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Opening extract from

The Keeper

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David Baldacci

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Dramatis Personae

Vega Jane – 15, a Wugmort from Wormwood
Daniel Delphia, 'Delph' – 17, Vega's best friend
Harry Two – Vega's canine

In the Quag
King Thorne – King of Cataphile
Luc – an ekos
Seamus – a hob
Astrea Prine – Keeper of the Quag
Orco – death
Lackland Cyphers – a Furina
Petra Sonnet – a Furina
Silenus – a remnant
Micha – Chieftain of the hyperbores
Troy and Ishmael – hyperbores
Rubez – the Obolus River pilot

UNUS

The Quag

IT SEEMED BOTH fitting and even absurdly poetic that, hitched together like links in a chain, the three of us would die together. But having jumped off a mile-high cliff while being pursued by murderous beasts we didn't have much choice in the matter. We had literally leapt for our lives. And now we had to land properly or our final resting place would be down there. *Far* down there.

We fell a long way, far further than I would have liked. I glanced at my best friend, Delph, as we plunged. He was looking at me, not in stark fear but, admittedly, with a bit of anxiety. My canine, Harry Two, on the other hand, was grinning, ready for our adventure to begin.

The reason we had jumped was around my waist. My chain, Destin, allowed me to fly. But I had never jumped off a mile-high cliff and we were plunging faster than I ever had before.

I tried my best to manage the landing smoothly, though we thudded into the dirt with ample force. We lay there momentarily stunned. But I soon realized that while we were battered and bruised, we were alive.

I unhooked Harry Two from his harness, which had allowed him to rest suspended against my chest. I watched as

Delph slowly rose and stretched his arms and legs tentatively. Then I looked upward, all the way to the spot we had so recently vacated. If we hadn't, we would assuredly be dead.

The beasts that had been hunting us now stared down over the precipice. It was a herd of garms and a roughly equal number of amarocs. Even without being able to see them properly from this distance, I knew the scaly garms, with their own blood perpetually dripping down their armoured chests, were breathing rage-filled flames at us. I'm sure the amarocs, giant wolflike creatures that apparently lived for no other reason than to kill, looked similarly homicidal.

Yet none of them appeared willing to take the mile-long dive that we just had. It was worth all the coins I would ever have that these creatures could not fly as I could. I looked down and patted the chain around my waist with the letters *D-E-S-T-I-N* imprinted on some of its links. It had saved my life on numerous occasions already, although I had not possessed it for that long.

I could hardly believe it. I was in the Quag. Me, Vega Jane. I had lived my entire fifteen sessions in the village of Wormwood. It was all I'd ever known. I had been told that, other than the deadly Quag, it was all there was in existence. But I believed that to be a lie. There was *something* beyond the Quag, and I meant to find out what.

I was not doing this for a lark. I strongly suspected that my parents and grandfather were on the other side of the Quag. While my brother, John, still lived in Wormwood, he

was not the young innocent lad he used to be. The sinister and murderous Morrigone had seen to that.

Thus, my mission in life was to get the Delph, myself and Harry Two safely through the Quag as quickly as possible. It might be an extremely ambitious goal, but it was mine nonetheless.

I breathed more normally and again looked over at Delph.

"Wotcha, Vega Jane," he said.

"Wotcha yourself, Delph," I replied, failing, despite our near deaths, to keep the smile off my face at having successfully entered the Quag.

"You reckon those ruddy beasts can get down here?" he said.

"I *reckon* I don't want to wait around to find out, do I?" I shot back.

I hoisted my tuck over my shoulder and Delph did the same with his. I kept Harry Two's harness on in case we had to take to the air quickly.

The map of the Quag that my friend Quentin Herms had left me was very detailed, but there were some troublesome lapses to it, now I could see. For one, it did not mention the cliff that we had just jumped from. And, correspondingly, I was not prepared for the valley we now found ourselves in. And yet I had seen Quentin enter the Quag one light. That's really what started this whole journey for me. He must have known what lay in here.

The map gave me general directions but did not provide

a precise route to take through this place. I apparently would have to figure that out on my own. I also possessed a book, which I'd taken from Quentin's cottage, that explained the sorts of creatures dwelling here.

Delph said, "The map has us heading generally that way." He pointed. "Towards that mountain, way in the distance over there."

I hesitated and then said haltingly, "I . . . I don't want to start that sort of trek at night. We need to find a safe place till first light."

He looked at me like I was completely mad. "Safe place? In the bloody Quag? Do ya hear yourself, Vega Jane? The Quag has many things, no doubt, but safe places ain't one of 'em, I reckon."

I gazed ahead at the flat, open expanse. There were trees and bushes and long, sweeping fields of grass slowly bending in the breeze that blew off the cliff. It looked peaceful and serene and not dangerous at all. Which told me that there were probably dozens of foul things lurking in wait that could and would kill us, given the slightest of opportunities.

I looked down at my feet. Which way to step? I glanced at Harry Two, who was gazing up at me curiously, apparently waiting for me to make up my mind.

It struck me, rather uncomfortably, that I was to be the leader here. Was I up to it? I wasn't sure that I was.

Far, far in the distance was a place the map called the Mycanmoor. It was described as a dull, dead sort of place that went on for a very long way, and which, unfortunately,

there was no sure path around. The map was remarkably silent as to the *exact* perils that lay directly in front of us. But the book I'd nicked filled in some of these details.

I slipped it from the pocket of my cloak and lit a bit of candle stub to read the pages more clearly in the darkness.

Delph looked nervously over my shoulder. "'Tis nae a good idea to be lighting us up that way, Vega Jane."

"You know, Delph, you can just call me Vega. It's not like we're flooded with folks here named Vega. As far as I can tell, in fact, I'm the *only* one."

He took a long breath and slowly let it out, his eyes big as cup saucers. "O'course, right you are, Vega Jane."

I sighed and stared down at the page. I basically had to match up the map with descriptions of the places in the Quag so I could see which creatures to expect where. It would have been much easier had Quentin Herms conveniently placed all this information in one place, but he hadn't.

I felt my spirits plummet as I realized how ill prepared I was. And Delph and Harry Two were depending on me to have a plan!

Harry Two started growling. I looked down at him. His hackles were up, his fangs bared. I quickly gazed around to see what was causing this reaction in my canine. But there was nothing in the darkness, at least that I could see.

I looked at Delph. He said, "What's got into 'im?"

And then I noticed it. My canine was breathing heavily through his snout. He wasn't seeing the danger — he was *smelling* it.

And in my experience, foul smells usually led to foul beasts.

I took a whiff of the air, wrinkled up my face and glanced sharply at Delph. "Do you smell that?"

He took in a chestful of the air and then exhaled it. "No."

I thought rapidly. I knew that scent, or at least something close to it.

And then the clouds in my mind slowly cleared.

Poison.

"What is it?" he asked nervously.

"I'm not exactly sure," I replied, and I wasn't. But I had smelled that sort of concoction before, back at Stacks, the factory where I was employed as a Finisher.

I pointed to the left. "Let's try that way."

"Shouldn't we maybe fly?" said Delph. "Get there faster, won't we? Let us . . . let us maybe see what's coming, before . . . before it *gets* us," he finished breathlessly.

We would get there faster flying. But something in the back of my head said to leave our feet firmly on the ground. At least for now.

I was one who tended to follow her instincts. They had served me more right than wrong over my sessions.

And that's when I happened to look up, and saw it. Or rather, *them*.

A flock of birds was racing in perfect formation across the Noc-lit sky. This surprised me because I did not think that birds flew at night, but perhaps things were different in the Quag. As I watched the birds soar along, something very

strange happened. From out of nowhere appeared a cloud of bluish smoke.

The birds turned sharply to avoid it, but a few could not make the turn in time. And when these birds passed through the smoke and came out the other side, they were no longer flying.

They were falling.

Because they were dead.

I stood there, paralysed. Then I felt something grip my arm.

It was Delph.

"Run, Vega Jane," he yelled. "Run!"

As we ran, I looked back once and wished I hadn't. It was a creature I recognized from a drawing in Quentin's book, but had never seen for real before.

I glanced at Delph and knew that he too had looked behind him and seen what I had. Taking to the air would do us no good. Unlike the garms and amarocs, what was back there and coming on fast was something that could fly.

It looked like our journey through the Quag was about to end before it had even truly begun.