

THE
FINISHER



A NOVEL BY

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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 color 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 the short boards nailed to the trunk of 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 stun-

ning 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 toward 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-okay, 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 color of the sky. But other times, when the clouds covered the heavens, they could look quite silver, as though I were absorbing the colors 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.



DUO

Stacks

AS I WALKED along the now quiet forest path, I calmed and certain things I had been told long ago entered my head. I don't know why exactly; the timing *was* a bit strange, but I have found that these sorts of thoughts come to me at the oddest slivers.

The first one was the most indelible for me.

The most bitterly awful place of all is one that Wugmorts don't know is as wrong as wrong can possibly be.

That's what my grandfather told me before he suffered his Event and was gone forever. I believed I was the only one my grandfather told that to. I never mentioned it to anyone.

I was not, by nature, a very trusting Wugmort. One really couldn't be here.

I was a very young when my grandfather said those words, and he suffered his Event shortly afterward. I had to admit I wasn't sure what he was talking about then. I'm not exactly sure about it now. I agreed that a place could be bitterly awful, but what could be as wrong as wrong can possibly be? That was the conundrum I had never been able to sort out, often though I had tried.

My grandfather had also talked to me about shooting stars.

He said, *Every time you glimpse one making its blazingly haphazard way across the sky, a change is coming for some Wugmort.*

It was an interesting idea for a place that never changed — like Wormwood.

And then these twin thoughts left me like wisps of smoke floating away and I refocused on what lay ahead — another light of toil for me.

As I grew close to my destination, I drew a breath and the smell gobsmeaked me. The odor was already in my pores, never to be washed away no matter how many times I stood under the rain bucket or the pipes. I turned the corner on the path and there it was: Stacks. We called it that because it had so many chimney stacks to carry the soot and grime away. Brick piled on top of brick so far into the sky. I had no idea what its original use was, or if it was ever used for anything other than to make pretty things. It was unfathomably large and extremely ugly, which made its current purpose quite ironic.

A shriveled Wug stood at the immense doors with his little ink stamp. His name was Dis Fidus. I had no idea how old Dis Fidus was, but he must have been close to a hundred.

I walked up to him and held out my hand. The top of it was discolored by the collective ink of two sessions laboring here. I could only imagine what it would look like ten or twenty sessions hence. My skin there would be permanently blue.

Fidus gripped my hand with his skeletal one and then stamped my skin. I had no idea why this was done now. It made no sense at all and things that made no sense troubled

me to no end. Because, I suspected strongly, it made sense to *someone*.

I gazed at Dis Fidus, trying to detect in his features if he had heard of the chase this light. But he was so naturally nervous-looking that it was impossible to tell. I walked into Stacks.

"I like my charges to be here earlier than three slivers before second light, Vega," said a voice.

Julius Domitar was big and puffy like a plump frog. His skin possessed a curious hue of pasty green as well. He was the most self-important Wug that I knew in Wormwood, and the competition for that title was a keen one. When he said he liked his "charges" to be here earlier than three slivers, he really meant me. I was still the only female at Stacks.

I turned to look at him through the doorway of his office. He stood there at his little tilt-top desk on which rested bottles of ink from Quick and Stevenson, the sole ink purveyors in Wormwood. Domitar held his long ink stick and there were rolls of scrolls lying on his desk. Domitar loved scrolls. Actually, he loved what was on the scrolls: records. Little bits and pieces of our working lives.

"Three slivers early is still early," I said and kept walking.

Domitar said, "There are many worse off than your lot, Vega. Don't forget that. You have it fine here. But that can change. Oh, yes it can."

I hurried on to the main work floor of Stacks. The kilns had long since been fired up. The huge furnaces set in one corner were never turned off. They gave the room a warm, humid feeling on even the coldest lights. The muscle-bound Dactyls pounded away on their metals with hammer and

tongs, producing a sound like Steeple bells. Sweat dripped off their brows and sculpted backs, dotting the floor around their feet. They never looked up from their work. The Cutters sliced through wood and hard and soft metals. The Mixers ran their enormous tubs congesting ingredients together.

The Wugs here were just like me, ordinary in all ways and hardworking — simply just trying to get by. And we would be doing this exact same work for the rest of our sessions.

I went to my wooden locker in a room off the main floor, where I put on my work trousers, heavy leather apron, gloves and goggles. I walked toward my workstation, which was located near the rear of the main floor. It consisted of one large, heavily stained wooden table, an old, finicky trolley with metal wheels, a set of both large and small tools that fit my hands precisely, some testing instruments that constituted our quality control and bottles of paints, dyes, acids and other materials that I used from time to time.

Some of my work was dangerous, which was why I put on as much protection as I could. Many who worked here did so with missing fingers, eyes, teeth and even limbs. I would rather not join their lot in having reduced body parts. I liked the ones I had just fine. They were just the right number and matched for the most part.

I passed by the broad stone stairs with marble balustrades leading to the upper floor of Stacks. It was quite an elegant thing to have in a place like this and made me think, and not for the first time, that Stacks hadn't always been a factory. I smiled at the Wugmort guard who stood there.

His name was Ladon-Tosh and I had never heard him

speak. Over his shoulder he carried a long-barreled morta. He also had a sword in a sheath and a knife in a small leather casing on a wide black belt. His sole task here was to prevent access by any of us to the second floor of Stacks. With long, coal-black hair, a scarred face, a hooked nose that apparently had been broken several times and eyes that seemed dead, Ladon-Tosh was scary enough even without all those weapons. *With* them, he was pretty much terrifying in all respects.

I heard that, one time, long before I came to work at Stacks, some gonk tried to make it past Ladon-Tosh and up the stairs. It was said that Ladon-Tosh stabbed him with the knife, shot him with the morta, cut off his head with the sword and then threw the remains in one of the furnaces that blazed at Stacks all light and night. I'm not sure I believed that, but I wasn't *that* sure.

For that reason, I was always unfailingly polite to Ladon-Tosh. I didn't care if he never looked at me or spoke to me. I just wanted him to know that he had a friend in me.

When I first started working here, there was a Wugmort named Quentin Herms who helped me on finishing. That's what I was here — a Finisher. I walked in on my first light here, and all Domitar had barked was, "You're two slivers late. Never let that happen again."

On that first light, I had looked down at my ink-stamped hand and wondered what it was I was to do at this place. I found my workstation only because it had my name on it. A rectangle of blackened metal with silver letters spelling out VEGA JANE on it and bolted onto the top of the wood. It wasn't a pretty sign.

And the whole time I was thinking, *It's not just my name bolted to this place.*

It's me.

On that very first light as I stood next to my station, Quentin had hurried over and greeted me. He was a family friend and had always been very kind toward me.

"I thought you were starting next light, Vega," he said. "Or else I would have been ready for you."

"I don't know what to do," I said with a touch of desperation.

He went back to his station and returned with a little figurine made out of metal. It was of a very young male petting a canine. He said, "This, or things like this, are what you will finish. This is metal. You will also finish things in wood, ceramic, clay and other materials. The Wug and his canine I will paint in pleasing colors."

"How do you know which colors to use?" I asked.

"There are instructions for each item on your workstation. But you have some leeway to use your own creativity. You will sometimes paint, sometimes carve, sometimes mold and sometimes distress objects to make them look older."

"But no one has taught me how to do this."

"I know you showed artistic ability at Learning," he said. "Or else they would not have sent you here to be a Finisher."

I looked at Quentin. "I just thought there would be some training involved."

"There will be. I will train you."

"What about your work?" I asked, glancing at the unfinished objects at his station.

"That will be part of your training, helping me finish them. I've been looking forward to this light, Vega. I had always hoped you would be assigned to Stacks."

And he taught me. Each light, I had come in with a smile, but only because Quentin was there. I had picked up things quickly until my skill rivaled his.

I was recalling all of this now, not for nostalgic reasons but for a very different cause.

For Quentin Herms had been the very Wug I had seen rushing headlong into the Quag with the canines and Council after him. I knew that he would not be at Stacks this light. I wondered when others would realize this too.

My head filled with more dread than puzzlement, I turned to the one thing I knew how to do: finish pretty things that would be purchased by Wugs who could afford them. I was not among that number.

I lifted up my first task of the light. A small, unfinished porcelain bowl that required painting and then kiln firing. As I held up the bowl, the top slipped and it nearly fell off. I set the top down on the table and gripped the bowl more firmly.

That's when I saw the small piece of parchment tucked in there. I glanced around to see if anyone was watching and then I carefully dipped my hand in the bowl and took out the parchment. I hid it in a work cloth and put the cloth on the workstation and opened it, unfolding the piece of parchment as well. The handwriting was small and precise, the words clear.

I will not be back at Stacks, Vega. Go to your tree this night. What you will find there may set you free from Wormwood, if you so desire. QH.

I balled up the parchment and swallowed it. As it went down my throat, I looked up in time to see four males enter Domitar's office. They were all members of Council, as denoted by their black dress tunics. Jurik Krone was among them, which was not a good thing. He had seen me near the Quag this light. That coupled with the fact that I worked next to Quentin might not bode well for me.

Thirty slivers passed and I lifted my gaze when I heard Domitar's door open. To a Wug, all the black tunics were staring at me. I felt my body stiffen like I'd been poked by one of the hot irons the Dactyls used in their work.

Krone came forward, the other Council members in his wake. He held up an object. When I saw it, my breath caught in my throat. I recognized it immediately, though I had not seen it for many sessions. I wondered how Krone could be holding it now.

"We meet yet again, Vega," said Krone as he and his cohorts encircled me at my workstation.

"Yes, we do," I said, trying to keep my voice steady, but it wobbled badly, like a very young testing out his new legs.

He held out the object in his hand. It was a ring. "Do you recognize this?"

I nodded. "It was my grandfather's." It had a distinctive design etched in the metal that matched a mark my grandfather had on the back of his hand. Three hooks connected as one. I had never known what it meant and he had never talked about it, at least with me, but I had been only a very young when he had suffered his Event.

"Can you explain how Virgil Alfadir Jane's ring came to

be found at Quentin Herms's cottage?" Jurik Krone asked patiently, but there was a definite edge to his voice.

I shook my head, my stomach doing tiny flips and my lungs expanding faster than I would have liked them to. "I assumed it had vanished along with my grandfather when he had his Event. As you know, there is nothing left of a Wug after an Event."

Krone tossed the ring down on my workstation. When I reached out to take it, he slammed his knife blade into the ring's opening, pinning it to the wood. I jerked my hand back and stared up at him fearfully.

He slowly pulled his knife blade free and picked up the ring. "You know Herms?" Krone said quietly. "He's a friend of yours, isn't he?"

"He's a friend of my family's. He's the only other Finisher here besides me."

"Why is he not at work this light?"

"I don't know," I said quite truthfully. Still, I was rapturously relieved to have swallowed Quentin's note. "Maybe he's hurt or sick."

"He's neither." He stepped closer. "Let us speak frankly. You were near the Quag at first light. You saw us chasing him."

"I told you, I saw nothing. And you didn't tell me who you were after." I looked up into Krone's face. "But why were you chasing Quentin?"

"There are laws, Vega, laws that Quentin Herms has broken. And for that he will be punished." Krone gave me a searching look that seemed to leave no crevice of my being untouched. "If he tries to contact you, you will inform

Council immediately. The consequences for not doing so will be harsh. This is a serious matter, Vega. Very serious indeed." He paused. "I am speaking of Valhall for those who disobey."

Every Wug there, myself included, drew a sharp breath. No Wug wanted to be locked up in that cage in plain sight and guarded by the brutish Nida and the ferocious black shuck.

He put his hand on my shoulder and lightly squeezed. "I am counting on your help with this, Vega. All of Wormwood needs to stand together on this matter."

Then his hand glided to my face and pulled something free. He held it up. It was a bit of the parchment from Quentin's note that had caught on my skin. With a thrill of horror, I saw that it had a smudge of ink on it.

"A remnant of your work, perhaps?" he said. Krone's gaze once more bored into me. Then he turned on his booted right foot and strode out. His colleagues followed.

I shot a glance at Domitar. I had never seen him so pale and his skin so clammy.

"You *will* cooperate, or it *will* be Valhall," he said to me, and then spun on his heel, almost toppling over in the process, and disappeared into his office.

I turned back to my work and waited for the night to come.