestrus continued, "Good. We are approaching Huskfall in 5 hours time, so we make haste for a nearby hunting cabin. It's been a while since last time, but hopefully, it's still intact."

I turned around to look away from the group as the realization hit me. I did not put out the fire. The whole cabin might be nothing but smoldering ash. I knew I should say something. I could get the whole group killed. I did not want them to find the cabin and realize it was me who did it. I turned around and

interrupted him.

“Erdifestrus, sir. I believe I came upon the hunting cabin you spoke of. At least it was large enough to fit such a description. It was burnt to the ground.” I said, heart thumping against my chest.

Erdifestrus sighed and closed his eyes. He stood there for a minute in silence. I was sweating profusely. My newly acquired clothes soaked.

“Alright, get ready for a hefty night.” He said out loud to the group. “Hemmet, Allizar, Claire and Fiffen, scour the perimeters for trees that can be chopped down for the use of a palisade.” He pointed and singled out several members who started leaving into the fog. “Aigan, Silvus and Jesabelle, start setting up our wagon and crates to make some barricades we can use to our advantage.” He waved for them to start, and so they did. Then he came over to me with Melchon on his tail.

“Conserve your strength for now, Vosh. When night falls your aim better be true.” He looked over at Melchon while pointing at my boomstick, “can you create ammunition for this?”

Melchon took a second, nodded, and said “Come with me Bugeye”

I looked between the two, “Bugeye?!”

Melchon chuckled, “Yeah, you got them Bugeyes.”

Erdifestrus smiled, shook his head slightly, then headed back to the rest of the group.

Melchon gestured for me to follow him. I shrugged and trailed behind him as he lead me over to the wagon where he fished out some barrels. One small barrel containing a black powder, one larger one containing lots of scrap metals and one containing some basic smithing equipment. Melchon started talking. He was rapid, precise, monotonous. It was

hard to follow. He started guiding me through how to create ammunition for my boomstick. How firearms work in general. How smithing works. The history of the art behind the craft. The chemistry of it all. Everything regarding firearms. As he mentioned some things, I remembered them. Much like trees appearing in the mist, so did knowledge of the craft. And so on went five hours.

## A Finger on the Trigger

I took a deep breath. Melchon stood over me, watching every move I made as I slowly poured the black powder into the brass casing. My hands were trembling, and the sweat was beading on the brow, however not a single mote of black fell to the ground. It was perfect. As if I had done it a million times before. Afterwards, I loaded it with the lead rounds we had just melted and cast. Filled to the brim with coming destruction.

Melchon chimed in, "Well done, Bugeyes. You seemingly know a thing or two about firearms. Mercenary or arms division?" He asked.

I finished capping the first of many cartridges and looked up, "mercenary," I fibbed.

Melchon leered my way, "That explains the poor form." He quipped

"What do you mean poor form?" My brows furrowed, "I'm dehydrated, haven't slept properly, and been lost in the swamp for days. What form am I supposed to have?" I asked.

Melchon shook his head, "No, it's not that. There is no craftsmanship in you. Its only pragmatism. You load the cartridges to



have ammunition. There is no love for the mechanism behind it. No love for the engineering and invention of it all. You treat it as a solution, not a work of art.”

I looked down. *Was he right?* To be honest, I never thought about it. Maybe that’s why he was right.

Melchon continued, “Don’t take it to heart, Bugeyes. Most people see it as a solution. They don’t grasp the beauty of the ingenuity behind it.” He sounded genuine in his semi apology

“Let’s just get this ammunition sorted and ready for use. We can discuss the finer details of firearms if we survive.” I answered.

Melchon shrugged, sat down with legs crossed, and started quickly and precisely filling the casings. His speed and accuracy was impressive. A true aficionado. I made a mental note to not get into a gunfight with him.

For the next hour we sat there filling cartridges, giving slight glances and speaking few words and fewer sentences. The other people had taken most of the things out of the wagon and built smaller barricades, stacking boxes and miscellaneous items. The tarp on the wagon was dislodged in several places to create openings for me and Melchon to shoot through. The loggers had spent the last hours chopping down and dragging large dead trees back to our camp. They were set up to create make shift palisades. Erdifestrus and Jesabelle had spent some time creating a large fire pit, cooking some food and purifying some water. People went over periodically to drink and eat, before continuing the preparations. There was a tense silence in the air. The type of silence you would expect from a court room.

The sky above us cracked open with red flashing lights, dimmed by the thick fog. Rumbings like thunder drummed in the

distance. Everyone at camp perked up. Erdifestrus stood up and addressed the group, "So it starts. Huskfall. You know what to do. Kill them before they lock on. If anyone gets locked, help them. If you lose yourself, follow the path, whatever shape it takes."

I looked at Melchon, "What does that mean?" I asked

He looked at me like I was stupid, "What do you mean, what does he mean?" He said and fixed his gaze back upon the fog.

"I mean. What does follow the path mean?" I answered hastily and pulled at his clothes to get his attention.

"Have you never been memory locked?" Melchon answered as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

"No. I have no clue what that means." I blurted out a bit too loud.

Melchon leaned in close, "It means. When a husk locks onto you and starts draining your memories, you might start experiencing a dreamlike state. And if you do. You need to find the path back to the real world." He whispered through gritted teeth.

"And if I don't?" I asked and grabbed his coat even harder.

"Then you die a slow and painful death as you slowly forget everything, including the will to breathe." He answered and slapped my hand away.

"Point taken" I said and put my hand firmly around my boomstick.

In the distance, we heard the rolling thunder. Then whispers. Loud like someone screaming, yet cautious like someone trying not to be heard, all echoing inside my mind. Everyone was tense, reaffirming their grips on their chosen weapon; white-knuckle clenching swords, maces, firearms and shields. Everyone were locked on the fog. Except Erdifestrus. He was looking at

everyone else. Our eyes met. He gave a wink and a sly smile.

Then they came. First we heard the splattering of mud and water. Fast and frantic. Uneven. Then as quick as their shapes appeared in the fog, it pierced it, and these naked, elongated creatures came rushing towards our camp. People started firing their firearms, swinging their swords and thrusting their spears. The creatures threw themselves at the barricades and started climbing over. No regard for self safety. No tactics. Just aimless aggression. Melchon pulled the bolt action of his rifle, popped over the edge of the wagon and put a bullet right between the eyes of a husk. Dark crimson scattered into the mud beneath. The creature kept climbing. He hunkered down and started loading another round.

“Don’t just sit there, Bugeyes!” He shouted, “Start firing!”

I pulled the lever on my boomstick, popped over the edge, and let off a scatter of pellets into the side of a creature. It ripped the flesh and the hollow-eyed creature turned to look at me. I felt its gaze pierce me with frigid cold. It twitched. Then it jerked around and ran towards me. I hunkered down and started loading another round. Even with my trembling hands, I managed to get it in. I popped over the edge. The creature was already climbing the side of the wagon, frantically grabbing for me. I pulled the lever. It locked in place. I pulled again. It did not budge. The creature lunged and grabbed a hold of me, dragging me over the edge of the wagon.

Melchon screamed, “I’m coming, Bugeyes! Follow the path!” as I fell into the mud below. It knocked the wind out of me. The creature grabbed a hold of my dazed head. A searing pain took over my thoughts. A piercing, high-pitched sound took over my hearing; and a wall of white faded my sight to nothing. I could feel myself slipping from reality, as I could not even feel

the creature's hand upon my face anymore. Only white light.

Breathless. As if I was drowned in the desert. Cold and dark, embraced in the white of endless shores.

I found myself standing in the middle of a dark oak room. By the far end was a large, sturdy desk. Behind it sat a man clad in tattered rags looking back and forth between two parchments. He looked up at me.

"You just gonna stand there like a neutered dog?" He said sarcastically.

I looked around the room. There was a weird lack of detail to everything. A large clock hung on the wall, yet the numbers and pointers were blurry and faded, as if it was not fully there.

The man snapped his fingers, "Vosh?"

I looked at him, "Yes? Is that me?"

The man shook his head, "What have I told you about drinking before noon. You are gonna lose your head if you keep to it."

I partially ignored him and started to walk around the room inspecting the unclear nature of the objects in it. The man's eyes followed me.

"Where am I?" I asked while examining a book containing nothing but a toddler's approximation of words.

The man chuckled, "Fine, let's play this game. This is my home. Our base of operations, if you will. Does that answer all your questions, or do we have to go on playing pretend."

I looked at the man, "No. This place feels wrong. It's familiar, but at the same time not at all. I have been here. I'm sure of it. But none of this is real." I stopped and opened the book to show him, "These aren't words." I said and tapped the pages, "These aren't wood" I continued and struck my hand against the

wall. The wall was more brittle than I expected, and my hand went through. The splinters pierced my hand, drawing blood. It didn't hurt in the moment, but before me flashed images of a hollow-eyed creature. The pain surged with each flash.

"I need to leave." I said and started walking towards the door.

The man stood up and quickly cut off my exit, "You don't get to leave, Vosh. You need to stay here, with me." He said.

Now, as I stood here sizing up this rather large figure, I noticed something peculiar. His eyes. There is a spark in people. Something that echoes creation, empathy and love. Yet his were devoid. Not of a pupil or iris, but of the million specs of possibilities that lie within the cluster of the iris universe. The spec of hope that keeps going through endless suffering. His were void. I was not talking to a man. I was talking to an it.

"What's wrong, Vosh?" The thing asked with a slight crooked smile.

I took a step back, "Stay away from me." I said.

"Sorry, Vosh, can't do that. It's imperative you stay here with me" It answered and slowly started walking towards me. Its smile grew wider. There, in the midst of yellowed white, black plaque on the edges of where the gums meet the ivory.

I grabbed a scale weight standing on the desk beside us and held it up, "Stand aside, or I will bring the weight of mercantilism down upon your wretched head." I growled.

The things maw enlarged, the cracking of bone and ripping of tissue reverberated in the space. It slowly approached. I slowly walked backwards. Then I lunged forward and struck the creature in the head. I heard the skull crack. Its head lodged to the side. It twitched and snapped back into place. Only a few rifts in its skin to show for it. I swung at it again, this time it caught my swing with its hand. It jerked my hand around,

cracking my wrist. The scale weight went crashing against the floorboards. I struck with my other hand straight against its face. Again. And again. It barely reacted as it slowly leaned in, maw agape, breath upon my skin with the faint smell of rotten tissue.

A large, explosive boom emanated from outside the room. The creature screamed out a high-pitched squeal. It vanished. No trace of it was left. I was alone. A continued low frequency rumbling echoed from the outside. A similar experience as to when the pressure builds in your ears underwater. With the cadence and bounce of someone speaking, but with no clarity. I knew I had to get out of here. Wherever here was. The space was familiar, not in the sense of chair or desk, but in the sense of how one can walk to the privy in the dark in ones own home. *Was this my house?* I thought. It said it was its, but that creature was lying, it was rotten. Whatever facsimile it held to something recognizable was a falsehood.

I looked around the room one last time and decided to walk out the door. At the precipice of the doorway the room beyond changed from that of a wooden living room to that of a sprawling cityscape with lots of white stone buildings with blue clay roof tiles. When I looked back, the room I left was gone. Just more city. Winding streets and boardwalk coastlines overlooking a deep gemlight blue ocean. There were people walking to and from, left and right. Their faces were hollow and featureless like that of a faded painting. As I walked amidst them they stopped and looked at me. Shallow hollow eyes, no iris, no pupil, tracking me as I slowly made my way into the city. Non hostile for now.

This place seemed familiar. The stone walls a stranger yet the feeling of leaning up against them lodged in the back of my

mind. The boardwalk a blank canvas, yet the smell of seaweed and kelp lingered in my nose. So many twisting paths leading to so many places. My blood, my sweat, my tears had fallen unto them before. It felt like home. It was home.

I kept following the main road leading further and further into the city proper. My eyes trailed off into every corner of the city. Just observing it. *There has to live over a million people here*, I thought. *So many houses. So many bakers. Mercantile ships with nondescript sails. Smithies, cobblers, masoners, buildings in progress, buildings on the verge of collapse, millions of bricks and a million more steps to cross their paths.* At a certain point I lost myself in the grand beauty of it all. The people staring at me fell to the back of my mind and all I saw was the grandeur of the space. Tears welled in the corner of my eyes. *I was home. I had not felt this overcome with joy since. Never. No, since Erdifestrus.* I thought. The thought of Erdifestrus was like a punch in the face. Until his face came to my mind, it was as if he did not exist to me. I scoured my mind for more Erdifestrus. *Who was this man?* I thought. My minds eye flashed with images and sounds. Jesabelle, Melchon, swamp, cold, dying, pemmican, water, the gentle touch of a leader upon my skin. The security of his manner. The tone of his voice.

“If you lose yourself, follow the path, whatever shape it takes”. *Follow the path?* I thought. Then I remembered. *I am not here. I am somewhere else. In a swamp. I’m fighting.* I thought. At this point I realized I must have gotten locked.

As I realized my predicament, the words kept ringing true in my mind. “Follow the path”. So I did. Winding roads through city centers and onwards into wherever. It felt like hours. Walking the same brick roads, betwixt white walled buildings. Then I saw it. A large brass and alabaster castle. Seven tall

and slender towers protruding the distant clouds. Speckled and engraved with ornaments and gemstone. Around it a large moat filled with water and a large drawbridge. Two people clad in armor, with shields and pikes stood by each side of the bridge. Hollow eyed and staring. I approached the bridge. They did not react. I hesitantly started walking past them. They turned their heads, following my pace, but did nothing. And as I came upon the precipice of the end of the bridge, a shooting pain surged from head, to chest, to arms and legs. Like a thousand burning needle pricks.