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A Place Called Wormwood

I WAS DOZING WHEN I heard the scream. It pierced my head like a morta round, doing terribly befuddling things to my mind, as loud and terrifying as though it were all happening right there and then.

After the sound came the vision: the blue, the colour blue. It was in a mist like a cloud on the ground. It enveloped my mind, pushing out all other thoughts, all memories. When it finally disappeared, my befuddlement cleared as well. Yet I always believed there was something of great importance that had simply not come back to me.

I suddenly sat up straight on my planks atop my tree, the vision along with my sleepiness struck clean from me. At first light, I was almost always up in my tree — a stonking, straight-to-the-sky poplar with a full towering canopy. Twenty short boards nailed to the trunk were my passage up. Eight wide, splintered boards constituted my floor when I got up there. And a stretch of waterproof cloth I had oiled myself draped over branches and tied down tight with scavenged rope represented my roof. But I was not thinking about that, for a scream was ringing in my ears and it wasn't the scream of the blue mist, which apparently existed only in my mind. This scream was coming from down below.

I hurtled to the edge of my planks and looked down to the ground from where I heard the scream once more. This cry was now joined by the baying of attack canines. The sounds shattered what had been a peaceful first light.

Wugmorts did not, as a routine matter, scream at first light or at any other time of the light or night. I scampered down my tree. My booted feet hit the dirt, and I looked first right and then left. It was difficult to tell from where the screams and baying were coming. Amid the trees, sounds bounced and echoed confusedly.

When I saw what was coming at me, I turned and started running as fast as I could. The attack canine had hurtled from out of a stand of trees, its fangs bared and its hindquarters lathered in sweat, a testament to the effort it was employing.

I was fleet of foot for a female Wug, but there was no Wug, male or female, who could outrun an attack canine. Even as I ran, I braced for the impact of its fangs on my skin and bone. But it flashed past me and redoubled its efforts, soon vanishing from my sight. I was not its prey this light.

I glanced to the left and saw between two trees a glimpse of black — a black tunic.

Council was about. The attack canines must have been unleashed by them.

But for what reason? Council, with one exception, was comprised of males, most of them older Wugs, and they kept themselves to themselves. They passed laws and regulations and other edicts that all Wugs must obey, but we all lived in peace and freedom, if not in much luxury.

Now they were out in the forest with canines chasing something. Or maybe some Wug? My next thought was that there had been an escape from Valhall, our prison. But no Wug had ever escaped from Valhall. And even if they had, I doubted members of Council would be out trying to round them up. They had other means to collect bad Wugs.

I kept running, following the baying and the racing footfalls, and soon realized that my path was taking me perilously close to



the Quag. The Quag was an impenetrable barrier that circled Wormwood like a noose. That's all there was in existence: Wormwood and the Quag. No one had ever gone through the Quag because the terrible beasts in there would murder you within slivers. And since there was nothing beyond the Quag, there had never been visitors to Wormwood.

I neared the edge of this most terrible place that Wugs were repeatedly warned from the age of a very young to avoid. I slowed and then stopped a few yards from where the Quag began. My heart was pounding and my lungs bursting, not simply from my running but from being this close to a place that held only death for those stupid enough to stray inside.

The baying had now ceased, as had the sounds of the footfalls. I looked to the left and glimpsed canines and Council members staring into the depths of the Quag. I could not see their faces, but I imagined them to be as full of fear as was mine. Even attack canines wanted no part of the Quag.

I let out one more long breath and that's when a sound to my right reached me. I looked in that direction and in a stunning moment realized that I was seeing someone disappear into the tangled vines and twisted trees that rose up like a barricade around the perimeter of the Quag. And it was a Wug I knew well.

I looked to my left to see if any of Council or the canines had caught sight of this, but it didn't appear they had. I turned back, but the image was now gone. I wondered if I had simply imagined it. No Wug would voluntarily venture into that awful place.

When something touched me on the arm, I nearly screamed.

As it was, I just about collapsed to the ground, but the thing, now revealed to be a hand, kept me upright.

"Vega Jane? It is Vega Jane, isn't it?"

I turned to look up into the blunt features of Jurik Krone. He was tall, strong, forty-five sessions old and a fast-rising member of Council.

"I'm Vega Jane," I managed to say.

"What are you doing here?" he asked. His tone was not stern, simply questioning, but there was a certain repressed hostility in his eyes.

"I was in my tree before going to Stacks. I heard a scream and saw the canines. I saw Wugs in black tunics running, so I . . . I ran too."

Krone nodded at this. "Did you see anything else?" he asked. "Other than the black tunics and canines?"

I peered at the spot where I had seen a Wug run into the Quag. "I saw the Quag."

His fingers gripped my shoulder more tightly. "Is that all? Nothing else?"

I tried to keep calm. The image of the Wug's face before he fled into the Quag slammed into me like a spear of skylight. "That's all."

His fingers released and he stepped back. I took him in fully. His black tunic rode well on his broad shoulders and thick arms.

"What were you chasing?" I asked.

"It's Council business, Vega," he replied sharply. "Please be on your way. It is not safe to be this close to the Quag. Head back

towards Wormwood. Now. It is for your own good."

He turned and walked off, leaving me breathless and shaking. I took one more look at the Quag and then raced back in the direction of my tree.

I scampered up the boards and settled myself once more on the planks, out of breath and my head filled with the most dreadful thoughts.

"Wo-wo-wotcha, Ve-Ve-Vega Jane?"

The voice coming from below belonged to my friend. His name was Daniel Delphia, but to me he was simply Delph. He always called me Vega Jane, as though both names were my given one. Everyone else simply called me Vega, when they bothered to call me anything at all.

"Delph?" I said. "Up here."

I heard him scampering up the short boards. I was very nearly twenty yards up. I was also fourteen sessions old, going on a lot older. I was also female.

Being fourteen and female was frowned on here in Wormwood, the village where we both lived. It's never been clear to me why. But I liked being young. And I liked being female.

I was apparently in the minority on that.

Wormwood was a village full of Wugmorts — Wugs for short. The term *village* suggested a communal spirit that just wasn't present here. I tried to lend a helping hand from time to time, but I picked my causes carefully. Some Wugs had neither trust nor compassion. I tried to avoid them. Sometimes it was

hard, because they had a tendency to get in my face.

Delph's head poked over the boards. He was much taller than me, and I was tall for a female, over five feet nine inches. I was still growing, because all the Janes were late bloomers. My grandfather Virgil, it was said, grew four inches more when he was twenty. And forty sessions later came his Event and his height became meaningless because there was nothing left of him.

Delph was about six and a half feet tall with shoulders that spread like the leafy cap of my poplar. He was sixteen sessions old with a long mane of black hair that appeared mostly yellowish white because of the dust he did not bother to wash away. He worked at the Mill, lifting huge sacks of flour, so more dust would just take its place. He had a wide, shallow forehead, full lips, and eyes that were as dark as his hair without the dust. They looked like twin holes in his head. I think it would be fascinating to see what went on in Delph's mind. And, I had to admit, his eyes were beautiful. I sometimes went all willy when he looked at me.

He did not qualify to work at Stacks, where some creativity was required. I have never seen Delph create anything except confusion. His mind came and went like rain bursts. It had done so ever since he was six sessions old. No one knew what had happened to him, or if they did, they never shared it with me. I believed that Delph remembered it. And it had done something to his head. It obviously wasn't an Event, because there would be nothing left of him. But it might be a near peer. And yet sometimes Delph said things that made me believe there was far more going

on in his mind than most Wugs thought.

If things were a bit off with Delph inside his head, there was nothing wrong with the outside of him. He was handsome, to be sure. Though he never seemed to notice, I had seen many a female giving him the "look" as he passed by. A snog is what they wanted, I'm sure. But Delph always kept moving. And his broad shoulders and long muscled arms and legs gave him a strength that virtually no other Wug could match.

Delph settled next to me, his legs crossed at bony ankles and dangling over the edge of the splintered boards. There was barely enough space for the two of us here. But Delph liked to come up my tree. He didn't have many other places to go.

I pushed my long, dark straggly hair out of my eyes and focused on a dirt spot on my thin arm. I didn't rub it away because I had lots of dirt spots. And like Delph's Mill dust, what would be the point? My life was full of dirt.

"Delph, did you hear all that?"

He looked at me. "H-hear wh-what?"

"The attack canines and the screaming?"

He looked at me like I was wonky. "Y-you O-OK, Ve-Vega Jane?"

I tried again. "Council was out with attack canines chasing something." I wanted to say chasing *someone*, but I decided to keep that to myself. "They were down near the Quag."

He shivered at the name, as I knew he would.

"Qu-Qu-Qu —" He took a shuddering breath and said simply, "Bad."

I decided to change the subject. "Have you eaten?" I asked

Delph. Hunger was like a painful, festering wound. When you had it, you could think of nothing else.

Delph shook his head no.

I pulled out a small tin box constituting my portable larder that I carried with me. Inside was a wedge of goat's cheese and two boiled eggs, a chunk of fried bread and some salt and pepper I kept in small pewter thumbs of my own making. We used lots of pepper in Wormwood, especially in our broths. Pepper cured lots of ills, like the taste of bad meat and spoiled vegetables. There had also been a sweet pickle, but I had eaten it already.

I handed him the box. It was intended for my first meal, but I was not so big as Delph. He needed lots of wood in his fire, as they said around here. I would eat at some point. I was good at pacing myself. Delph did not pace. Delph just did. I considered it one of his most endearing qualities.

He sprinkled salt and pepper on the eggs, cheese and bread, and then wolfed them down in one elongated swallow. I heard his belly rumble as the foodstuffs dropped into what had been an empty cavern.

"Better?" I asked.

"B-better," he mumbled contentedly. "Thanks, Ve-Vega Jane."

I rubbed sleep from my eyes. I had been told that my eyes were the colour of the sky. But other times, when the clouds covered the heavens, they could look quite silver, as though I were absorbing the colours from above. It was the only change that was ever likely to happen to me.

"Go-going t-t-to see your mum and dad this light?" asked Delph.

I shot him a glance. "Yes."

"Ca-can I c-come t-too?"

"Of course, Delph. We can meet you there after Stacks."

He nodded, mumbled the word *Mill*, rose and scrambled down the short boards to the ground.

I followed him, heading on to Stacks, where I worked making pretty things. In Wormwood, it was a good idea to keep moving.

And so I did.

But I did so in a different way this light. I did so with the image of someone running into the Quag, when that was impossible because it meant death. And so I convinced myself that I had not seen what I thought I had.

Yet not many slivers would pass before I realized that my eyesight had been perfect. And my life in Wormwood, to the extent I had one, would never be the same.