



ONE

In the dead of night, Barclay Thorne sleepily staggered toward a tavern in the middle of nowhere.

The establishment looked many years—perhaps decades—past its prime. It slouched at a rightward slant, as if buckling under the weight of its too many floors. Even from a distance, they towered up, up, with spindly stairwells crisscrossing between balconies and shutters dangling hangnail on their hinges. To and fro, it teetered, creaking like old bones, as though a mere breeze could blow it over.

Wooden signs lined the path to the entrance. Each one was etched in scraggy Lore script, as well as the looping alphabet of the local language.

KEEP OUT.

BEWARE OF MONSTERS.

FLEE OR BE EATEN. (This sign even included an illustration of a stick figure roasting on a spit.)

“Please tell me it’s nicer on the inside,” Barclay groaned.

“If I remember right,” muttered his teacher, Runa Rasgar, “it’s worse.”

As they neared, Barclay made out strange noises from within: hisses and squawks, chitters and growls. Claw marks raked across the front

door. And from the nearest grimy window, a set of three eyes with slit-shaped pupils watched them, unblinking.

Middle of nowhere or not, they'd come to the right place.

He swung open the door, and the tavern keeper's gaze widened with fright as he took in, not Barclay, not Runa, but the monstrous creature looming behind them.

It resembled a wolf, with shaggy black fur, dagger-sharp fangs, and white spikes jutting out from the base of its spine. It was a Beast, a creature of magic, of Lore. More specifically, it was a Lufthund, one of the fastest Beasts in the world, whose wind Lore was so powerful their very howls could conjure storms.

His name was Root.

"W-welcome . . ." As the tavern keeper greeted them, his focus never left Root. Not even as his own Beast, a small, mud-colored Rattle, scurried across the bar, or as Barclay and Runa's fellow passengers began to amble in behind them. "Welcome to Nell's Bed and Breakfast, an award-winning hospitality experience."

Barclay wasn't sure what "experience" awaited them here, other than cholera. The ground floor tripled as a hotel lobby, a carrier dragon station, and a restaurant. Dirt and hay lay trampled across the numerous, mismatched carpets, and mysterious stains oozed across the ceiling. Traveling Lore Keepers crowded inside, with Beasts nuzzled in their laps and luggage stacked at their feet. In the back, a musician played a fiddle onstage, every note shrill and out of tune.

"Rooms are complimentary for passengers of both Draconic Airlines and Skyback Carrier Dragons," the tavern keeper continued, smearing his sweaty hands on his apron. "Though you'll be charged add-on fees for meals as well as the use of showers, chamber pots, and pillows."

The tavern keeper wasn't the only one who gaped at Root. The other passengers of Draconic Airlines Flight B39 gave him a wide berth. Some ogled Barclay and Runa curiously, trying to judge whom the Beast belonged to: the young woman whose hood concealed most

of her face or the pale, skinny fourteen-year-old boy. Root might've stood taller on four legs than Barclay did on two, but Barclay thought it obvious that he was Root's Keeper. With his long, messy black hair and dark eyes, they looked like a set.

Realizing Root was far more enticed by the skewers of meat sizzling on the grill than by him, the tavern keeper relaxed and took in the rest of the newcomers. "While staying with us, we invite you to enjoy our world-class dining and entertainment. Tonight's specials are chestnut soup and beaver kibble. The kitchen closes in one hour, and breakfast will be . . ." He trailed off, squinting at Runa, who hastily ducked her head lower. "Fiery Skellets, I know you! You're the Fang of Dusk!"

Sighing, Runa removed her hood, and the music and chatter around them abruptly died as the entire establishment twisted around to gawk. They weren't disappointed—Runa looked every bit as fearsome as the tales of her described. Her chain-mail vest and jacket suited a warrior, and her blue eyes gave her an icy, calculating stare. Most fearsome of all was the famous white scar slashed across the right side of her face, rippling her fair skin from her cheek to her ear.

"Where's Nell?" Runa asked the tavern keeper, ignoring the attention.

"She passed a few years ago, I'm afraid. Sudden heart attack. Couldn't believe it when I heard it . . . All those marathons she liked to run . . ." He shook his head grimly. "I own the place now. Didn't change a thing, of course. Would've been a shame to lose any of its charm."

As he spoke, a green, brackish sludge gurgled up from the nearby sink. Barclay coughed to hide a gag. It smelled like rotten spinach.

Runa tensed. "Oh. I'm sorry to hear that."

Then, as she made her way toward an open table, the tavern keeper added, "But wait! Before you get settled, you must sign our autograph wall. It's our main attraction. People travel from all over the world to see it, you know." He scuttled to the wall beside the stage. What Barclay had first mistaken for a hideous piece of artwork was actually hundreds of names, scrawled over one another in countless shades of ink. The man proudly pointed out several notable ones. "Perhaps you

could sign next to Sanjit Varma? He's probably one of the only people who've won more Dooling championships than you, eh . . . ? Or there's this spot below Cheng Yu. The Yus are a very fine family, very fine indeed . . . And here! Conley Murdock. So tragic, so tragic. Would've loved to have met him—"

"I've actually already signed the wall." Runa tapped her jagged signature in four different places.

"But those are barely noticeable! Here, here, something bigger this time."

He thrust a quill at Runa, who huffed and scribbled her name on an empty spot.

Afterward, she steered Barclay and Root toward an old barrel in the corner, which the tavern keeper set with a candle, a breadbasket, a mug of ale for Runa, and several glasses and bowls of water. Root hunched to lap at his atop the table.

"So you've been here before?" Barclay asked Runa, drowsily propping his head on his hand.

"I lived here off and on for two years."

He jolted. Two years was a long time.

But before he could ask more, his closest friends and fellow apprentices, Viola Dumont and Tadg Murdock, tottered into the tavern and slumped onto the stools beside them.

"If you don't want to be the last to get your luggage, you shouldn't pack so much," Viola told Tadg.

Tadg glowered and shrugged off his backpack, which smacked the floor with a loud thump. "This is the worst rest stop I've ever seen. Where even are we?"

"We're in the Elsewheres," answered Runa. "In the distant edges of the Sasardin Empire."

The world was divided into two types of regions: the Wilderlands, where Beasts and Lore Keepers lived; and the Elsewheres, which—as the name suggested—meant everywhere else. Barclay had never heard of the Sasardin Empire, despite being from the Elsewheres himself.

But the Elsewheres were huge, covering most of the world. And he was a long, long way from the town he'd once called home.

After graduating from the Symposium last Spring, Barclay, Viola, and Tadg had remained in the Desert for another half a year, training with Runa and spending time with Viola's mother, stepfather, and little sister. All until two days ago, when Runa had announced they'd begin the next phase of their apprenticeships in a new Wilderland: the Mountains.

The whole journey, the trio had hedged bets on what plans Runa had in store for them. But Barclay was now far more intrigued by another mystery: Runa herself.

"Why would you live in a place like this for two years?" he asked Runa.

"What?" Tadg gasped. "You lived *here*? How come you've never—AHH! Toadles! Why do you always do that?!"

One of Tadg's Beasts, Toadles, had appeared without warning on the crown of his head, nestled amid Tadg's light brown waves as though squatting on a lily pad. When not out in the world, Beasts rested in stasis in a golden tattoolike Mark on their Lore Keeper's skin. Tadg had two of them: the small imprint of Toadles on the back of his right hand and the huge, serpentine image of Mar-Mar that twisted up his left arm and peeked out above his collar.

Ordinarily, Beasts didn't leave their Mark unless summoned. Toadles, however, came out whenever he felt like it. He peered down at his angered Keeper with his usual blank stare, the gemstone embedded in his forehead gleaming in the candlelight.

Though Toadles hadn't changed in their time at the Desert, Tadg certainly had. He'd stretched out so long and lanky that none of his clothes fit quite right, and freckles had popped across his nose from days spent training in the Summer sun.

"So you've got nothing to say for yourself?" Tadg demanded.

"*Croak!*" was Toadles's defiant response—typical.

Tadg scowled, plucked his pesky Stonetoad out of his hair, and

popped him in one of the bowls. The water instantly darkened to the stormy violet of Toadles's poison Lore.

Yet Tadg refused to be distracted from his question. "How come you've never mentioned this place before?" he finished.

Runa pursed her lips. "Because living here wasn't the happiest chapter of my life. Believe it or not, you don't know everything about me."

That shut Tadg up. But still he scrutinized Runa with narrowed eyes, as if trying to glimpse what other secrets hid beneath her cool facade. Unlike Barclay and Viola, Tadg had known Runa nearly his whole life, as Runa and his father, Conley, had been best friends until the day Conley died.

But after almost three years as her apprentice, Tadg was hardly the only one to consider Runa family. And now Barclay, too, studied his Lore Master curiously. Gross or not, this tavern was merely a place for Lore Keepers to rest for the night before continuing their travels in the morning. It wasn't a place to *stay*. To call home.

He glanced at Viola, wondering what she thought of Runa's cryptic past. But apart from the two buns of curly dark hair atop her head, Viola was entirely hidden behind today's edition of the *Keeper's Chronicle*. She didn't even notice one of her two Beasts, Mitzi, prowling toward the stage—no doubt to cause trouble.

"Never mind about me," Runa muttered. "Don't you want to know what I have planned in the Mountains?"

"Are we hiking to the top of Celestial Peak?" Tadg asked. Celestial Peak was the highest point in the world.

"Nope. Too easy."

"Are we training in the high altitudes?" Barclay guessed.

"Interesting theory, but no."

Viola, who *had* been eavesdropping, peeked her brown eyes over the newspaper. "Are we hiking the Narrow Pass?"

"With Winter coming up? Definitely not." Runa winked at them as she sipped her ale. "Oh, come on. You don't have any other ideas?"

"Most Lore Masters would just, you know, tell us," Tadg grumbled.

“Well, most Lore Masters aren’t half so fun, or clever, or—”

“Mysterious?” Barclay finished.

“Secretive?” Viola piped up.

“Weird?” Tadg said flatly.

“Really, weird?” Runa smirked. “Need I remind you, I’ve got five signatures on the autograph wall. People travel from all over the world to see it, you know.”

“If we guess right, will you tell us why you lived here?” Tadg asked.

Runa sighed. “I don’t see why this is so important.”

“Because we don’t actually know any more about you than everyone else in this room,” Barclay said.

“That’s ridiculous. You know I’m allergic to shellfish. You know my twenty-ninth birthday is this Winter. You know I’m right-handed.”

“Wow,” Tadg said dryly. “You’re right. That’s really everything.”

Without warning, Viola slapped the newspaper across the table.

Kulo, her tiny Skulkit and the newest addition to their party, jerked from where he slept in her lap, the glass hoops in his large ears clinking together. Kulo resembled a fennec fox, with sandy fur and huge, dark eyes, and he was so cute that Barclay sometimes forgot he was as powerful as Root.

“Sorry, Kulo,” Viola said. “But look! They interviewed Dad yesterday.” She pointed to a sketched portrait of Leopold Dumont. He wore a proud and stately expression, as suited the Grand Keeper—the leader of the Lore Keeper world.

Tadg groaned as he picked the fuzzy white mold off his bread roll. “The election isn’t until Spring and I’m already tired of it.”

Viola looked scandalized. “Even if we’re not old enough to vote, the election affects us, you know.”

“Yeah, because you won’t shut up about it.”

Though Barclay wouldn’t have put it so bluntly, Tadg was right. Since Gamila Asfour, the High Keeper of the Desert, had launched her campaign to challenge Leopold for his seat, Viola had followed the news with almost Scholarly fervor.

“Besides,” Tadg continued, “what’s the point? Everyone knows your dad is gonna win. The Dumonts have been the Grand Keepers for three generations.”

Viola hiked up her chin, her expression nearly identical to her father’s portrait. “Dad isn’t leading just because of our family. He’s leading because he’s been a great Grand Keeper.”

Barclay wasn’t so sure he agreed. Leopold Dumont certainly hadn’t been a *bad* Grand Keeper, but a great one? The few times they’d met, Leopold had cared more about preserving his perfect image than owning up to the ghosts of his past—including, most especially, Audrian Keyes, the Lore Keeper who’d nearly destroyed not one but *two* Wilderlands. Although Keyes hadn’t resurfaced since his crimes at the Desert, all the Wilderlands remained on edge, as it was only a matter of time before he struck again.

Tadg rolled his eyes. “If you say so.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Viola snapped.

“It’s late, and we’re all tired.” Runa shot Tadg a warning look. “Let’s just eat some supper and—”

A shriek tore across the tavern, and the musician’s fiddle cut out with a clang.

“Mitzi, no!” Viola shouted. In an instant, she shoved Kulo into Barclay’s arms and bolted out of her seat.

Barclay twisted around—Kulo peering over his shoulder—and gasped. The musician thrashed on the stage floor while Mitzi pinned him beneath her two silver, feathery wings. Her light Lore flashed like a strobe between her fangs. If she hadn’t been a vegetarian, Barclay would’ve sworn she was trying to eat him.

Then he spotted something shiny glinting in the musician’s mouth—a golden tooth. Mitzi loved nothing more than shiny things.

Just as Mitzi pried open the man’s jaw with her talons, she vanished. Cursing, the musician clambered to his feet, and Barclay and Tadg snickered as Viola apologized many times over and dropped several kritter coins into his tips bucket. Then she ducked back to their table. On her

forearm, Mitzi's Mark squirmed unhappily across her light brown skin.

"She *has* to stop doing things like that!" Viola sank onto her stool, but, being as tall as she was, hardly sank very low at all. "She doesn't realize how big she is now. And she's only going to grow bigger! Oh, do you think anyone recognized me?"

As Viola hastily flipped over the *Khronicle* to hide her father's portrait, Barclay said, "Wait—is there any news about Keyes?"

Viola's face went serious. "No, not since the rumor that he and Yasha were spotted in the Jungle. But that was back in Spring, and it was never confirmed."

Yasha Robinovich was Keyes's apprentice, a boy Barclay had once considered a friend. But that was a long time ago.

"If Audrian is spotted, I'll hear about it before it's reported in the *Khronicle*," Runa told them. As a Guardian, one of the four types of Lore Keepers licensed by the Guild, it was Runa's duty to protect people from dangerous Beasts and Lore Keepers like Keyes. Not only that, Runa *knew* Keyes. She, Keyes, and another Guardian named Cyril Harlow had all been Leopold's apprentices together, much like Barclay, Viola, and Tadg were Runa's now. And as Keyes's old friend, Runa was determined to bring him down before he could hurt anyone else.

"And when you hear news, you'll tell *us*?" Barclay asked pointedly.

"Of course," Runa answered. "I know I've kept you all in the dark in the past, but I'm done with that. You might still be apprentices, but you've more than proven yourselves." It was Barclay and his friends who'd thwarted Keyes at the Sea, who'd uncovered Keyes's true plan at the Desert. "Whatever happens, we're in this together now. I promise."

The next morning, Barclay and Root hauled themselves up before sunrise.

The pair seldom woke so early if they could help it. But despite their few hours of sleep, they both jittered with excitement; today was the final day of their journey.

Though the lobby was still quiet, the fields outside clamored with

commotion as carrier dragons prepped for departure. They varied in size from huge to enormous to colossal, and Barclay and Root watched from the edge of the runway as they stretched their humongous wings or bent to be fitted with their caravans. This early, the Autumn air smelled crisp, and grass sprawled out endlessly in every direction. Far, far in the distance, the shadows of mountains rose. *The Mountains*. As if peeking out over the edge of the world.

Barclay might've lingered to admire it all, but after four days cooped up in his Mark during their flights, Root had no such patience. He took off, leaving his Lore Keeper behind.

Barclay laughed and dashed after him.

Even as a kid, Barclay had loved running. He'd loved it so much that he often got in trouble for it, as running, like all forms of wildness, was strictly forbidden in his hometown of Dullshire.

And running with Root was definitely wild.

Within seconds, Barclay caught up to him, and the two quickened their pace, faster and faster, until gusts whipped through Barclay's tangled hair, and Nell's Bed and Breakfast lay far behind them.

Yet even as Barclay summoned more power, his Lore didn't strengthen. Normally at this speed, their bodies transformed into the wind itself, and Barclay loved that feeling more than anything. Of the currents whooshing between his bones. Of letting go of his balance and whirling freely through the air. But no matter how hard he focused, he couldn't do it.

He slowed to stop beside a crooked post, each sign pointing in a different direction.

THE MOUNTAINS ABOVE ↘ 216 MILES

THE MOUNTAINS BENEATH ↑ 288 MILES

THE WOODS → 752 MILES

THE SEA ↗ 1711 MILES

THE DESERT ↓ 1898 MILES

THE TUNDRA ↖ 2009 MILES

THE JUNGLE ↙ 2395 MILES

"What's wrong?" Barclay panted. "Why isn't it working?"

Root huffed, equally frustrated.

Barclay sat to catch his breath, puzzling over it. Then, as he leaned back and flattened his palms against the ground, a strange, empty feeling filled his chest.

“Maybe Lore works differently in the Elsewheres,” he mused.

His surroundings certainly felt different than a Wilderland. The grass didn’t reach toward him as it blustered in the breeze. The shrubs never pointed into the distance, as though beckoning him onward.

“I wonder how I never noticed it before. I used Lore in Dullshire and Knunx.”

Root snorted.

“All right, I’ll admit those weren’t my finest moments. . . .” Unable to tame his powers, he’d accidentally destroyed Dullshire’s famous clocktower, and he’d leveled an entire street in Knunx. “But it was still more Lore than *this*.”

He flung his arm outward, and a torrent of wind swept across the grass, so sharp it sliced through the blades like a scythe. A few years ago, the simple move would’ve impressed him. Now, not so much.

“Dullshire and Knunx are both border towns, though. Maybe it’s different this far from a Wilderland.”

Root let out a low gruff as he collapsed beside him. He didn’t know either.

Whatever the reason, Barclay’s disappointment didn’t last long. He plucked a withered sprig of wormwood and twisted it between his fingers. With a little Lore, it twirled and fluttered over his hand. He grinned.

“I heard the city of Yunshan sits *above* the clouds. And that you can ride cable cars all the way up the slopes. And that there are dragons everywhere, some even as small as insects.” Giddiness crept into his voice. “I can’t wait to get there. It’ll be a whole new adventure.”

Usually, admitting such thoughts would embarrass him, but not to Root, who knew him better than anyone. And even if Barclay felt more at home in the Wilderlands than ever, with friends he called family and Lore that grew stronger by the day, a part of him would always

feel like that orphaned outcast from Dullshire, who secretly dreamed of becoming a hero in an adventure story.

He'd gotten everything he'd wished for—and more.

By the time he and Root returned to the bed and breakfast, the lobby bustled with activity. They squeezed past the queue of passengers waiting to board a flight to Munsey, then skirted around the pack of Beasts burrowing beneath the carpets. They found Tadg hunched over their same barrel from the night before. In one hand, he clutched a steaming mug of coffee. With the other, he drew something on a paper napkin.

Barclay peeked at it as he sat down. It was a sketch of Toadles, who perched oddly still atop the table, as if posing.

“Huh. That’s actually not bad,” he said. It was almost as good as the illustrations throughout *A Traveler’s Log of Dangerous Beasts*, the endearing memoir and Beastly encyclopedia that had made Conley Murdock beloved the whole world over.

Tadg only grunted in response. It was too early for him to speak in proper sentences.

“Your dad’s name is on the wall, you know. Over there.”

That roused him. He dragged his gaze up and stared at the autographs thoughtfully.

When he glanced back at Barclay, he frowned. “How are you already covered in dirt?”

Barclay peered at his muddied clothes and gritty fingernails. Then he shrugged. He'd hardly noticed.

Viola joined them, setting a basket of fresh pastries on the table. Kulo helped himself to the chocolate croissant—he had an insatiable sweet tooth.

“Don’t you both look . . .” Viola studied Tadg’s dour expression and Barclay’s windswept hair. “Refreshed.”

“You’re wearing your pins again.” Barclay nodded at the hundreds of gold pins, buttons, and baubles covering Viola’s jacket. Largest among them was the one directly over her heart: the symbol of a three-headed dragon, the Dumont family crest.

“Yeah, well, they distract Mitzi from shiny objects around the room,

even if they do look a bit silly.” They jangled as she dropped onto the empty stool between them. “And Mitzi and I had a long, mature conversation last night. We’re Dumonts, and neither of us is a kid anymore. We can’t just go around attacking people and stealing their teeth.”

Behind her, Mitzi hung her head in shame.

“Or clawing at their belt buckles,” Viola continued, citing an earlier incident.

Mitzi buried her face in her feathers.

“Or biting off fingers with rings.”

Mitzi sank to the floorboards.

“Oh, that wasn’t so bad,” Barclay said. “His pinkie grew back, didn’t it?”

“Yeah, but it took three weeks and ten bottles of Mendijuice.”

As she shuddered, Kulo leapt into her lap and nuzzled his face into her stomach, purring loudly. Mitzi glared.

Then Viola snatched a cherry tart out of the basket and grinned mischievously. “Anyway, I’ve been thinking—”

“Uh-oh,” Tadg said, which Viola ignored.

“I bet I know what Runa’s planned for us in the Mountains. We’re going to sleep in dragon nests.”

“I’m pretty sure Runa wants us to survive to the end of our apprenticeships,” said Barclay.

“I’m serious. My grandmother spent a night in a den when she was sixteen. It’s a Dumont tradition.”

“Is it possible for you to go a full minute without mentioning your family,” Tadg asked, “or will you just explode?”

Viola fumed. “Is it possible for you to be in a good mood for once, or—”

“At least I don’t remind everyone three times a day that I’m gonna be the next Grand Keeper.”

“I hardly do that. Right, Barclay?”

“What’s Barclay gonna say?” Tadg asked. “You know he can’t lie.”

As both of his friends whipped their heads toward him, Barclay stuttered, “I—I mean, I don’t . . .” His face flushed, as it always did when

he lied. Because they were both right: Viola talked about her family constantly, and Tadg was almost always a grouch.

“Ah, I see we’ve started our routine early today,” Runa said behind them, saving Barclay from finishing his answer. She claimed the fourth stool, and her Haddiss, Goath, slithered across the carpets to the sound of *click click click*. The nearby patrons lunged out of his path, unnerved by the large serpent whose body was nothing but skeleton.

Unlike Root, Goath basked in the terror he inspired wherever he went. His bones rattled with happiness, and he twisted up Runa’s back to rest his jaw upon her shoulder. She scratched his skull affectionately.

Their breakfast was silent except for the slurps of hot drinks, the scratching of Tadg’s stylus, the scrapes of Mitzi prying a shiny nail from the floorboards, and the clacks of Root gnashing on an antelope bone.

Until the tavern keeper approached their table. “Um, Miss Rasgar? A postal dragon arrived. There’s a letter for you.”

Runa frowned. “For me? All the way out here?”

“Y-yes, I suppose it’s urgent.”

Barclay assumed the quiver in the man’s voice was due to Goath until he glimpsed the envelope. On the back was an official Guild seal with purple wax flecked with gold. The letters *LD* were etched on the insignia, along with a three-headed dragon.

Viola gasped. “That’s Dad’s seal!”

The three apprentices leaned forward curiously—as did the tavern keeper, whom Runa shooed away with a stern look.

Then she opened it, and as she read, her expression darkened.

“Well, what does it say?” Barclay asked nervously.

“There’s been a change of plans. We’re taking an express flight to Permafrosk. The High Keeper of the Tundra was just murdered.”