

## *DEUS EX RAND()*

Welcome to Mackurd, kid. You must be new here. How do I know? You and your friends have that serious look about you, and you don't have any visible scars. Besides, I know everybody, and I don't know you, so you must be from the city. Grab a stool; Lefty'll be with you in a minute. Don't bother calling him because he won't hear you until he turns around.

The story behind this place? What, just because I look old, I must have been around back then? Just kidding, I helped build it. This was 50-some years ago, mind, but if you put my beer on your tab, I can probably remember.



So, there we were, soldiers of the apocalypse, last meal between the horrors of the Collapse and the remnant of humanity. Forget stories about paladins, werewolf guardians, and the pale king; we were just fourteen guys and gals with guns. An ex-Coastguard reservist called Puddle pulled us together into a squad after the krakens sunk most of the Fleet. I should probably tell you about him before we move on.

Puddle was a pretty mellow guy, considering the end of the world and being raised by a family of Marines. His grandfather was a general of some kind, his uncle a gunnery sergeant, his mother a colonel when she retired. His dad was a househusband, and they both thought it'd be funny if Puddle got his International Baking and Pastry Arts degree paid for by the military. So he did.

After that, Grandpa called him a cream puff, and his uncle called him a puddle pirate. We just called him Puddle for short.

It turned out Puddle took a liking to a regimented life. He was kicking the ever-loving shit out of pirates in the Gulf of Aden when Manhattan was evacuated and all the ships were called home, which is why there were fourteen of us guarding a couple dozen civilians, not the usual two or three scared survivors. And we ate well, which was no small feat either.

Anyway, we were doing pretty good, considering, until everything went unusual.



Remember microwaveable popcorn? Some of the old-timers know what I'm talking about. Before the Collapse made tech as unreliable as magic was before the Collapse, we had these boxes that cooked things with waves. Crazy shit. Anyway, that pop every couple seconds when the bag was just starting is what a normal day during the Collapse was like.

Pop!

“Yeehaw!”

That was Tex, my team’s self-appointed sharpshooter. Tex was so nearsighted she had to tie her boots by feel. She broke her glasses between when D.C. went up and Puddle found us, so Puddle gave her the scope from his rifle. That’s the kind of guy Puddle was. With the lenses set just right, Tex could see and shoot pretty good, though we had to have a talk about trigger safety when she started looking at everyone through it and Lefty lost an ear.

“Hey Lefty! You see that?”

“What?”

“Did you see that?”

“Yeah, I saw that. You don’t need to shout!”

Puddle came out of his tent, face half-lathered, and asked, “Tex top a shambler?”

“Yeah, boss,” I said. You could see Tex’s pearly whites from the far end of the line. “Never gets old for her.”

“Lucky,” Puddle said, dipping the razor in his mug.

“Yes she is.”

We’d holed-up outside a Piggly Wiggly, a few blocks from the Arsenal and most of the civilians. Puddle called it an outpost; we rigged it to blow in case we got overwhelmed, which is why we slept outside. There was food, the terrain was flat, and we’d set up two barricades on the main road – one to slow people down, and one to shoot from. We even had a puppy called Scruff, on account of how Puddle liked to carry her when she’d had a few.

Most of the real military types at Mackurd took off north with all the warded guns they could carry. Turned out that left plenty for us. Our hedge-mage, Squint, never seemed to stop carving null-wards into brass casings, and we never stopped asking for more rounds. There were so many bodies stacked against the outer barricade that one day the civvies pulled all the lighter fluid from the shelves and decided to burn them. I almost gave up meat.



The werewolves hit us four hours before sunset. You might be used to them now – bouncers, militia, the occasional mob-lawyer – but back then most of the packs were feral. Doesn’t make sense, seeing as they were people like us, but they sure acted like it. We were short on silver, but if you blew off big enough chunks, they didn’t get back up. It was like a Darwinian game of Sly Fox; if they touched you while you were reloading, you were dinner.

“Reloading!” Lefty yelled.

“Firing!” I yelled, aiming for the kneecaps.

“Yeehaw!”

If you’re ever stupid enough to get in a fight with a lycanthrope and all you have are regular rounds, wait until they get within 200 yards, and forget headshots. Inside 200 yards, the bullet fragments, doing more damage, but that doesn’t matter to a wolf unless they lose mass. Aim for the joints, the abdomen, or the throat, or their bodies will just heal the bullets out. And they’ll be angry.

Puddle stood up with his one-shot grenade launcher. Phtoook! Click, clack. Boom! He dropped back down, another round loaded.

“Nice one, boss,” I said.

“Thanks. To your right.”

I spun, baam! Took the wolf’s leg off with the under-slung shotgun. “Dammit Billy! Mind your part of the line!”

Billy flipped me the finger without taking his eyes off the barricade. A wolf vaulted over; Billy flicked his hand; the brute went down, thrashing, black foam coming out of its throat. Billy’s a damned magician with a silver throwing knife.

Scruff came out of Puddle’s tent with a can in her mouth.

“Hey boss?”

“Yeah?”

“Scruff’s stealing your beer again.”

He looked, called her what she was, then stood. Phtoook! Click, clack. Phooooong!

“Shit!”

A rippling wall of light had appeared around a red-robed man advancing with the two remaining wolves. It turned out the pack had brought a friend with them.

Squint took one look at that red-clad asshole and took off running for the Piggly Wiggly. An eerie silence fell over the line as most of us wondered what to do.

Click, Clink, Clack. Phtoook! Puddle emptied and reloaded the launcher and fired; nailed one of the wolves in the chest. Boom! The null-warded grenade had slipped right through the shield and detonated, removing the werewolf’s upper torso and knocking the guy in red on his ass. He looked funny flailing his arms about on the ground, until the charred skeletons on the barricade started twitching.

I know you’re expecting me to tell you something about the undead, or magical mechanics, or the difference between a mage and that nut-job sorcerer in the red robes, but what I really remember is the smug look on Scruff’s face as she settled, shook her head, bit down, and shotgunned the whole can. The beer foam made her look rabid. The popcorn bag was in full swing at this point, and we were running out of rounds.

What? Fine. A mage studies rituals, spells, and wards. A sorcerer grabs raw magic by the balls and makes it his plaything. Anima – that’s life energy – is the easiest to use and the most destructive, and werewolves have boatloads of it, so when we killed most of the pack, we juiced the sorcerer.

Once the skeletons untangled themselves from the barricade, shedding flakes and chunks of crispy char, it was just a question of putting enough hurt on them until the magic ran out. There’s no finesse to it; you just unload everything you’ve got until you’re dead or the sorcerer blinks.

Click, clack, phtoook, boom!

Pop, pop, pop!

Brrrrrrp! The medium machine gun opened up, shattering bones that reassembled and stood back up.

The sorcerer was doing some kind of dance in a circle of chalk. “Tex! Top him!” I shouted. Pop! Phooooong! That stupid shield was still up. Our grenadier – we called him

Popper back then – stood and pulled the pin on a frag. Ping! He cocked his arm back. Wham! The grenade went off prematurely. That’s how Stumpy got his name.

Brrrrrrp!

Dark clouds were starting to circle over the sorcerer and the medium machine gun was out of ammo. Billy and Lefty scooped Stumpy up, stumbling toward the rear. The rest of us were about dry, and the skeletons were running toward us.

“Fall back!” Puddle yelled, fumbling with the firing device. He flipped the safety and cranked the handle a few times. “What’s wrong with this–” Whump, whump! Wha-whump whump!

The claymores went off. The whole line exploded behind me, and I face planted, skinning my hands and knees. I got back up – Puddle recovered faster than I did and ran past, arms pumping. He grabbed Scruff by the back of the neck and headed inside. I followed.

Squint, our hedge-mage, was waiting in the Piggly Wiggly. He shoved fresh magazines at me and I tucked them under my arm before clearing the door.

“Civilians make it out?” Puddle asked. Scruff was biting his pants leg and growling as fiercely as a puppy could.

“Yeah, they should be at the Arsenal by now.”

I could hear the undead reforming outside; it sounded like a bamboo forest in heavy winds. We headed for the back door. Draw them in, blow the charges, cold beers at the Arsenal. Nothing simpler.

We were halfway to the exit when all the windows blew inward, the roof was ripped off, and the walls dropped outward. The vortex in the sky spat out a streak of fire; it headed straight for us.

“Horseman!” Tex yelled, looking through her scope.

“What?”

“I said Horseman!”

Things have settled a bit now, but back when that kid first cracked open the world, there was more magic than people who knew how to use it. Squint explains it better, but it just sat around in pockets of potentiality, waiting for some mage or sorcerer to give it shape. Dramatic assholes like red-robos liked to call on the Horsemen, but which one they got depended on their personality.

Bad luck for everyone, the sorcerer had summoned Chaos. The fifth Horseman descended in fire and flashes of light, the joints in his armor leaking steam, Madness screaming like a whole herd of wild horses beneath him, and landed on what was left of the pet food aisle with a clip clop and the squeak of a chew toy.

Before I move on, I want to point out that Puddle liked to read. He probably thought all this through beforehand, so don’t be too impressed.

Puddle threw his gun at Madness’ face, making the nightmare buck, and pulled Chaos out of the saddle. He mounted backward, Scruff tucked under his arm, and slapped Madness’ ass. The horse charged backward through the front of the store. The charred skeletons stared with empty orbits as they galloped by. The sorcerer started running. Puddle spun in the saddle like a Mongolian rider; Madness spun too; they were both

moving forward at 50 miles per hour when he lashed out with his boot and the sorcerer's head exploded into confetti. Meanwhile, the fifth Horseman was still down for the count with a fit of the giggles.

By this point we were all still alive, which surprised the hell out of me. Billy had a tourniquet around Stumpy's arm, the skeletons were inanimate again, and Chaos was fading from existence but still dangerous enough to wipe the town off the map. Puddle walked Madness back, one hand on the bridle, and Scruff followed after them in a vague approximation of a straight line.

"I should kill you for that, mortal," Chaos said, now partly see-through.

"I expect you to," Puddle said, handing him the reins.

The Horseman grunted, drew his sword, and with a flick of his wrist scribed the sigil of Chaos on Puddle's forehead, which on that particular Tuesday was Aries inverted with an acute accent. He mounted and launched himself into the sky with a clip clop and the squeak of a chew toy.



So, that's how Puddle became the avatar of Chaos, and why he has a cock permanently etched into his forehead. The thirteen of us normal folk are still around; Stumpy got a shiny prosthetic in the City of the Angel; Billy's our chief of interracial relations, leading hunting parties and whatnot. Scruff led a good life; you'll see her bastards digging through the trash all over town. And here comes Lefty with your drinks.

Now the Arsenal's an outpost and we have a couple hundred people living in Mackurd. We may not look like much, but we're the safest place between New Charleston and Savannah, and if you stick around, you'll never be bored.

THE END

## ***AUTHOR'S NOTE***

**Hey, thanks for checking out Deus Ex Rand(). If you enjoyed it, you might like the Black Year series, which covers how the world got into this mess to begin with.**

**You can buy it  
(<https://kdp.amazon.com/amazon-dp-action/us/bookshelf.marketplacelink/B00VZ7ZBK6>) or you can get it for free by signing up here (<http://eepurl.com/bjBgYr>)**