

VEGA JANE
AND THE
SECRETS OF
SORCERY

DAVID BALDACCI

Illustrated by Tomislav Tomić

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS



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W

E

S

The Care

The
Duelum
Pitch

Hospital

Valhall

Fancy
Frocks

The Council
Building


The
Starving
Tove

Learning

THE
QUAG

The Delphias
Cottage

WORMWOOD



Steeple

Morrigone's House

The Hallowed Ground

The Loans

Confectionery Shop

Village Square

High Street

Mill

Weapons Shop

Vega Jane's Family Home

Quentin Herms's Cottage

Stacks

Vega Jane's Tree House

CAST OF CHARACTERS

VEGA JANE – 14, Finisher at Stacks
JOHN JANE – 11, Vega's brother
HELEN JANE – Vega's mother
HECTOR JANE – Vega's father
VIRGIL JANE – Vega's grandfather
CALLIOPE JANE – Vega's grandmother
HARRY TWO – Vega's canine

DANIEL DELPHIA, 'DELPH' – 16, Vega's best friend
DUF DELPHIA – Delph's father, beast trainer

Council

THANSIUS – Chief
DUK DODGSON
JURIK KRONE
MORRIGONE

At Stacks

DIS FIDUS – doorkeeper
LADON-TOSH – staircase guard
NEWTON TILT – Cutter
QUENTIN HERMS – Finisher
JULIUS DOMITAR – Vega's boss

At the Loons

ROMAN PICUS – owner, also bookmaker
CACUS LOON – lodge keeper
HESTIA LOON – Cacus's wife
CLETUS LOON – Cacus's son

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This is a strange and dangerous world you are about to enter, and paying attention to what follows will ensure that you do not run foul of something that could mar the journey ahead . . .

*Wormwood is a place full of humans called **Wugmorts**, or **Wugs** for short. Wugmorts often have strange terms for certain words, as you will discover.*

*A **canine** is, obviously, a dog.*

*The **Care** is the place incurably sick Wugs are sent.*

*The **Council** is the governing body that runs Wormwood.*

***Dactyls** are the very strong Wugs who work at Stacks banging heated metal into proper shape, like blacksmiths used to do.*

*An **Event** is when a Wugmort mysteriously vanishes into thin air for a reason no one knows. Quite exciting!*

***Finishers** are those who work at Stacks, crafting pretty things to sell to others.*

*The **Learning** is a building where young Wugs go to school.*

***Light** means various stages of the day, and **night** means the darkness.*

***Mendens** are what we would call doctors, who attend to the sick in hospital.*

*A **morta** is what we could call a gun.*

*A **session** equals what we would call a year.*

*A **slep** is a horse, albeit with six legs, which is quite a strange beast indeed, and perhaps it once could fly.*

A **sliver** is a short unit of time, like a minute.

Stacks is an old castle of sorts, with many secrets waiting to be discovered.

Steeples is a place for prayer, named after its pointed tower.

Farms abound, and they are worked by Wugs called **Tillers**.

You must understand that Wormwood is a place with vast, unrealized potential, like a young person waiting to grow up into someone extraordinary . . .

But life is hard and primitive in Wormwood, and only a few live in great luxury, while most exist in starkly poor conditions.

There are no cars or trains or aeroplanes – no computers, credit cards or TVs. Indeed, their world is like ours would have been many years past.

Wugmorts never leave Wormwood, for there is nowhere else they could go. Their entire existence is restricted to their city, for beyond its borders lies only death.

Or so they have always been told . . .

PROLOGUE

Soaring above Wormwood, the birds can see right to the horizon.

In the distance a barren landscape shimmers white, an ominous haze hovering above it.

Below, large chimneys spout sickly smoke into their path, as crowds of tiny figures trudge through winding, crowded streets.

Dense forest surrounds the city, an impenetrable tangle of thick, vine-choked trees, packed so tight together it is hard to see to the ground.

But there is one tree unlike all the rest.

Short wooden boards are nailed to its thick trunk forming a crude ladder, leading up to planks that make a floor. It is a hiding place far above everyone.

Here, a girl tosses and turns in her tortured sleep.

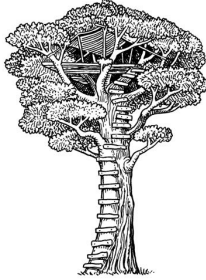
The girl is Vega Jane.

All is not right in her world.

And it is about to get far worse.

For her.

A PLACE CALLED WORMWOOD



I was dozing when I heard the scream. It pierced my head like a mortar round, sending my mind in confusing circles.

I sat bolt upright, at the top of my tree. At first light, I was almost always there. It was a straight-to-the-sky poplar with a towering canopy. Twenty short boards nailed to the trunk was my passage up. Eight wide, splintered planks formed my floor. And a stretch of waterproof cloth draped over branches represented my roof. It was usually a peaceful time, but not this light.

From the edge of my planks, I looked down to the ground. Fresh screams were now joined by the baying of attack canines.

I scampered down and looked around. It was difficult to tell where the screams and baying were coming from.

Suddenly an attack canine hurtled towards me, its fangs bared.

I was fast, but no one could outrun an attack canine. Even as I ran, I braced for its fangs biting into me. But it

flashed past me, soon vanishing from sight.

What could it be after?

I caught a glimpse of something between two trees – a black tunic. Council member. The attack canines must have been unleashed by them. The Council, with one exception, was comprised of males. They passed laws that all Wugs must obey.

Perhaps there had been an escape from Valhall, our prison? But no Wug had ever escaped from Valhall.

I kept running, following the baying, 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. No one had ever gone through the Quag because the terrible beasts in there would murder you instantly. My heart was pounding simply from being this close to it.

As I looked to the left, I glimpsed canines and Council members staring into the depths of the Quag. I let out a long breath and caught the movement of someone disappearing into the tangled vines and twisted trees. It was someone I knew well.

I looked to see if any of the Council or canines had seen what I had. It didn't appear to be the case, so I turned back, but the Wug had 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.

'Vega? 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 the Council.

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

'What are you doing here?' he asked, with hostility in his eyes.

'I heard a scream and saw the canines. I saw Wugs in black tunics running.'

'Did you see anything else?' he asked sharply.

'I saw only the Quag.'

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

The image of the Wug's face before he fled into the Quag slammed into me like a spear. 'That's all,' I lied. It seemed a smart thing to do at the time.

Jurik let go of me.

'What were you chasing?' I asked.

'It's Council business, Vega,' he replied dismissively. 'Be on your way. It is not safe to be this close to the Quag. Now.'

He turned and walked off, leaving me breathless and shaking. I took one last look at the Quag and then raced back in the direction of my tree. I climbed it so fast, I felt dizzy. I wasn't sure I would ever want to come back down.

DELPH



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

The voice from below belonged to my friend Delph. His full 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 called me Vega – when they bothered to call me anything at all.

I said, 'I'm up here, Delph.'

I heard him clambering up the short boards. Then Delph's head poked over the planks. He was much taller than me, and I was tall for my fourteen sessions, over five feet, nine inches. I was still growing, because all the Janes were late bloomers. My grandfather Virgil, it was said, grew four more inches when he was twenty.

Delph's shoulders spread broad, like the leafy cap of my poplar. He was about a session older than me, with a head of thick, black hair that appeared mostly grey-white because of the dust collected there. He worked at the Mill, lifting huge sacks of flour, so he was dusty all the time. He

had a wide, shallow forehead, full lips, and eyes that were as dark as his hair.

He did not qualify to work at Stacks, where some creativity is required. I have never seen Delph create anything except confusion. No one knew what had happened to him, but something was not quite right with Delph. It had been so ever since he was six sessions old. And yet sometimes he said things that made me believe there was far more going on in his head than most Wugs gave him credit for. I think it would be fascinating to see what went on in Delph's mind.

He settled next to me, his legs dangling over the edge of the splintered boards. Delph liked to visit me. 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?

'Delph, did you hear all that?'

'H-hear wh-what?'

'The attack canines and the screaming?'

He looked at me like I was mad. 'Y-you O-OK, Vega Jane?'

'The 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. Hunger was like a painful, festering wound for many in Wormwood, including Delph and me. When you felt it, you could think of nothing else.

Delph shook his head.

I pulled out a small tin box, which constituted my portable larder. 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. Pepper cured many ills, like the taste of bad meat and spoilt vegetables. There had also been a sweet pickle, but I'd eaten it already. I handed him the box. It was intended for my first meal, but I was not as 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 wolfed it all down in two swallows.

'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 at other times, when the clouds covered the heavens, they could look quite silver, as though they were absorbing the colours from above.

'Go-going t-t-to see your mum and dad l-later?' asked Delph.

'Yes.'

'Ca-can I c-come t-too?'

'Of course, Delph. We can meet you there after I pick up John from Learning.'

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

I followed him, heading on to Stacks, where I worked to help make hand-crafted items. Now, I didn't know much. But in Wormwood, I did know that it was a good idea to keep moving.

And so I did.

But 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 of time would pass before I realized that my eyesight had been perfect. And that my life in Wormwood would never be the same again.



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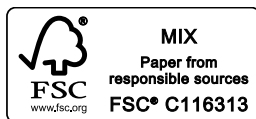
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