

THE EVER STORMS





ALSO BY AMANDA FOODY

The Accidental Apprentice

The Weeping Tide

The Night Compass



WILDERLORE

THE EVER
STORMS

AMANDA FOODY

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TO DAISY,
WHO LOVED SUNFLOWER SEEDS AND
NAPS—BOTH MOST PARTICULARLY WHILE
IN HER HAMSTER WHEEL





ONE

Barclay Thorne groaned and covered his ears, trying to muffle the ferocious rumbles of the dragon's stomach—the dragon he was now riding.

This was Barclay's first time traveling by carrier dragon, and for the most part, he liked it. The passenger caravan strapped to the Beast's back was comfy and spacious, with wide windows perfect for admiring the breathtaking views. And the speedy flight had shortened an otherwise thirty-week journey on foot to a mere four days.

What he didn't like was all the *noise*. The wind whizzed shrilly in his ears. The pilot hollered directions from his saddle, no matter the time of day or night. And the carrier dragon, named Justine, was clearly suffering from a bad case of indigestion.

"Are we there yet?" Barclay grumbled.

"For the fifth time, no," answered his closest friend, Viola

Dumont, who sat cross-legged on the window bench beside him. “We’ll land at sundown.”

As she spoke, Mitzi—Viola’s own dragon—reached a silver wing over Viola’s shoulder and clawed at one of the hundreds of gold pins on her tunic. Viola yelped and shot Mitzi a dirty look.

Mitzi used to be sneakier—and a *lot* smaller. Only a baby whelp when Barclay had first met her, Mitzi had since grown to the size of a sheepdog. Two nubby horns had sprouted between her ears, and the feathers on her tail now climbed up her back and wings. But despite how much she’d changed, Mitzi still loved nothing more than all things shiny.

“Mitzi, we talked about this,” Viola scolded her. “You need to be better behaved.”

Mitzi paid her no mind. She jabbed a talon at a glimmering button on Viola’s sleeve.

Both Justine and Mitzi were Beasts, which were animals with magical powers called Lore. Beasts came in many shapes and sizes, from tiny, harmless creatures to gigantic, terrifying monsters, and they dwelled in six regions of the world known as the Wilderlands. The people who lived there with them, like Barclay and Viola, were called Lore Keepers, and they bonded with Beasts in order to share their magic.

“You should try to relax,” Viola told Barclay, ignoring Mitzi’s pokes and prods. “Haven’t you read that book twice already?”

Barclay peeled his attention away from *Beastly Biographies of Brilliant Keepers*, which Viola had gifted him for

his thirteenth birthday earlier that Summer. “But what if I missed something? There are going to be apprentices from all across the Wilderlands at the Symposium, but I didn’t grow up in the Wilderlands like everyone else. I don’t want to fall behind.”

The Symposium was a set of courses that all apprentices of the Lore Keeper Guild were required to pass before they could sit for their licensing exam. It took place every year at the University of Al Faradh, the most famous school in all the Wilderlands.

Being an apprentice himself, Barclay had always known that he’d have to attend the Symposium, but he’d assumed that would be years and years away. Until four days ago, when their teacher, Runa Rasgar, had abruptly announced their travels to the Desert for the Symposium. And four days was *definitely* not enough time to prepare.

Viola shook her head. “You’ve been a Lore Keeper for a year and a half now, and you know as much about Beasts as Tadg and I do. You have nothing to worry about.”

Tadg Murdock was their fellow apprentice, a hotheaded boy who always found something to be grumpy about. After complaining all afternoon about how boring and long their flight was, he’d fallen asleep on the cushions in the caravan’s corner. His wavy light brown hair was matted from his pillow, and one of his Beasts, Toadles, had nestled himself into the crook of his arm.

Barclay hoped that Viola was right. Even if he ended up being the only student from the Elsewheres, which were the regions of the world without magical Beasts, he no longer felt like the scared mushroom farmer who’d accidentally wandered into

the Woods. He'd faced not one but two Legendary Beasts. And after more than a year spent training at the Sea, he was smarter, stronger, and faster than he'd ever been.

Gurrrrrrrrrrg. The floor tremored with Justine's latest stomach cramp.

The sound made Root wake with a start. Root was Barclay's Lufthund, a wolflike Beast with powerful wind Lore. Side by side, the pair of them looked similarly wild. Root had shaggy fur, hooked claws, and sharp teeth. He was all black except for the white bones that jutted out from the base of his spine. Meanwhile, Barclay had long, tangled dark hair to match, pale skin, and fingernails far too often caked with dirt.

Unlike Barclay, who was still as short as ever, Root had grown far bigger this past year. When he padded up to Barclay, he had to bend down to nudge his Keeper's head.

"I know," Barclay told him, scratching him beneath the chin. "I'm tired of being cooped up too. But we'll land soon."

Root huffed impatiently. Then he sat down and rested his head on Barclay's knees.

Barclay turned back to Viola. "Maybe you're right and I've been studying too much. But how come you're not?" That wasn't like Viola, who didn't deem a book finished until she'd read it three times over.

Viola shrugged. "Oh, I've been studying for the Symposium since I was seven, so I've spent the trip doing more important things. Like mapping out my to-do list for when I get home."

Mitzi and Root weren't the only ones to have grown this past year. When Viola stood to fetch her satchel, she tow-

ered over Barclay. She might've always been tall, but lately she seemed to stretch another inch every season, and her two hair buns of tight brown curls only added to her height. She was even taller than Runa now.

Viola sat down and flipped through the pages of her leather-bound notebook.

"Your mom lives in the Desert, right?" Barclay asked. "How long has it been since you last saw her?"

"Almost two years, since I first became an apprentice." Barclay was no expert on families, as his parents had died when he was small, but two years seemed like a long time to be apart. "Which is why the first thing I'm going to do when I get home is eat as much of my mom's cooking as possible."

Barclay agreed this task was very important. The food at the Sea left a lot to be desired.

"Second," Viola continued, "I'm going to meet Gamila Asfour. She's the new High Keeper of the Desert, now that Idir Ziani retired. I've heard she's very impressive, and I need her to like me if I'm going to be Grand Keeper one day."

Whereas High Keepers governed each Wilderland, the Grand Keeper was the leader of the Guild and the entire Lore Keeper world. Though the job was elected, not inherited, the Dumonts had been the Grand Keepers for three generations. And Viola was determined to follow in her family's footsteps. Barclay had no doubt she'd succeed. She'd already traveled to five of the six Wilderlands. She was an expert on languages. And she spent all her free time studying and preparing for a job that was years away.

"Last, I'm going to bond with a second Beast," Viola finished.

Barclay smirked. “Will Mitzi like that?”

Mitzi now crept across the floor toward Toadles, her best friend—or, as Tadg referred to him, her partner in crime.

“Mitzi and I have had a lot of long talks,” Viola replied. “And we agree that I’m more than ready for a second Beast.”

Meanwhile, Mitzi tapped Toadles on the gemstone in the center of his forehead. The tiny Beast’s bulging eyes flew open with surprise, and purple goo squirted out of his webbed hands. Tadg jolted awake, seething. Toadles’s poison Lore had made his fair skin swell violet with an itchy rash.

“You’re supposed to stay in your Mark!” Tadg snapped at Toadles, who only stared at him blankly.

Suddenly, the caravan lurched as Justine swooped to the right. Root howled. Viola collided with Barclay. And Mitzi frantically stretched out her long wings to take flight, smacking Tadg in the face.

“Whoa, girl! Steady!” the pilot hollered, tugging on Justine’s reins.

In the span of a blink, Runa rose from her sleeping roll in the corner and darted toward the pilot’s side. “What’s going on?” she asked, her voice calm even as Justine plunged into a steep dive.

Runa Rasgar was never afraid of anything, because no matter where she was, *she* was always the scariest thing in the room. Her chain mail clothes looked fit for a warrior, and a jagged scar cleaved down the pale skin on the right side of her face. Her famous reputation as a Guardian and a Dooling champion had earned her the nickname the Fang of Dusk.

“I . . . Look! Over there!” The pilot pointed southward, and Barclay and Viola twisted around to peer out the windows.

In the distance, a dark, menacing pillar stretched up from ground to sky. It was as wide as a city or even a mountain, as though a vast hole had been torn through the world. It took Barclay several seconds to realize that the pillar was *moving*. Its surface swirled and billowed like plumes of smoke.

“What is that?” Barclay rasped. Beside him, Root sprang up to take in the sight as well, and he let out a low, threatening growl.

“It’s a sandstorm,” Runa answered gravely.

“But it’s so small,” said Viola, which made Barclay gape. The storm might’ve taken up only a sliver of the otherwise blue and sunny sky, but it still felt ridiculous to describe something so frightening as small. “If it was a sandstorm, it would be—”

“I don’t think it’s a normal one. Can you take us closer?” Runa asked the pilot.

“C-closer?” the pilot sputtered. “That’s much too dangerous. You see how Justine reacts.”

“We don’t need to fly close enough to put us in harm’s way. I just want to get a better look.”

The pilot muttered something under his breath, then tapped his foot against Justine’s long neck, steering her to the right. The caravan tilted, forcing Barclay and Viola to grasp onto the window frames to keep from falling, and Root’s claws raked across the seat cushions. Along the back wall, a rack of pamphlets advertising *SKYBACK CARRIER DRAGONS, the #1 Keeper-recommended draconic flight service* toppled down with a crash.

Tadg pried Mitzi off him—she’d been clinging to his face—and stumbled toward Runa. “You told us that you didn’t have any work to do in the Desert. You said that while we were studying, you’d be taking a vacation.”

“Did I?” Runa said innocently, with a not-so-innocent twinkle in her icy blue gaze.

Runa was a Guardian, which was one of the four types of Lore Keepers licensed by the Guild, so it was her job to protect the Wilderlands from dangerous Beasts. Last year, Runa had been summoned to the Sea to investigate a carnivorous algae bloom called the weeping tide, which had been making Lochmordra, the Sea’s Legendary Beast, attack islands and ships. But as it turned out, the seaweed wasn’t to blame. The real culprits were a Lore Keeper named Audrian Keyes and his apprentice, Yasha Robinovich, who were trying to destroy the borders between the Wilderlands and the Elsewheres to let Lore consume the entire world. Even though Barclay and his friends had saved the Sea, Keyes and Yasha had escaped, and no one had seen them since.

“I *knew* there was a reason you were sticking us in the Symposium,” Tadg said smugly. “You’ve been sent to investigate something in the Desert, haven’t you?”

“High Keeper Asfour might’ve requested my presence,” Runa admitted. “But the three of you don’t need to concern yourselves with it. You should be focusing on your studies.”

“No way! We’d rather help you than be stuck in some class.” When Runa didn’t respond, Tadg whipped his head toward Barclay and Viola. “Well? Don’t you two agree with me?”

Barclay was only half paying attention. As they neared the sandstorm, he could make out huge, whirling currents of

dust within it, twisting around one another like snakes. It looked as though the Desert was writhing. The sand that soared in the air was so thick that no light could break through from above, creating a deep, deep darkness.

“Is that what sandstorms usually look like?” Barclay asked Viola.

“No,” she answered tightly.

Justine let out a fearful cry and lurched a second time, so strongly that Viola shrieked and Tadg was thrown to the floor.

“I’m sorry,” the pilot told Runa. “She won’t take us any closer.”

Runa stared at the sandstorm through shrewd, narrowed eyes.

“Ma’am?” the pilot asked nervously.

“That’s fine. Get us back on course to Menneset.”

Justine swerved around, and Barclay breathed a sigh of relief. Just looking at the sandstorm had made goose bumps prickle across his skin. He wrapped his arm around Root’s back, and after a few moments, Root relaxed and withdrew his claws from the shredded cushions.

As they soared away, something dark moved in the corner of Barclay’s vision. He turned back to the window, and his heart stuttered to a stop.

One of the columns of sand had bent away from the storm and stretched out toward them, like a massive hand reaching for a candle flame.

No sooner did Barclay scream than the hand closed over them.

And the world snuffed out.



TWO

Sand exploded through the windows, smothering the entire caravan in a thick, prickly haze. Barclay coughed. It felt like he was breathing in pebbles. Even his eyes stung, forcing him to squeeze them shut.

Justine was wrenched backward, as if the storm was yanking her toward it. Barclay tumbled to the floor, and his shoulder slammed into something soft and shaggy, which he realized was Root. The Lufthund yelped, then nuzzled his head into his Keeper's side to block the harsh sand.

Barclay clung to Root tightly. He had to do something.

He drew himself to his knees, then stretched his arms in either direction and thought, *Wind!*

Gusts blasted from his palms at the windows, so powerful that any papers and loose trinkets were cast out with the sand and hurled into the sky. Barclay tried to gulp in a deep breath of clean air, but his chest only shuddered with more coughs.

As powerful as his wind Lore might've been, it wasn't enough to rip Justine from the sandstorm's grasp. The carrier dragon flailed, whipping the caravan this way and that. But it was no use. The storm dragged them backward as though trying to swallow them whole.

"Brace yourselves!" Runa shouted.

Their already dim surroundings went utterly black.

Then they were falling.

Everyone screamed as they were thrown upward. Barclay slammed into the ceiling, and his Lore abruptly died. Sand barged back into the caravan.

Sparing Root any more terror, Barclay returned him to the golden, tattoolike Mark on his shoulder, where he resided in stasis until Barclay was ready to summon him again. Immediately, it began to sting in warning, and he girded himself for impact—possibly, even, for doom.

A heartbeat before they crashed to the ground, Justine managed to spread her wings against the violent winds. They stopped free-falling with a jerk. Barclay smacked the floor face-first, and pain burst from his nose. He groaned and rolled over, tasting blood on his lips.

Seconds later, Justine clumsily landed, the blow softened by the cushioning dunes. They skidded for several seconds before finally coming to a halt.

At first, Barclay was too scared to move, certain he'd shattered all his bones. But the torrents of sand continued to rage, making it impossible to inhale. And so he had no choice but to raise his arms and muster his Lore again. The wind drove the debris outside, and he gasped for air.

A warm glow appeared. He opened his eyes to find Viola

lying beside him, an orb of light shimmering around her hands and illuminating the caravan. She looked as shaken as he felt, with several scrapes torn across her light brown skin.

Her eyes widened as she took him in. “Your *face!*”

Barclay was too busy using his Lore to find a mirror, but judging from the pain throbbing from his mouth to his forehead, he must’ve looked a mess.

Runa was in front of him in an instant. Her pale blond hair, normally braided, hung wild and loose, and sand was matted in her eyebrows. “Your nose is broken,” she told him matter-of-factly. “I’m going to reset it with my bone Lore. Are you ready?”

Barclay was *not* ready, but Runa didn’t give him a chance to say so. An invisible force yanked his nose back to the center with a loud, agonizing *snap!* Barclay screamed, and his wind Lore stuttered. But after a few strangled breaths, the pain lessened, and he regained his focus.

“Not my best work—it’s still a little crooked. But it’ll have to do.” Runa patted Barclay on the shoulder. “That was quick thinking up there. Well done. How long do you think you can keep going?”

Barclay’s wind Lore was far stronger than it used to be, but he’d never used this much longer than a few minutes at a time. “A while,” he answered, determined not to prove his words a lie.

Viola woozily stood and gawked at the ruined caravan. “What are we going to do now?” Her voice was scratchy, as though a prickly pear had gotten lodged in her throat.

“Carrier dragons are all equipped with distress beacons, so once we find it, we can send a signal to the closest city to come help us,” said Runa. “Now, where’s Tadg?”

“I’m here,” came a muffled voice from beneath a heap of carpets. Then Tadg crawled out from under them, like a dung beetle. He collapsed at their feet. “I want a better look. Fly a little closer. What could go wrong?” he mimicked Runa mockingly. Neither Barclay nor Viola was brave enough to make fun of the Fang of Dusk, but Tadg had known Runa his whole life. Before he died two years ago, Runa had been Tadg’s father’s best friend.

“Normal sandstorms don’t just reach out and grab people,” Viola said nervously. “What is this?”

“I don’t know,” Runa responded. “This doesn’t seem as bad as what the High Keeper described in her letters.”

“Doesn’t seem as *bad*?” Tadg repeated. “Should it also be raining fire?”

“If there’s been a sandstorm, why wouldn’t Mom have told me in her letters?” asked Viola.

“I promise to answer your questions later,” Runa assured them. “For now, let’s just focus on getting out of here.” She walked toward the pilot, who was slumped unconscious in the saddle. She shook his shoulder, but he didn’t respond.

“Is he dead?” Barclay squeaked.

“No, but he’s out cold. I’m gonna check on Justine. Tadg, would you search through these compartments for the distress beacon?”

With that, Runa slipped out one of the windows into the storm.

Tadg rummaged through the compartments in the walls on either side of the cockpit. Each drawer he thrust out was dusted in a thin layer of sand. “Is this the part where we all get eaten by a sand serpent? I heard they swim underneath the dunes.”

“*Asperhayas*,” Viola corrected, using their proper name, “are really rare. I’m more concerned with whatever Beast is causing this sandstorm.”

“You think a Beast is doing this?” Barclay asked.

“Well, it’s not a normal storm, is it? That means there’s some Lore at work.”

“Found it!” Tadg brandished a strange disk that looked like a smooshed beetle. He slid open two of its winglike slats, and the disk began to blink with red light. “Can a rescue team really reach us in here?”

“I don’t know,” Viola replied. “If they figure out we’re in this storm, they’ll probably send a team of Guardians to fetch us.”

“How long do you think that’ll take?” asked Barclay. He didn’t want to admit it out loud, but his arms were already tiring.

GRRRRRRRRRRRRLLLLLL!

A thunderous growl boomed in the distance, so loud it drowned out even the roaring of the storm.

The three apprentices froze.

“Are you *sure* *Asperhayas* are rare?” Barclay asked anxiously. His fingertips trembled, making his Lore stutter out in spurts.

Behind them, Runa climbed back inside. “The good news is that Justine is fine. She’s just frightened, though I don’t think the fall helped her stomachache. The bad news is that the winds are too strong for her to lift off again. Did you find the beacon?”

“Yeah, but are we just gonna pretend that there isn’t some giant Beast out there?” Tadg demanded.

As always, Runa’s tone was cool and measured. “I’m also

interested to see what made that noise. So come on—let’s move outside. Barclay, Viola, you keep using your Lore. Tadg, you and I will grab the pilot.”

“Outside?” Tadg echoed. “Is this for another *closer look*?”

Runa shrugged. “If you’d rather *not* see the possible monster hunting us, then by all means, go back to lying under your carpets.”

Tadg had no argument for that. So the four of them—with the pilot limply in tow—shoved open the caravan’s door and staggered outside onto the slope of a soft dune. Barclay had been looking forward to seeing the Desert up close, but it was so dark amid the storm that it might as well have been the dead of night. Even with Viola’s make-shift lantern, the blustering sand obscured everything more than a few feet in front of them. It was also far hotter on the ground than it’d been in the sky, hotter and drier than even the longest Summer days in the Woods or at the Sea.

Gradually, Barclay shifted his Lore. Instead of blowing air in opposite directions, he shaped the wind into a sphere, with all of them protected inside.

The group walked along Justine’s long red neck until they reached her head, which she’d half buried within the sand. Barclay widened his sphere to cover her face as well, and her green eyes gratefully met his own.

“Your control is improving,” Runa told him, as though this was merely any other lesson and they weren’t stranded in the center of a gigantic, terrifying dust storm.

“Thanks,” Barclay managed. Beads of sweat dribbled down his temples.

GRRRRRRRRRRRRLLLLLL!

At that, one of Runa's two Beasts—Goath—appeared at her side. Goath was a Haddisss, a large snake made only of skeleton. He slithered up his Keeper's back, and his bones rearranged themselves with eerie clicks until they brack-eted Runa's upper body like armor. His tail stretched out over the top of her right hand into a long, lethal blade.

"What kind of Beast do you think it is?" Tadg asked, his voice cracking.

"It could be a Trickanis," Viola said, and the name alone made a shiver creep down Barclay's spine. "Or a Waramasa. Or an . . . Asperhaya."

"I knew it!"

"Quiet," Runa snapped, her voice unusually sharp with warning. Their bickering abruptly silenced.

In the distance, a sound rumbled. It reminded Barclay of an earthquake, and he immediately thought of Audrian Keyes, whose stone Lore had been powerful enough to shake the entire Isle of Munsey at the Sea. Barclay didn't know who he'd prefer to face—a genuine monster or the man who'd nearly destroyed an entire Wilderland to get what he wanted.

Runa must've been thinking the same thing, because for the first time, her expression betrayed a hint of fear. She dropped into a fighting stance.

Beside her, sparks of electric Lore sizzled at Tadg's fingertips.

"Is it going to attack—" Tadg started, but was cut off when something screeched overhead.

Three figures soared above them, and even from afar, Barclay could tell from the spindly shape of their wings that they were dragons. As they shot downward, the lash-

ing against Barclay's sphere began to ease. The gales still blew as fast as ever, but the sand froze, floating in midair as though ignoring the wind entirely. Then, all at once, the sand hardened into a dome wide enough to shield them and Justine.

The rescue party had arrived.

Exhausted and relieved, Barclay lowered his arms and let his Lore release.

The three dragons landed in front of them. Dragons came in all sorts of varieties, and these looked far more elegant than Mitzi and not nearly so humongous as Justine. All three had long, slender necks and shimmering scales in brilliant hues of gold, ruby, and violet.

Barclay realized this was no average rescue party.

"Dad?" Viola asked, just as a man slid down from the golden dragon's saddle.

Barclay had never met the Grand Keeper before, and he couldn't imagine anyone with a more commanding presence. As he strode forward, his glossy cape billowed around his boots. He had blond hair and a matching neat beard, and he was so tall that Barclay had to crane his neck to look up at him. Embroidered over his heart gleamed the crest of a three-headed dragon.

"Viola," Leopold Dumont gasped, immediately seizing his only child in his arms.

A second person jumped from the ruby dragon and ran to Viola's side. Unlike the Grand Keeper, who donned leather riding gear, this woman wore a linen dress and dozens of gold bololanene bangles that clearly hadn't been chosen for flying. The second Leopold stepped away from Viola, the woman replaced him.

“Mom?” Viola sounded breathless from being squeezed so tight. “But you hate flying!”

“You think I wouldn’t rush over here the moment we heard your distress beacon?” Viola’s mom pulled away, but her hands still fretfully roamed over her daughter, from the scrapes on her cheeks to her torn sleeves. She kissed her on the forehead. “You’re all right?”

“Yes, I’m fine.”

“You’re sure?” Leopold asked.

“Yes,” Viola repeated, sounding embarrassed.

With the three of them side by side, it was impossible to tell which of Viola’s parents she took after most. Viola’s complexion was different from her mother’s deep brown and Leopold’s ruddy pink, but she and her mom shared the same slope of their nose and eyes, and she’d inherited Leopold’s height and square jaw. Clearly, Viola had gotten her love of gold pieces from her mother. And there was even a mole on her father’s chin that Viola had in the same spot.

Runa cleared her throat, interrupting the family reunion. “Kadia,” Runa said warmly to Viola’s mom. But when she turned to Leopold, her expression tightened. “Grand Keeper.” Goath unlatched from her arms, but Runa had yet to relax her defensive stance.

“Runa.” Leopold spoke her name far colder than he had Viola’s.

A third figure dropped from the last dragon—a woman. She looked older than Leopold and Kadia by at least two decades, and she had broad, muscular shoulders, tan skin, and a stern expression. Perched on her raised arm was a falcon Beast whose beak and talons hooked like scythes. It

spread its wings, which weren't made of feathers—but sand. It flapped them, spraying grit behind it, and between its strange form and glowing golden eyes, it looked more like a specter than a Beast.

"It's lucky our team wasn't far when we got your distress signal," the woman said. "I'm sorry your arrival was met with such unfortunate circumstances. But I suppose you can see why I asked you here."

"I have an idea, yes," Runa said.

"Now wait a moment," Leopold cut in. "I still think you're mistaken about the scale of—"

"Yes, I am aware of what you think," the woman said flatly, and Barclay's jaw dropped. Whoever this woman was, she had no problem spurning the Grand Keeper. "Though I'm surprised that witnessing your daughter's flight crash-land in the center of one of the storms has done nothing to change your mind."

Leopold's face reddened with fury. "I'm. Being. *Cautious*."

"It seems we have different understandings of what 'cautious' means." She turned back to Runa. "I take it these are your other apprentices?"

"Yes, this is Barclay Thorne and Tadg Murdock. And this is Gamila Asfour, the High Keeper of the Desert."

"Asfour?" Barclay repeated. Viola had mentioned the High Keeper's name earlier, but he realized he recognized it from another place as well—from his studying. "Like Faiza Asfour, the first Grand Keeper? The one who bonded with all six Legendary Beasts?"

The High Keeper's lips quirked into a smile. "That would be my ancestor, yes. Now, as happy as I am that you're

all here and safe, I ask that we move out of the storm. It's strenuous to maintain the dome."

Barclay gaped. If it was Asfour's sand Lore holding up the dome, why didn't she have to use her hands? The High Keeper must've been strong enough to control her Lore with concentration alone.

"You told me the storm was a day southwest of the capital," Runa asked. "Has it moved?"

Asfour frowned. "No. I'm afraid this storm is a second one—it appeared early this morning. The three of us were accompanying a larger expedition studying it, which is how we reached you so quickly. From what we can tell, both storms show no signs of spreading or stopping. But this one isn't half as powerful as the first."

Barclay swallowed, trying to fathom what a storm twice as bad as this one must look like.

"What was that growl we heard in the storm?" Tadg asked.

Asfour's sharp gaze leveled on him. "You heard a Beast?"

Runa glanced at her apprentices warily. "We can discuss all of this later. For now, let's just get everyone safely to Menneset."



THREE

The next morning, Barclay awoke to a face looming inches over his own.

“Ahh!” he screamed.

“Ahh!” shrieked the person watching him, a young girl who looked about eight years old and had ears that stuck out wide. She lurched back, and the baby armadillo–like Beast in her arms whimpered and curled itself into a protective ball of sparkling diamond plates. “Sorry! I’m supposed to tell you that you gotta wake up or you’ll sleep through Registration. I knocked a bunch of times. Didn’t you hear?”

Barclay sat up, so groggy that he had no idea where he was. But as he studied the huge, bright windows and polished stone floors, he remembered arriving in Menneset—the Desert’s capital city—late the night before. He’d been so exhausted that he’d barely paid attention to the house where Viola’s mom had brought them, only sleepily rushed through a bath and mumbled good night.

“R-Registration?” Barclay repeated, yawning.

“For the Symposium,” the girl answered. “You don’t want to be late, do you?”

In a sudden panic, Barclay bolted out of bed. He hadn’t unpacked last night, so he rummaged through his satchel for fresh clothes.

The girl peered at him curiously.

“Um,” said Barclay. “Who are you?”

“I’m Pemba Tolo. Viola’s my big sister.” Barclay should’ve guessed this sooner. Pemba looked like a miniature version of Kadia, though she’d added wooden beads to the ends of her cornrows, which clicked and clacked as she bounced up and down. “And this is Bulu! He’s a Mudarat.”

Bulu the Mudarat did not unroll from his ball.

“Bulu isn’t used to visitors,” Pemba explained. “He’s normally very friendly.”

Viola appeared at the door, already dressed in her bauble-covered tunic. “Why are you still in your pajamas? We’re going to miss it!”

Five minutes later, Barclay, Viola, and Tadg sprinted through the streets of Menneset.

“I can’t believe all Runa did was leave a note,” Viola said, panting. “Why didn’t she wake us? What if we’d slept through Registration?”

“Probably because she knew we’d want to come with her,” Tadg grumbled. “Would *you* rather be in school all day, or helping the Guardians study those sandstorms?”

As much as Barclay wished to help Runa, he wasn’t surprised they hadn’t been invited. They might’ve been another year older since Runa’s mission at the Sea, but they were still only apprentices.

“How far is it to the University?” asked Barclay.

“You see that building up there?” Viola pointed to a giant obelisk in the distance that speared over the city skyline. “That’s the University.”

They quickened their pace and wove deeper into the Desert capital. The buildings reared high overhead, cloaking the narrow streets in cool shade. Though all the walls and roads were built of the same golden stone, the city burst with color. Columns with red and orange mosaics stretched up to aqueducts that crisscrossed Menneset in a massive knot. Vibrant embroidered awnings hung over the windows. Green-leaved palm and olive trees drooped over every alley.

Barclay had never visited a place so huge—or crowded. Countless people bustled past, many carrying armfuls of books for the University or baskets of wares for a market. As in other Wilderland cities, the people varied in features, but most wore light, long-sleeved clothing to protect their skin from the hot sun.

For as many people as he saw, Barclay counted twice as many Beasts. Large horse- and camel-like creatures plodded past, wearing elegant saddles decorated in beads. Flying Beasts swooped overhead or perched on clotheslines. The serpent Beast on the shoulder of a nearby man had scales like pure obsidian. The common Anthorns that scurried at their feet glinted as red as rubies.

Finally the alleys opened into a vast circular courtyard, where the University of Al Faradh stood like a palace in the city’s heart. The tallest tower rose so high, Barclay had to crane his neck to glimpse the peak.

Viola led them past the gates onto the campus. Even outside, books lay scattered everywhere. Old books wedged

beneath the legs of benches to hold them level. Books stacked tall enough to rival the stone columns. Books clutched in the hands of passing students. Books left aimlessly on tables. Books tucked like secret messages into empty slots within the walls.

The trio dashed between the buildings and skidded to a stop at the entrance of a hall with soaring ceilings and a stone floor so shiny, Barclay could see his sweaty reflection in it. Hundreds of Lore Keepers milled about, many of them young students. At the center, a folded card sat neatly on an empty desk.

Registration Closed.

“So much for that,” Tadg muttered. “I say we go find Runa in Menneset’s Guild House.” Guild Houses were the headquarters of each Wilderland’s chapter.

Barclay wasn’t ready to give up just yet. “Maybe there’s someone we can ask for help?”

The three apprentices gazed around the room, but Barclay had no clue who they were supposed to talk to. And he didn’t recognize anyone.

“Let’s split up,” Viola suggested. “I’m sure someone will be willing to register us, even if we’re a bit late.”

“Fine,” Tadg said bitterly. “But I’d still rather learn more about the storms.”

The two of them strutted off, leaving Barclay alone by the empty desk. He wasn’t as fond of splitting up as they were. After all, Barclay didn’t have the Grand Keeper or a world-famous Surveyor for a parent. Maybe if he mentioned Runa, someone would be keen to hear him out. Runa was one of the most respected Guardians in the Guild. No, the

best way to make a good impression was simply being polite.

Except when Barclay tried to take a step, he tripped and fell to the floor. Several of the nearby Lore Keepers turned to stare at him, and his face burned. So much for a good impression. When he rolled over, he saw that his shoelaces were tied together.

“How . . . ?” he started.

Then his shadow began to wiggle, even though he wasn’t moving. It split into two halves, then one of them grew and grew until a girl took shape in front of him. She was scrawny and pale, with dark hair so short, it only brushed the tops of her ears.

Cecily Lloris smiled at Barclay mischievously. “You should pay better attention to where you’re walking.”

“Cecily! What are you doing here?” Barclay had last seen Cecily over a year ago, when her teacher, Cyril Harlow, had been sent to the Sea to investigate the weeping tide. At first, Barclay hadn’t gotten along with Cecily and Cyril’s two other apprentices, mainly because Runa and Cyril famously hated each other. But now Barclay considered the three girls his close friends.

“We’re here for the Symposium. Shazi, Hasu, and I are all students,” Cecily answered. “And Cyril is this year’s Guardian Master resident or whatever it’s called. It sounds boring to me, but he’s awfully proud of it.”

That didn’t surprise Barclay, as Cyril cared more about status than anyone he’d ever met.

Then his heart lifted.

“Wait—that’s perfect!” he said. “Cyril can help us register. Where is he?”

Cecily shrugged. “He had to leave this morning on official Guardian business. He wouldn’t tell us what it was for.”

Barclay retied his shoelaces properly, then stood up. “Probably the sandstorms, like Runa.”

“Sandstorms?” Cecily tilted her head in confusion.

“You know, the sandstorms outside the city that are full of Lore and don’t seem to ever stop and . . . You have no idea what I’m talking about, do you?”

Cecily smirked. “I’m pretty sure if that was true, *everyone* would be talking about it.”

But not if no one knew. The Guild must’ve been keeping the storms a secret from the rest of the Desert, though Barclay couldn’t guess why. However, now was not the time to get distracted.

“Never mind. I’ll tell you about them later. What’s more important right now is that Viola, Tadg, and I got here too late to register. Do you know someone who could help us?”

“Shazi’s dad probably could. He’s over there.” Cecily grabbed Barclay by the wrist and yanked him with her across the hall toward a huge throng of people. After a dozen “Excuse mes” and at least five or six “Sorrys,” the pair squeezed past the onlookers to the center.

The first person Barclay recognized was Shazi Essam, one of Cyril’s other apprentices. Her clothes better suited a sparring match than Registration Day. A sheathed saber rested on each of her hips, and she wore leather practice gear across her forearms and right leg. On her other leg was her prosthetic, which measured from the knee down and which she controlled with her powerful metal Lore.

Beside her stood a man wearing gold robes with at least

a dozen twisted tassels adorning his shoulders. Barclay assumed he was Shazi's father, both because they shared the same light brown skin and straight dark hair, and because he beamed while patting Shazi's shoulder.

Barclay had forgotten that Shazi's father was Ata Essam, the Chancellor of the University.

"Has the University issued a statement about Younis's absence?" asked one of the crowd members, a handsome man dressed in a smart quilted vest. He held his quill poised over his notebook.

"Instructor Younis suffered an accident," Essam said. "It was very unfortunate, but he's recovering and will soon return to good health."

"He's taught the history course of the Symposium for almost five decades. Who will be replacing him?"

Essam shifted uncomfortably. "We . . . did succeed in finding a replacement on such short notice. Grusha Dudnik kindly accepted the position."

Murmurs swept through the crowd. Barclay was certain he'd heard that name before, but he couldn't recall from where.

"Isn't Dudnik known for being rather, um, unconventional?" the man asked.

"She's a Guild-licensed Scholar, which means she's qualified. And who are you again, sir?"

"Tristan Navarre, with the *Keeper's Khronicle*," the journalist answered smoothly, scribbling in his notebook. "And has the University altered its procedures in regard to student safety?"

"I—I don't know what you mean by that," Essam

stammered. “The students are perfectly safe, as they’ve always been.”

“There have been reports of unusual weather patterns—”

“That is a question you should take to High Keeper Asfour. As always, all students of the University are safe, from those completing advanced degrees to the apprentices attending the Symposium. If I weren’t confident, would I have permitted my daughter here?” He patted Shazi again on the shoulder, though he was no longer smiling. “That’s all the questions I’ll answer today.”

With that, Essam strode away, and the crowd dispersed. Barclay hesitated, unsure if he should bother the Chancellor after such a scene.

Then he felt a light punch on his arm.

“I *knew* that was Tadg I spotted earlier skulking around,” Shazi said smugly. “Are you all here for the Symposium too?”

“We would be, if we ever manage to register,” said Barclay.

“Consider it done—I’ll talk to my dad. Registration Day is barely for registering anyway.”

“What’s it for, then?”

“Scoping out the competition, of course.” Shazi seized Barclay by the shoulders and spun him around to face the rest of the hall. “See that boy over there? The one with green hair?” Indeed, Barclay spotted a very good-looking teenager with hair dyed a vibrant shade of lime. “He’s one of the only Apothecary apprentices I’ve ever heard of to come in first in his Exhibition. And those three over there, reading? They’re the apprentices of the Chancellor of the Meridienne

College in Halois—that’s Al Faradh’s sister school. Or rival, the way Dad talks. And her?” Shazi pointed at a blond girl who roamed around carrying a giant map, as though she needed directions to find the building’s single exit. “She’s the apprentice to Yawen Li, who’s the resident Surveyor Master this year.”

“Does that mean everyone will be scoping *us* out because of Cyril?” Cecily asked nervously. Cyril was just as famous as Runa, and he even bore a nickname to match: the Horn of Dawn.

“Definitely,” Shazi answered. “But not as much as Barclay, once they find out who he is.”

“Me?” asked Barclay, stunned. “Why?”

“Because you’re the Elsewheres kid who won first in his Exhibition. *And* you’re the Fang of Dusk’s apprentice. Obviously there are students way older than us here, but you’re still one to beat.”

All of Barclay’s worst fears about the Symposium bubbled to the surface. He was already worried about being a miserable failure, and that would be twice as humiliating if all the other students expected greatness from him.

“Why would the Symposium be so competitive?” he choked. “I thought it was just school.”

Shazi threw up her hands. “Don’t you know about the Tourney?”

“The what?”

“Some people will tell you that you should spend the whole Symposium studying. Learning how the Guild works and all that. But would you rather *learn* history, or would you rather *make* it?”

Barclay couldn't tell if it was Shazi's words or the shifty gleam in her eyes, but a thrill fluttered inside him as though his stomach was full of moths. He might not dream of becoming the Grand Keeper like Viola, but he *did* have ambitions of his own. He wanted to help teach the Elsewheres that Beasts and Lore were nothing to be afraid of, so that one day the Elsewheres and Wilderlands could live in harmony.

"I guess," he admitted. "But I still don't know what you mean."

Shazi groaned. "Come on. Let's go find the others. Then we'll strategize."

After some searching, they spotted Viola and Tadg on the other side of the hall, deep in conversation with Hasu Mayani. Hasu was Cyril's third apprentice, a heavy girl with brown skin, dark hair she wore in a long, sleek braid down her back, and a dimpled smile.

Hasu threw her arms around Barclay as he approached. "I'm so glad you're here! Viola and I were just talking about being roommates."

"Hold up," Shazi said. "We agreed that you were going to try to spy on the enemy! If we're going to win, we need to know who we're up against."

Hasu pulled away and rolled her eyes. "I told you that all the two of them talk about is the Tourney." Her Beast, a Madhuchabee named Bitti, was fast asleep as usual on Hasu's nose. Her tiny wings twitched from her dream. "Not all of us are as obsessed as you two. Some of us want to make *friends* with the other students. Not enemies."

"I'd still like to know what the Tourney is," Barclay said, growing impatient.