



N. D. WILSON

AUTHOR OF THE BOOKS OF THE 100 CUPBOARDS

THE
DROWNED
VAULT

≡ ASHTOWN BURIALS II ≡

By N. D. Wilson

Leepike Ridge

THE BOOKS OF THE 100 CUPBOARDS

100 Cupboards

Dandelion Fire

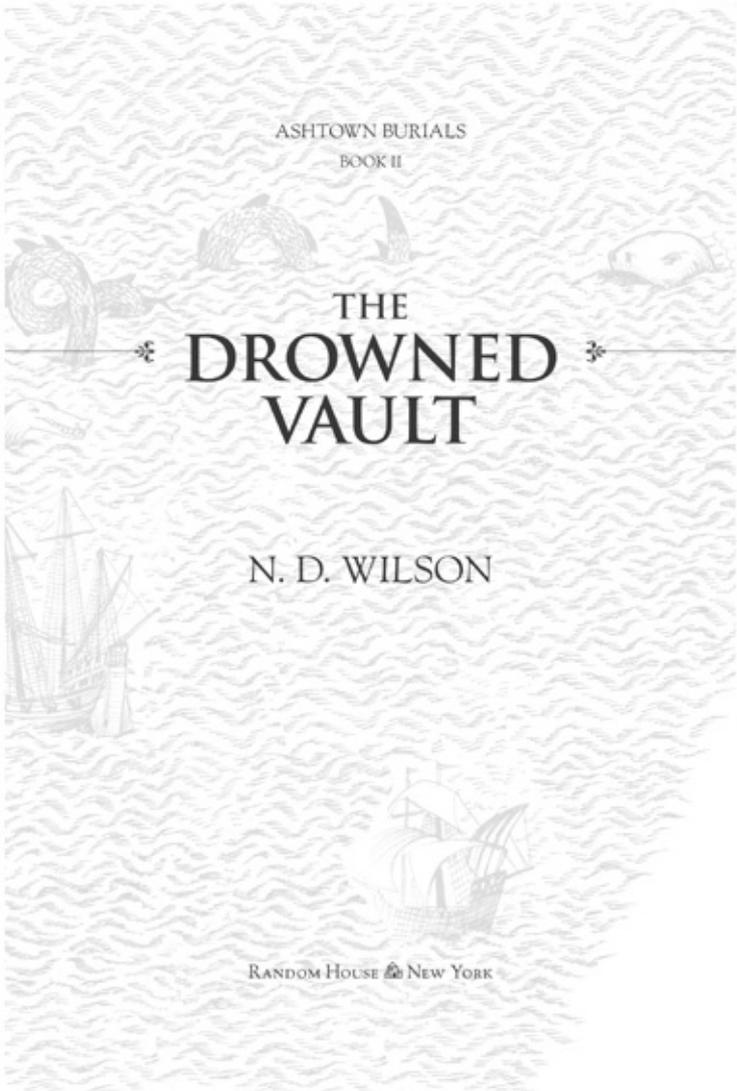
The Chestnut King

ASHTOWN BURIALS

I: The Dragon's Tooth

II: The Drowned Vault

ASHTOWN BURIALS
BOOK II



THE
DROWNED
VAULT

N. D. WILSON

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*For Lucia, Ameera, and Marisol,
three parts to my laughter*



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PROLOGUE

THE MAN IN THE PINK SHIRT stopped outside his house. Four steps forward and he could be out of the pouring Parisian rain, sheltered beneath his stone stoop. Instead, he took one step back. The wet paper grocery bag he carried was disintegrating in his hands. His shirt was plastered, pinkening his shoulders. Miniature rivers burbled and swirled around the cobbles beneath his feet.

The man's eyes slid up his front door, up the stone wall, up past the gargoyles spewing rainwater, and settled on an attic window built into the roof.

In front of the glass, a broad spiderweb was bouncing and shivering in the rain. It hadn't been there when he'd left that morning. The spider had done her job—just like the girl he'd promised. Someone, *something* was inside his house.

Down one floor, a curtain moved.

For the past year, he'd been afraid of this moment. And now that it had come, he was frozen, weakly staring at the danger.

The man turned and tried to move casually up his street. Ten feet. Twenty. Then he dropped his grocery bag in the gutter and he ran.

Behind him, he heard his front door open.

For the first time in four centuries, Juan Ponce de León thought he might die.

He ran faster.

DASH

THERE IS ONLY ONE BEGINNING. There is only one place and one moment where the world, life, and time itself began. There is only one Story. It began in the dark. It has many middles and many ends. You and I could chase it for lifetimes and only make it longer by our living. It is too sprawling for these pages and too big for this mouth.

We begin in a middle. We trace a smaller arc.

This is a story about darkness. About lightness. About blood, and about family. About losing, about finding, about danger and dying, about what happens when the world remembers the oldest of its secret things (and what happens when the world forgets).

This is a story about Cyrus and Antigone Smith.

The sun dumped golden heat onto the flat back of Lake Michigan. It baked unwatered grass and persecuted Wisconsin cows. It sent men cursing back indoors and blistered unprotected skin beside a thousand swimming pools. Frogs, young and foolish, exploded while crossing sizzling asphalt streets. But the forests were happy.

Cyrus Smith was one year and one slice of summer taller than he had been when the Archer Motel had burned and he had first seen Ashtown's green lawns, its piece of the Green Lake, its airstrip, its mazes, its Burials, and its occasional hot-air-balloon battles. To Cyrus, one year ago was a different reality. One year ago, he hadn't known anything about the world. Now, well, he knew one or two things. But not enough for Rupert Greeves. Not enough to leave Ashtown on his own. Not even enough to travel with Rupert. He was stuck in Ashtown with hundreds of people who pretended they couldn't see him, dozens who truly hated him, and a very few he could call friends—and they were mostly staff.

Cyrus stood two miles from Ashtown, behind a rope laid on the ground, beside an old moss-covered stone marker, beneath a canopy of maple trees. He was sweating in the shade, waiting for someone official to arrive with a stopwatch. He sighed and rolled his head slowly on his shoulders, trying to ignore the heat. He handled it better than some, but this was beyond even his threshold—the last roar of summer. Fruit was ripe. Insects were fat—ready to lay their eggs and die. Soon the leaves would bake and brighten, but for now, hidden under the glowing green canopy, cicadas whirred and whined like distant weed-eaters. All around him, miniature droplets rained gently down from the maples as armies of gorging aphids advanced and ate and ate. With his eyes closed, Cyrus could feel the sugary insect honeydew settling onto his face. With both hands, he swept it away in his sweat.

His bare arms were dark and lean from training. His bare feet curled impatiently in the grass. He'd shaved his head three weeks ago, but his thick hair was quickly shagging back in. In the center of his tight white tank top, a small black monkey was boxing inside a yellow shield. He reached up and felt the cool serpent body of Patricia, his patrik, the first of the strange creatures he had met in this new life. She was his invisible necklace, unseen whenever her tail was tucked firmly into her mouth, as it was now. Hanging from a ring

around her body—made just as invisible as the snake—were two keys. Cyrus fingered them—one small and silver, one large and gold. Beside them on the ring was an empty silver sheath. Last year, when William Skelton had tossed the key ring to him, the sheath had held the Dragon's Tooth.

When he and Antigone had arrived at Ashtown, they had been heirs to the outlaw William Skelton. They had been Smiths, the last two members of a long and troublesome line. They had been swept away, disliked, ignored.

Now it was worse. Now they were the Smiths who had lost the Dragon's Tooth. At best they were failures. At worst, they were traitors. No matter what, they were the reason Phoenix had the tooth—the cause of Ashtown's fear.

Cyrus blinked sticky eyelids, lost in uncomfortable memory. He looked up into the maples and watched a red-winged blackbird hop along a twig. The bird was always there, always nearby. It chirped at him and he whistled back at her—*her*, even though he knew the bright splashes of red on the wings meant it was a *he*. But to him, it was a *she*. He didn't know why.

Stretched out on a bed of moss, Antigone groaned and stretched. The whistle had wakened her.

"Cy." Antigone stood slowly and leaned against a tree trunk. Cyrus ignored her; he knew she could not be ignored for long.

"Yoo-hoo. Cyrus. Rus-Rus!" Antigone's black hair was as long as it had been in years, actually reaching past her jaw. She tucked it back behind her ears, knuckled her eyes, and crossed her arms. Her skin was almost as dark as Cyrus's, and in the shade, her eyes glistened in the blackness. "You don't have to do this. And you know Rupe isn't going to like it one bit."

Cyrus squinted through the trees. In the distance, down a long, slow hill, he could just see the stone buildings of Ashtown. Beyond them, the glistening lake. A two-mile run to the shore. Two-mile swim to the buoy. Two-mile swim back from the buoy. Two-mile run back up the hill to the starting line. He could do it. Even in the heat. Maybe.

"Cyrus ..."

Cyrus looked at his sister. She had leaf rubble clinging to her hair. "Rupe can tell me how much he doesn't like it when he gets back. It's not like he's been training us."

Antigone sighed and wiped her damp head with a forearm. "I don't get the hurry. We made Journeyman on time. We can go for more whenever. Or not. Who says you have to make Explorer at all? Rupe says it can take years. We don't have to rush."

Cyrus didn't answer. He could hear an old engine through the trees behind him. He turned as a rusted-out Jeep emerged between the trunks and stopped, weeds rustling against its bumper. Rupert Greeves was behind the wheel.

Cyrus held his breath and let his cheeks inflate. Rupert pushed scratched sunglasses up into a scruff of short hair on his head and locked eyes with Cyrus. Then the big black man slid out of his seat and moved slowly toward Cyrus. A lean and freckled passenger hopped out on the other side, but Cyrus didn't pay him any attention. He was waiting for a sign of Rupert's mood—a flicker of anger, a twinkle of approval. But the Order of Brendan's Avengel gave him nothing. The man's dark face was stone, if stone could have a swollen cheek beneath a small butterfly bandage. He was wearing tall canvas safari boots and worn shorts with bulging pockets. His white linen shirt was unbuttoned at the neck, revealing a tangled nest of

scars on his chest, and his sleeves were rolled short, snug around his biceps. A short beard strengthened his already strong jaw.

Rupert stopped beside Cyrus and stared down toward Ashtown. Then he nudged the rope on the ground with his boot. Cyrus inhaled and waited. He could feel the big man's heat next to him.

"Hey, Rupe," Antigone said. "Welcome back."

"Hello, Antigone." He didn't sound angry. At least not at her.

"Any news about Phoenix?" Antigone asked.

Rupert shook his head. Cyrus clawed at the earth with his toes. The tall freckled kid—most of a man, actually—was stretching on the ground beside the Jeep. He hopped up and moved to the rope beside Cyrus.

Antigone pushed off her tree trunk and straightened. "Just in case you were wondering, this wasn't my idea."

Rupert waved her quiet. Then he thumped a heavy hand on Cyrus's back.

He looked down at Cyrus and raised his eyebrows. "No work on Cartography? Mazecraft? Navigation? Greek?" He sounded more amused than disappointed. Cyrus almost smiled. Rupert continued. "Sleep-fasting? Reliquary? No? Nothing?"

Cyrus raised his hands, relieved that he wasn't in real trouble. "Rupe, you know I need someone to help me with that stuff. I hate being inside, and all the books Antigone reads make my head hurt."

"How could they make your head hurt?" Antigone asked. "I don't hit you with them."

Cyrus plowed on. "How am I supposed to study stuff on my own? I don't know how to do that. I'm supposed to have a Keeper. I mean, I do have one, but he's always gone."

Rupert's eyes sagged, suddenly tired. He raised a scabbed hand and scratched his short beard. "You want a new Keeper?"

"No!" Antigone jumped, shaking her head at her brother. "No, we don't! We're fine with you. We like you."

Cyrus shrugged. "I just want to come with you. At least sometimes. To, you know, help fix things. With Phoenix ..." He looked up at Rupert. "We're always stuck here. But when I'm an Explorer, I can go where I want. So I train."

Laughter flashed across Rupert's face. "You train? Is that what this is called?" Rupert sighed and nodded at the man with the freckles. "Cy, Tigs, this is Jeb Boone. His first time back to Ashtown in two years. He's going to run with you, Cyrus."

"Boone?" Cyrus turned. "You're Diana's brother?"

Jeb grinned. He was a lot taller than Cyrus. His hair was even more strawberry than his sister Diana's, and his bare shoulders—as broad as Rupert's, though not as powerful—were swarming with an ant colony of freckles. "Yeah, Diana's my sis, and she's told me stories. Like what you're doing, little man, testing at the 1914 levels. It's gutsy. Hope you don't mind me joining you."

Cyrus was confused. "Aren't you already an Explorer? How old are you?"

Jeb glanced at Rupert, and then back at Cyrus, blue eyes sparkling. "I'm nineteen. And yeah, I've ranked up. So call this a retest. Curiosity, I guess."

Rupert laughed. "He's doing me a favor. I've asked him to pull you out if you drown."

"You know, Cyrus." Jeb cocked his head. "You *are* only thirteen. There's not much point

trying for this stuff until your body's ready."

"Don't bother yourself, Jeb." Rupert slapped Cyrus's shoulders. "The boy's a Smith. He walk on glass if you told him not to. He only learns one way—crash and burn, yeah? Now get loose ... I don't have all day to sweat out here."

Cyrus watched Jeb bounce and stretch his legs.

Antigone glared at him. "Stretch, Cy."

"It's hot. I'm ready."

Jeb laughed and puffed a drop of sweat off his nose. "I know what you mean." He nodded at Rupert. "Anytime."

Rupert Greeves pulled a stopwatch out of one of his deep pockets.

Cyrus worked the ball of his left foot into the ground. He bent his knees and leaned forward, coiled, ready to spring. His limbs were long, and they loved to cover ground. Besides him, Jeb bounced in place.

Next to any thirteen-year-old in Ashtown—or in his old school in his old life—Cyrus would have been confident. But next to a nineteen-year-old named Boone? His nerves were tingling.

Breathing slowly, he looked down the hill between the trees and tried to focus on the distant water. He didn't have to beat him. Just beat the clock. It wasn't a race.

Cyrus tried to relax. *But if I do beat him ...*

Just the thought, the mere possibility of triumph, tightened every muscle fiber in his legs. Somehow, Rupert knew.

"Your own pace, Cyrus Smith. Not his. Run your own pace."

Right.

"Marked in three," Rupert said. "Two ... one ... off!"

Cyrus sprang forward, legs straining, splayed toes grabbing at the ground. His long stride settled quickly into pace. Fast. Really fast for the distance. He tried to even out his breathing and relax his shoulders. He could hold it. He knew he could.

On his left, Jeb Boone swooped past.

Cyrus didn't have to tell his legs what to do. He was already accelerating, fighting to match the faster pace. Grass and leaves flew up behind Jeb, and Cyrus sputtered and spat in the older boy's wake.

Antigone Smith winced. Her brother was nuts, and always had been. He was practical, sprinting. He was going to kill himself. Beside her, Rupert Greeves, Avengel to the Ashtown Estate of the Order of Brendan, Keeper to Cyrus and Antigone Smith, sent a burst of laughter rattling through the trees.

"You know," Antigone said, "that was really mean."

Rupert looked at her, widening his eyes in innocence. "Mean? Antigone, I'm only doing what's best for him."

Antigone crossed her arms. "And you just had to get Diana's brother?"

Rupert grinned. "Cyrus wants to be trained? Today, I have arranged for him to run faster than he has ever run." He turned and watched the two shrinking shapes. "He'll find a new speed. I'm giving him that. And when he finally collapses in failure, he'll have found a little more wisdom. I'm giving him that as well."

Antigone watched for a moment. "He's going to die."

“He’ll try to,” Rupert said. He turned to the Jeep, knocking his sunglasses down over his eyes. “But Jeb won’t let him. Come on. In this heat, the wise ones drive.”

Antigone followed him, eyeing his battered cheek. “What happened to your face? You had to have gotten close to Phoenix if you were getting your face smacked.”

Rupert grunted as he slid back behind the wheel and fired the engine. He only fit because the Jeep had no doors and his left knee was jutting out the side. Antigone grabbed the roll-over bar and hopped in next to him. The Jeep was ancient. She could see grass through holes in the floor.

“Come on, Rupe.” She smiled at the big man. “You’ll feel way better if you tell someone. Was it animal, vegetable, or mineral?”

Rupert looked at her. “I approached a somewhat irritable transmortal who was yammering about a pair of kids named Smith and what he thinks they gave to a villain named Phoenix. He ground the Jeep into gear. Antigone’s smile disappeared.

The red-winged blackbird watched the Jeep go. After a moment of indecision, she dropped out of the tree, wove her way around trunks beneath the canopy, and flew down the hill after Cyrus.

Cyrus’s splitting ribs were breathing for him. His legs were on fire as they churned, and his shoulders were clenched as tight as wire knots. His throat was closing, his tongue swollen and dry, and still he needed to spit. And spit. And spit again. The heat was too much, the pain was too much, and the streaming sweat-salt in his eyes was too much to blink away.

Cyrus had switched off Time. It didn’t matter how long he’d been going. It didn’t matter how much longer he must go. There was only now—only these steps, and these, and these, and these, and no others. He set his mind to *ignore all pain* and struggled to keep it there. His body’s screams grew distant and muffled, like nightmare residue after waking.

Somehow Jeb was only five strides in front of him, moving easily—shoulders gliding level with the ground, knotted calves driving feet that were casually chewing up yards at a time.

Ashtown was closer now—off to his right. Hulking buildings and statues and rooflines mounded out of the green lawns like a hand-carved mountain range. The sight no longer surprised Cyrus any more than watching planes drop onto the grassy airstrip outside the kitchen windows.

Running erased Cyrus’s frustrations. The exertion overwhelmed thoughts of pale-faced Nolan and his ancient-language drills, along with all of Antigone’s books and worries. The comments in the halls. The blank faces. The complete absence of tutors willing to work with anyone named Smith. Dennis Gilly—a porter—taught them sailing and navigation. Gunner—the driver—had started training them in marksmanship, but he had gone home to Texas months ago.

It should have been Rupert. It should all have been Rupert. But he kept disappearing. And when he was at Ashtown, he just looked at Cyrus like he was hopeless.

A whimper from his side snapped Cyrus’s mind back. He’d been running for at least ... no, don’t think about it. Too long.

He could see Rupert’s Jeep a few hundred yards ahead, waiting by the lake. Antigone was standing on the hood, hands shielding her eyes, watching the runners come. Beside her, taller than she was, stood Diana, strawberry hair pulled back in a tight ponytail.

Darn it.

Cyrus looked away from the spectators, focusing only on Jeb, on his pace, on the rhythm. His bare feet pounded out on the ground.

Jeb was accelerating.

How? Why? Cyrus didn't understand. He tried to push, to dig, to find another gear inside him. Mistake. His legs suddenly deadened. Acid surged through his veins, and his knees clipped against each other mid-stride. He was falling.

Cyrus threw up his hands and tucked his head to roll. He flipped too quickly, slammed onto his back, bounced up onto his knees, and fell forward onto his face.

Jackhammers thumped against his temples. His arms wobbled as he pushed himself up. He tried to find his feet, suddenly threw up in the grass, and then stepped in it as he managed to stand. He ignored the wetness between his toes, the foul taste, and the stringy cling on his chin.

He couldn't stop. Not now. He had to get to the water. Swimming was easy. It would be like resting. Cool water. He'd be fine.

At first, he couldn't control his direction. His legs carried him sideways. But the slope helped him steady his pace, and he accelerated slowly.

Jeb had reached the water. Cyrus heard Diana whoop and whistle and clap for her brother. He saw her ponytail swing. Jeb waved to her, bounced in a comic stride, and plunged in.

Two lifetimes later, Cyrus reached the Jeep. He saw Rupert check his stopwatch. Antigone was worried. Diana was smiling.

"Cy?" Antigone asked.

"Go, go, go!" Diana said.

Cyrus hit the water. High knees through the shallows. One foot worked; the other didn't. He collapsed forward, and his knees and toes and fingers banged against silty-skinned rocks on the bottom. He didn't care. He didn't feel the pain. He sank and felt the coolness surround him. He felt the relief of weightlessness. And then he needed to breathe.

On the shore, Antigone bit off her thumbnail while her brother splashed away. Diana watched next to her.

"He's a little crazy," Diana said. She looked at Rupert. "You're sure he'll be okay?"

Rupert shook his head. "I'm not sure of anything." He looked at Antigone. "That boy can run. I didn't think he'd even finish the first mile at that pace. He didn't run in school?"

Antigone snorted. "He hated coaches. Can we make him stop? Or just follow him in a boat or something?"

Stroke, stroke, stroke, stroke, breath. And again. Again. Two hundred *agains*. Three hundred. Or four. Or five. Cyrus didn't know. He knew that his strokes were growing shorter. His breaths were becoming gasps. Cyrus's dead, barely kicking legs slowly sank. His shoulders slowly petrified.

Cyrus hadn't seen Jeb since he'd hit the water. He couldn't see the buoy. He only knew that he was swimming. He hoped it was in the right direction.

His calves had already cramped twice, his toes felt permanently splayed, and his feet

wouldn't bend. And finally, the next stroke simply didn't come and Cyrus's legs swung all the way down beneath him. Bobbing in place and spitting out sweet mouthfuls, he looked around. Ashtown's little harbor and its stone jetty were directly behind him. He had drifted well off course.

He shook his head and spat again. Water dribbled out of his ears. He could hear something groaning—a machine. A boat?

Cyrus tried to kick up above the waves to scan the surface, but his legs had reached full paralysis. He could barely tread water. The groaning was growing. Engines, but above him. An airplane. He looked up.

A broad, fat-bellied seaplane the size of a small airliner was banking hard out over the lake. It turned, and turned, and turned until it was flying straight toward him. While he watched, it leveled its wings and dropped into a low approach, preparing to touch down. It was coming fast.

Panic erased Cyrus's weariness. His arms wheeled as he tried to crawl out of the way.

Too late. Fifty yards off, the fat belly hit the surface, blasting sheets of water up its side. Two wing skis threw up huge rooster tails.

Grabbing one quick breath, Cyrus dove. He kicked and clawed himself down. And down.

Propellers dusted the surface. The white belly carved through the blue above him, and he felt himself being sucked back up. Covering his head, he slammed into metal. Riveted steel punched his back, rolling and spinning him into darkness. And then the plane was gone.

Cyrus was sinking.

Life became simple. Cyrus Smith was going to die. His legs and his arms wanted to die. His back and his head and his lungs all wanted to die.

Fine, thought Cyrus. And then two arms slid beneath his.

They were not freckled arms. They were pale and thin and smooth. And strong. Cyrus looked at them, and then he looked into a girl's face made of moonlight and pearl, and haloed with long, swirling black hair.

The girl was pulling Cyrus toward the surface, and suddenly, his legs and his lungs and his head were willing to live again.

Fine, thought Cyrus.

ARACHNE AND ...

THE WAVES IN THE FAT PLANE'S WAKE slapped together and died as rumbling propellers pulled the heavy metal body on toward Ashtown's harbor. The sun sorted through froth and foam and settled on a floating mat of brown and gray and black—a thousand tiny things with legs linked together, rocking on the waves. Bubbles rose up beneath them.

Gasping, Cyrus surfaced and spewed a mouthful of lake down his chin.

Across from him, the strange girl's head and shoulders slid up through the water without splash. Cyrus sputtered and spat and blinked. The girl's wet black hair glinted in the sun like polished stone. Her eyes—set wide apart—were pale blue and full of light, but also worn and tired like ancient sea glass.

Cyrus shook his head. Droplets still clung to his face. And then one crawled onto his eyelid and he slapped at it. They weren't droplets.

"Don't," the girl said. But Cyrus wasn't listening. The things were all over his hands, his cheeks, his ears. All around him, the surface of the water was covered with a tangled mass of floating spiders.

Cyrus yelled. He clawed at his face and pulled at his ears. Spiders were on his lips, his nose, his eyes. Desperate, he grabbed a breath and dove.

Underwater, the spiders came off. While Cyrus sank, he scraped at his arms and neck and face and watched dozens of the tiny bodies float weightlessly through sunlight water-rays like an army of eight-legged astronauts. Above him, he could see the dark outline of the spider mat surrounding the strange girl.

The silhouette of a small boat with an outboard motor bounced into view.

Antigone leaned out over the prow of the boat, bracing herself against every bouncing wave and scanning the surface ahead. She'd spotted Cyrus just before the plane had landed, and then she'd seen the girl dive out of a side door behind the wing. But now ... nothing.

She didn't like this. Not one little bit. She lifted her head just enough to let the wind snarl her hair out of her face, and then she bit her lower lip hard. Last year, she'd been in the same boat, at night, in a thunderstorm, circling the burning wreckage of a plane, searching for bodies of her brothers and her mother.

"There!" she shouted. Two heads bobbed to her left. She straightened and pointed and felt the boat veer beneath her as Rupert followed her hand. Diana Boone slid up into the prows beside Antigone, one hand above her eyes to block the sun, her strawberry ponytail whipping behind her like a flag.

A wave rose and, for a moment, Antigone lost sight of her targets. She caught her breath waiting. There they were. No. There *one* was. Just the girl, calmly watching the boat come.

"Rupe!" Diana yelled.

"Got 'em!" Rupert throttled up and the boat surged forward, clipping across the rough water. A moment later, he killed the motor and let the boat drift toward the girl.

“Where’s Cyrus?” Antigone yelled.

The girl didn’t answer. With one easy backstroke, she pulled herself through an odd carp of flotsam and grabbed on to the side of the boat.

Diana and Rupert each grabbed one of her hands and pulled her up out of the lake and set her on her feet inside the boat. She was Antigone’s height, and she was wearing simple jeans and a black button-down shirt, but Antigone hardly noticed. She couldn’t drag her eyes off the girl’s strangely old and very perfect face. For a moment, Antigone even forgot Cyrus.

“Hello, Rupert,” the girl said, pushing back her long, wet hair. “Not exactly how I was hoping to arrive.”

Rupert nodded. “Arachne. Where’s the boy?”

“Here!” Cyrus was treading water twenty feet off the other side. “Is the water clean? Is there anything floating on top?”

Antigone hopped across the boat and leaned out over the side. “Just us. I don’t see anything. What do you mean? Are you okay? Anything broken?”

Cyrus shook his head and spat out another mouthful of lake water, then crawled slowly toward the boat. His arms felt like stone, but he managed to keep slapping at the water until he made it. Rupert grabbed Cyrus’s wrists and heaved him up, his ribs cracking on the metal edge, and he tumbled inside. After a few panting breaths, he elbowed himself up and looked around.

Rupert’s eyes were hidden behind sunglasses, but his mouth was almost smiling. Antigone looked worried. Diana grinned. The girl with the impossible eyes was staring at him. Behind her, the army of floating spiders was climbing into the boat.

Cyrus yelled, staggering to his feet.

Antigone and Diana turned, and then began backing toward Cyrus. Rupert simply watched the dripping rug of spiders slide in over the side.

“Arachne,” Rupert said. “Meet Diana Boone, Antigone Smith, and Cyrus Smith. Diana, Tigs, Cyrus—meet Arachne. The spiders are ... hers.”

Cyrus swallowed and wiped his eyes. The spiders were hers? What did that even mean?

Rupert scratched his jaw and focused on Arachne. “Who was flying that plane?”

Arachne looked down at the spiders swarming around her. A slight whisper trickled out between her lips, and the spiders began to herd themselves forward into the prow. She looked up. “Gil was flying. I saw the boy—Cyrus—early enough to pull up, but he still set down. I thought we might have killed him.” She stared at Cyrus for a moment. “If Gil had known who it was, he would have made sure of it. You’re the one who lost the tooth?”

Bristling, Antigone stepped forward. “He didn’t lose anything. It wasn’t like that.”

Arachne wasn’t listening to Antigone, and she didn’t look away from Cyrus’s eyes. Cyrus couldn’t have blinked even if he’d tried. His eyes were frozen by hers, trying to tell her everything he thought, every dream, every forgotten memory. He wanted to be strong, to seem carefree and confident to this spider girl, and then he knew it didn’t matter. She saw him truly. There was nothing he could hide. He realized he’d been holding his breath, and he exhaled slowly.

“Yeah,” he said. She released his eyes, and his head sagged. “I lost the tooth.”

For the first time, Arachne smiled. “For what it’s worth,” she said, “I’m glad we didn’t kill you. You were smart to dive. Are you okay?”

Cyrus hurt. His legs and lungs and shoulders. His head. His back.

"I'm fine," he said.

"No need to lie," Rupert said. "You'd almost killed yourself even before the plane. We get you to a nurse." He looked at Diana. "You spot Jeb?"

She nodded, shielding her eyes. "At the buoy and turning back. He'll stop if we make him but he'll want to finish."

Of course he will, Cyrus thought. *Perfect.*

"Right," Rupert said. "The clock's still ticking. We can drop Cyrus off and be waiting for Jeb back at the line."

Most of the spider army seemed to have straggled into or onto the boat. Rupert Greeve jerked a pull cord, and the outboard motor roared to life.

With the boat racing toward the harbor, Cyrus sat and shut his eyes against the wind. Muscles in his thighs and bruised back shivered and quaked in tiny spasms of exhaustion. He felt someone sit beside him, and he opened his eyes wide enough to squint.

Antigone reached up and touched a lump on his scalp. Cyrus winced. His sister showed him her fingertips—blood. He didn't want to know what his back looked like.

Antigone leaned toward him.

"I thought you were dead," she said. "Again."

Cyrus forced a smile and shook his head. "Not yet."

His sister studied his face, and then looked at the strange girl in the prow, surrounded by huddling spiders. As the wind lashed and dried Arachne's black hair, it was beginning to curl.

"Cy, are we ever going to get used to this place?" Antigone asked.

Cyrus reached up and felt the keys hanging safely on cool, invisible Patricia. He stared at the spider girl. How much had he already gotten used to?

"Maybe," he said. "But I hope not."

The boat bounced on. After a moment, Antigone leaned her head against her bigger little brother's shoulder. A year ago, he would have shrugged her off.

"You did good, bruv," she said. "Better than Rupe thought you would, that's for sure."

Cyrus snorted. But he let the compliment settle in. He was grateful. He wouldn't have admitted it to anyone else, but he was even grateful for the plane. He wouldn't have finished the swim. At least now he had gotten out of the water with a shred of self-respect and one of the best excuses of his life—a plane had landed on him. But he wasn't any closer to making Explorer. He wasn't any closer to being able to set out from this place on his own.

He focused on the fat silver plane, now anchored just off the harbor jetty. Behind it, the green slope climbed up to the grassy airstrip and the underground hangars, and up again to the hulking stone building that was the heart of the Ashtown Estate, heart of the Order of Brendan. A crown of statues on the roofline posed against the blue sky, and sunlight sprayed off the tall windows Cyrus knew belonged to the kitchen. Last year, Big Ben Sterling had ruled that realm, walking on two metal legs with golden bells dangling from his ears. Now Cyrus only saw Ben in his dreams. Food in the O of B had been a lot better back when Sterling had been around. Even thinking about the crooked cook made Cyrus hungry, which was strange given that Sterling had ended his Ashtown career with a mass poisoning.

Antigone lifted her head from his shoulder. "Wanna go see Mom?"

Cyrus inhaled slowly. "Yeah," he said. "As soon as I eat something." He looked up, squinting against the sun. A small bird was flying fast above the boat, its dark outline moving

in and out of the glare. As surely as he knew anything, Cyrus knew there were red feathers high on each wing.

Three hours passed before Cyrus opened a door in the hospital wing and stepped into his mother's room. He'd insisted first on returning to the starting line with Rupert to wait for Jerome—and to congratulate him on shattering an old Order record when he arrived. He'd scrounged for food in the kitchen. Finally, he'd gone to the hospital wing and been bandaged—on a butterfly on his scalp, two on his back. Small cuts. He'd had worse from training with dull sabers with Antigone. *Much* worse from training with knives against pale Nolan.

The hospital room was white and clean and fresh. A black ceiling fan whirled above the bed, and white curtains fluttered around a window. Bright photographs had been arranged on a small night table. Antigone was already seated beside their mother's bed, tipped back in her chair with her riding boots on a stool and a book in her hands. Her eyebrows shot up when Cyrus came in, and she glanced at a clock above the door.

"Sorry, Tigs," Cyrus said. "But I'm here now."

Antigone nodded toward the bed. "Tell her, not me."

"Oh, come on." Cyrus pulled a chair over from beside the window. "She's not mad at me. She doesn't even know I'm here."

Antigone slipped her feet off the stool and let them thump onto the floor. "Cyrus Smith!"

Cyrus dropped into his own chair, facing the bed. Leaning forward, he picked his mother's smooth, dark hand up off the white sheet. "Hey, Mom, I'm here." He shot a glance back at Antigone. "Now she knows," he whispered.

Antigone crossed her arms, but she smiled. "Cyrus was late again, Mom," she announced loudly. "Nothing's changed."

Cyrus looked at his mother's sleeping face. Her cinnamon skin was framed by the whiteness of her tight hair, surrounded by the bleached hospital whiteness of her pillow. She'd been asleep ever since she'd been pulled from the frigid waves in California, since Cyrus and Antigone and Dan had watched her plunge in after their father's distant, shattered boat three years ago.

Antigone had done their mother's hair in a braid, pulling it back from her face. Her breathing was steady and soft, her body relaxed, like she was well rested and ready for a new day, like she might suddenly yawn and stretch and smile at her waiting children. In some ways she seemed younger—three years without a smile to crease the corners of her eyes, without a laugh to seam her cheeks, without a son to give her worry.

Cyrus ignored the tightness in his throat. His thoughts were always a jumble beside his mother's bed. Words ran from him.

Something rapped on the window. Antigone stood and crossed the room to crank open the glass.

Cyrus kissed his mother's hand and pressed the back of it against his cheek.

"Love you, Mom." His voice was just above a whisper. "Lots."

Behind him, the red-winged blackbird hopped through the open window and perched on the sill. Antigone sat back down.

"Keep reading, Tigs," said Cyrus. "Whatever it was."

Antigone leaned back in her chair and picked up her book. She cleared her throat. "Whatever it was."

one is attempting to reproduce a map or chart from memory, it is of the utmost importance to have first seen—truly seen—the original in the correct way, even if only for an instant.’ ”

Cyrus groaned. “Really, Tigs?”

Antigone continued. “ ‘One must learn to see things correctly at the first before one can recall things correctly at the second. For example, when looking at a map of an island, one might mentally overlay the shape of a twelve-pointed star on top of the chart and therefore see the unpredictable coastline in terms of the more regular, but still unpredictable—’ ”

“Tigs!” Cyrus yelled. “You’re torturing her.”

Antigone looked over her book. “She likes it.”

“You’re torturing *me*.”

“Yeah?” Antigone smiled. “Well, I’m okay with that.” She tapped the page. “This works, but not the way. I don’t use an imaginary twelve-pointed star, but it works.”

“Well, you and your imaginary shapes can have fun together,” Cyrus muttered. “Leave me out of it.”

Antigone grew serious. “Listen up, Rus-Rus. You’re the one who’s insisting that we try for Explorer. At some point you need to realize that we can’t do that just by running around shooting and fencing and swimming, okay? Are you listening to me? At some point, you are going to have to read an actual book. And Nolan can’t force-feed you your languages, either. You have to want to learn ... Cyrus?”

Cyrus dropped his mother’s hand and straightened.

Antigone set her book down. “What is it?”

A woman’s shout echoed in the hall. On the windowsill, the blackbird hopped in place.

“Run and fetch your precious Greeves!” boomed a male voice just outside the door. The knob turned and the door banged open, slammed against the wall, and bounced all the way shut again.

Cyrus and Antigone both jumped to their feet.

The knob turned again, and the door swung open again, slowly this time. A huge man ducked beneath the lintel. He was wearing white pants, white patent-leather shoes, and a white patent-leather belt. A bright turquoise polo shirt barely contained his massive torso. A carpet of chest hair crawled up from his open collar, and the same hair, though not as thick, coated his tree-trunk arms. His face had been recently shaved, but his dark beard was visible all the way up his cheekbones. His sparking eyeballs would have been big for a bull, and his thick curly hair on his head had been oiled.

“Doors can be tricky,” Cyrus said.

The man’s purplish lips were as thick as young snakes, and he spread them into a smile. His teeth were factory-perfect.

“Who are you?” Antigone said. “You shouldn’t be in here.”

The man gripped the door with a huge hairy hand and shut it quietly behind him. Cyrus blinked. He had six fingers, each the size of a cucumber. Cyrus looked at the other hand. Six.

“People call me Gil.” His voice was oddly smooth and soft coming from such a big face. “And I have flown a very long way to meet the two of you.” He looked at Cyrus. “But especially you.”

“You were the one in the plane?” Antigone asked. “You’re the idiot who landed on my brother?”

“Yes,” Gil said. “I landed on your brother. And if I had known—”

“Right,” said Cyrus. “Whatever. Arachne already told us. You would have made sure to tell me.”

Gil smiled.

“What’s your problem?” Cyrus asked. “What do you want?”

“My problem?” Gil’s knuckle-size nostrils puffed out a breeze. “I have many problems. My home in France has been burned. My golf has become terrible. My money has become gone. My life has nearly ended. A friend’s life—a life that should have been unending—*has* ended. Another friend is missing. I have retraced my problems, and my problems begin with this ... place.” He looked around the hospital room, and his big lips curled. Then he looked back at Cyrus. “But especially with you.”

“Now, hold on,” Antigone said. “Cyrus didn’t do anything.”

“Seriously.” Cyrus shook his head. “I didn’t give the tooth away, even when I could have tried to keep it safe.”

“Keep it!” Gil’s shout rattled through the room. The blackbird shrieked. “Safe! No man should keep it! There is no safe for such a thing!”

Cyrus and Antigone backed away slowly. Antigone pointed at the big man.

“You listen,” she said. “Cyrus didn’t do anything wrong. I’m sorry about whatever happened to you. We both are. Okay? But we didn’t do those things.”

Gil began to move forward. “No. The man-devil who now holds the tooth did those things. He is using it to do more things. He will not stop doing things. And why does the man-devil have the dark tooth?” Looming over Cyrus and Antigone, he waved his timber arm smacking his knuckles against the ceiling. Another step forward and the black fan would kiss his scalp. His hair was already rustling. “No need to answer. Because *you* chose to keep it safe! Ha!” Twelve thick fingers curled and cracked. “Fools must be dealt with before they become villains.”

Behind the big man, the door swung open quietly. Cyrus watched Rupert slip into the room and off to the side. Jeb Boone slipped through and to the other side. Arachne stood framed in the doorway. Both men were carrying triple-tipped spear guns. Large spools of wire were coiled beneath each stock.

“Gil,” Rupert said quietly. “You shouldn’t be in here. Please step back.”

Gil didn’t turn, and he didn’t step back. He locked eyes with Cyrus and grinned. “Or what?” he asked. “Little Rupert will hurt me?”

Rupert flipped a switch on the side of his gun, and Cyrus heard it begin to hum. Jeb did the same. A moment later, tiny electrical arcs trickled between the trident tips.

“Gilgamesh of Uruk,” Rupert said. “Stand down. You are in violation of your treaty with the Order of Brendan.”

“Violation?” Gilgamesh spun around, ribs heaving beneath his turquoise shirt. “The Order is nothing. Less than nothing.” His fists clenched, and his huge shoulders flexed. “I should break your neck, Avengel.”

“Gil, please,” Arachne said.

“Fair warning, Gil,” said Rupert quietly. “Stand down or I will bring you down. This will be your third violation. If the Order uses force on you now, you will be eligible for Burial.” Rupert’s eyes darted to Cyrus’s, and his head twitched slightly to the side.

Cyrus grabbed Antigone and slid toward the window.

Still in the doorway, Arachne looked stunned. "Burial?" Her voice wavered. "Mr. Greeves, you wouldn't."

Gil began to laugh. "Of course he wouldn't. This place would be torn down around his ears first. I could hand him a sack of Smithling corpses, and he still wouldn't dare Bury me!"

"I can," Rupert said. "If needed, I will."

In a flash, the huge man lunged for Jeb. One six-fingered hand snatched the spear gun, and the other slammed Jeb against the wall.

Cyrus jerked in surprise as Antigone swallowed back a scream. Gil was much too quick for his size. While Jeb sank to the floor, Gil grinned, pointing the crackling spear gun at the ceiling. Rupert's was trained on Gil's chest. When Gil spoke, his voice was low.

"Do not threaten me, Rupert Greeves. I am harming no one. And neither are you. See?" Swinging his gun around toward the window, Gil fired. The electrical trident snapped, a crackling web of blue through the air and blasted out through the glass as Cyrus and Antigone dropped to the floor.

Gil let his gun clatter down beside his tremendous feet. Rupert, still tense, nodded at the door. Arachne backed out into the hall.

"The Order will make this right, Rupert Greeves," Gil said, and he ducked out the door and disappeared down the hall.

"I won't play football again!" Gil shouted. "I won't!"

Arachne leaned back into the room. "Rupe?"

"Keep eyes on him." Rupert sighed. He flipped his gun off and let it dangle by his side. "Please." He was sweating.

Arachne nodded and reached into a canvas satchel slung over her shoulder. Three long-legged brown spiders climbed out of the bag onto her arm. She lowered them to the floor. Cyrus watched them race away after Gil.

Arachne straightened. "If there's anything else ..."

"There is," said Rupert. "But we'll speak about it later."

Arachne nodded and hurried away.

Jeb was trying to stand. Instead, he sank groaning back down the floor, clutching his ribs.

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. "Rupe, I'm—"

Rupert shook his head. "Forget it. Stay still. Nurse!" He turned to Cyrus and Antigone. "We need to talk. Right now. Both of you Smiths come with me."

He picked up Jeb's empty gun and turned toward the door. "Nurse!"

"Coming, coming!" Two women bustled over to Jeb as Rupert strode out of the room. Cyrus and Antigone looked at their mother, then hurried after their Keeper.

When the nurses had taken Jeb away, only the red-winged blackbird remained in the room. After a moment, she dropped off the sill, fluttered toward the bed, and perched on the back of Antigone's chair. Cocking her head, she eyed the sleeper in the bed. Then she let out a low musical call—the kind heard all summer in the cattails beside ten thousand ponds.

Katie Smith's eyes fluttered. But only for a moment. And then they were still.

THE POLYGONERS

CYRUS AND ANTIGONE TURNED sideways to squeeze through an oncoming group of men. All of them were in safari boots and shorts; all of them were fit and hard with sun-browned skin. Cyrus had never seen any of them before—they'd either been on an extended trek, or they were from another of the O of B's Estates. The men were talking seriously, but every eye followed the Smiths as they passed.

They knew who Cyrus was, and they knew what he'd lost.

Antigone and Cyrus quickened their steps. The halls were crowded with the late rush to the dining hall.

"New people everywhere," Antigone said quietly. "Where are they coming from?"

Cyrus watched a group of five teens approaching. Three of them he knew—Sean, Chris, and Francis—typical boring, rich-kid Journeymen who disliked the Smiths and always seemed to be vacationing with family somewhere incredibly obscure. The three of them were clustered around and chattering at two blond brothers who Cyrus didn't know. Both of the brothers were shorter than Cyrus, but had broader, heavier shoulders and long, thick arms. They were wearing tight black T-shirts and pocketed fatigue shorts. A simple white design had been stenciled on the center of each shirt—an elephant skull with large curving tusks above crossed telescopes.

Cyrus stared at the strange Jolly Roger and then looked into the boys' faces. Tan skin, square jaws, and very blond hair. One of them had traded half of his right eyebrow for a lump of white scar tissue. Cyrus could still see a faint crisscross where the wound had been stitched.

The boy with the scar saw Cyrus and Antigone as they tried to pass, and shouldered his way free of his fans.

"You're the Smiths?" he asked. His voice was accented, almost British, but Cyrus knew that wasn't right. Australian? That was wrong, too.

Cyrus nodded. Antigone looked down the hall, where Rupert had stopped and was waiting for them.

"I'm Silas Livingstone," the boy said. He pointed at his brother. "This is my little brother George."

"Hey," said George. "You two are why we're here."

"Great," said Antigone, glancing at the three other Journeymen. They all looked like they smelled something unpleasant. "Nice to meet you. Cy, we should keep going."

"Wait." Silas cocked his head, raising one and a half eyebrows. He was looking at the emblem on Antigone's shirt. Then he looked at Cyrus's. "What is that? A boxing monkey? I've never seen that before."

South African accent, Cyrus thought. Or something close.

George pointed at it. "Is it your family's crest?"

Silas laughed. "George, that's not the sign of the Smiths."

“Right.” George looked embarrassed, like he’d forgotten something obvious. “Well, it’s not a Continental crest or an Estate crest or an Expeditionary Badge. Is it a new trainer’s?”

Cyrus looked at Antigone, and back at the two brothers. He shrugged. “I have no idea what most of that meant.”

Antigone tucked back her hair and smiled. “It’s the sign of the Polygoners,” she said. “We got it off a World War One flight jacket. Now it’s our symbol.”

“Smiths!” Rupert yelled. “Now!”

“What is the sign of the Smiths?” Cyrus asked.

Silas cocked his half-eyebrow in surprise. “The three heads?”

“Heads?” Antigone asked. “Of what?”

“Of men,” said Silas, confused. He seemed to think he was missing a joke. “Grand to meet you both. And no hard feelings, I hope.”

Cyrus and Antigone continued down the hall and rejoined Rupert. Antigone glanced at her brother.

“Heads? That’s a little weird,” she said. “And no hard feelings? What was that about? Why would there be hard feelings?”

“They’d like their father to be named Brendan instead of your trusty Keeper. Some would take that personally, but I share their hope, as unlikely as it is,” Rupert turned and continued down the hall. “Stay close and keep moving.”

“Where are we going?” Cyrus asked. “I thought you wanted to talk.”

“We’ll talk in your rooms,” Rupert said. “Not before.”

“Our rooms?” Cyrus said. “What about dinner?”

Rupert laughed. “Cyrus Smith, we’ll talk when we get there.”

Rupert carved his way through the crowded halls. Even side by side, Cyrus and Antigone followed easily in his wake.

Three heads. Living heads? Dead heads? Cyrus liked the boxing monkey better. He watched the mapped mosaic floors slide past under his feet. He stepped over a tile street map of Rome. And then what he thought was the Grund of Luxembourg—but only because someone had told him once. He still wasn’t sure what a Grund was, but by now he was probably supposed to.

He and Tigs had been walking over these mapped floors for a year now, and in that time Cyrus had come to genuinely like their new home. A lot. Even though the rich Skelton inheritance promised to them by the little lawyer John Horace Lawney VII had been a wash, and even though they were surrounded by people who always seemed to be giving them the stink-eye, this was the place where Cyrus had learned to fight and shoot and fly. He could wander halls lined with relics and artifacts that would have been beyond his collector’s imagination only a year ago. He knew what it was like to ride a bull shark and how his muscled sandpaper skin felt against his hands. There had been days when he had done nothing but search through faded old photographs of explorers, wondering which faces belonged to Smiths. But for all of that, he also felt stuck, almost more stuck than he had at the Archer Motel. He and Antigone weren’t allowed to leave the Estate without the permission of their Keeper, and Rupert was never around to take them anywhere off ground. He certainly wasn’t about to let them go anywhere on their own.

There were no classes and no real structure. Every time he looked at a book, he suddenly wanted to go for a run, or find a sparring partner, or ask Diana to take him up in one of his planes. But he was going to have to start making himself do the studying if he ever wanted to leave this place and hunt for Phoenix himself.

Cyrus grimaced. Yeah, there was plenty he didn't like. The looks in the dining hall. The muttered comments in the halls and the collections and even in the armory. And the fact that almost no one would train with him. That made him angry—even angrier because, on some level, the people who hated him were right. He, Cyrus Smith, had come to Ashtown carrying the Dragon's Tooth—a dangerous relic given to him by an outlaw. And he had lost it.

Next time ... he didn't even finish the thought. Even now, Cyrus could picture Phoenix's face and see the beast he became without his white coat. He could feel those powerful hands and even more powerful eyes, eyes that could close a throat and choke out breath.

Cyrus shivered. He had to do something, had been trying to do something. But even he could see that his efforts to qualify for Explorer were usually distractions when he fell penned in. Would Phoenix really be any more frightened of Cyrus the Explorer than he had been of Cyrus the Acolyte? Phoenix wasn't even frightened of Rupert.

Cyrus hopped over a complicated tile map-tangle in the floor labeled *Sub Aquagium Paris Aquagium*? It didn't ring a bell.

"Tigs?"

"Sewers of Paris," she said simply. "You've scraped through one level of Latin. You should know that."

"You should know that I wouldn't."

The three of them passed the loud dining hall and wound their way through the hallway. They passed photographs and strange animal heads and maps and guns and swords and battered wooden propellers until the hallway broadened and they finally reached the ancient leather boat of Brendan on its pedestal and the long dragon skin on the wall. Rupert strode past them to the great doors—the huge wooden doors that opened onto the courtyard lawn of Ashtown. Rupert opened a small wicket door on the right side and ducked out.

Cyrus and Antigone hopped through after him, and a moment later, they were both blinking in the smoldering heat.

The sun was already low, but the humid air held the warmth like ... like a baked potato, Cyrus thought. A potato he had to live in. He groaned and shut his eyes. His skin already felt greasy.

"I don't mind it," Antigone said. "Better than the cold."

Cyrus watched Rupert move down the stone stairs toward the huge courtyard lawn flanked by hulking stone buildings. In the center of the lawn, the towering fountain was steaming and it churned. All over the lawn, in tight regimented rows, Acolytes were erecting canvas tents.

"What's going on?" Cyrus asked. "Did I miss something?"

"Preparations," a voice said behind Cyrus. He wheeled around. Dennis Gilly stood beside the big wooden doors, sweating in his porter's suit and the bowler hat he had tied on with ribbon beneath his chin. He wasn't nearly as pimply as when they'd first met him, but he was hardly grown in the last year. "Mr. Greeves has ordered all Acolytes out of quarters. The staff are expecting a great number of guests who require quarters in isolation."

"Smiths!" Rupert shouted. He was already striding away along a gravel walk.

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