

THE KEEPER

Sneak Peek

Harry Two started growling. I looked down at him. His hackles were up, his fangs bared, and 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 chest full 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, paralyzed. Then I felt something grip my arm.

It was Delph.

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