

Bestselling Author of *The Hunger Games*

SUZANNE COLLINS

The cover features a dramatic illustration of a dark dragon with large wings flying over a lush, green, mountainous landscape. The dragon is carrying a rider on its back. In the distance, other smaller dragons are visible against a bright, hazy sky. The overall color palette is dominated by greens and yellows, with the dragon's dark wings providing a stark contrast.

GREGOR

THE UNDERLAND CHRONICLES

All Five Books in the *New York Times* Bestselling Series

 SCHOLASTIC

Gregor the Overlander Collection

Gregor the Overlander

Gregor and the Prophecy of Bane

Gregor and the Curse of the Warmbloods

Gregor and the Marks of Secret

Gregor and the Code of Claw

SUZANNE COLLINS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

Contents

[Title Page](#)

[Gregor the Overlander](#)

[Gregor and the Prophecy of Bane](#)

[Gregor and the Curse of the Warmbloods](#)

[Gregor and the Marks of Secret](#)

[Gregor and the Code of Claw](#)

[About the Author](#)

GREGOR
THE OVERLANDER
BOOK ONE OF THE BESTSELLING
UNDERLAND CHRONICLES

SUZANNE COLLINS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

For my mom and dad

PART 1

The Fall

CHAPTER 1

Gregor had pressed his forehead against the screen for so long, he could feel a pattern of tiny checks above his eyebrows. He ran his fingers over the bumps and resisted the impulse to let out a primal caveman scream. It was building up in his chest, that long guttural howl reserved for real emergencies -- like when you ran into a saber-toothed tiger without your club, or your fire went out during the Ice Age. He even went so far as to open his mouth and take a deep breath before he banged his head back into the screen with a quiet sound of frustration. "Ergh."

What was the point, anyway? It wouldn't change one thing. Not the heat, not the boredom, not the endless space of summer laid out before him.

He considered waking up Boots, his two-year-old sister, just for a little distraction, but he let her sleep. At least she was cool in the air-conditioned bedroom she shared with their seven-year-old sister, Lizzie, and their grandma. It was the only air-conditioned room in the apartment. On really hot nights, Gregor and his mother could spread quilts on the floor to sleep, but with five in the room it wasn't cool, just lukewarm.

Gregor got an ice cube from the freezer and rubbed it on his face. He stared out at the courtyard where a stray dog sniffed around an overflowing trash can. The dog set its paws on the rim, tipping the can and sending the garbage across the sidewalk. Gregor caught a glimpse of a couple of shadowy shapes scurrying along the wall and grimaced. Rats. He never really got used to them.

Otherwise, the courtyard was deserted. Usually it was full of kids playing ball, jumping rope, or swinging around the creaky jungle gym. But this morning, the bus had left for camp, and every kid between the ages of four and fourteen had been on it. Except one.

"I'm sorry, baby, you can't go," his mother had told him a few weeks ago. And she really had been sorry, too, he could tell by the look on her face. "Someone has to watch Boots while I'm at work, and we both know your grandma can't handle it anymore."

Of course he knew it. For the last year his grandma had been slipping in and out of reality. One minute she was clear as a bell and the next she was calling him Simon. Who was Simon? He had no idea.

It would have been different a few years ago. His mom only worked part-time then, and his dad, who'd taught high school science, was off summers. He'd have taken care of Boots. But since his dad disappeared one night, Gregor's role in the family had changed. He was the oldest, so he'd picked up a lot of the slack. Looking after his little sisters was a big part of it.

So all Gregor had said was, "That's okay, Mom. Camp's for kids, anyway." He'd shrugged to show that, at eleven, he was past caring about things like camp. But somehow that had made her look sadder.

"Do you want Lizzie to stay home with you? Give you some company?" she'd asked.

A look of panic had crossed Lizzie's face at this suggestion. She probably would have burst into tears if Gregor hadn't refused the offer. "Nah, let her go. I'll be fine with Boots."

So, here he was. Not fine. Not fine spending the whole summer cooped up with a two-year-old and his grandma who thought he was someone named --

"Simon!" he heard his grandma call from the bedroom. Gregor shook his head but he couldn't help smiling a little.

"Coming, Grandma!" he called back, and crunched down the rest of his ice cube.

A golden glow filled the room as the afternoon sunlight tried to force its way through the shades. His grandma lay on the bed covered by a thin cotton quilt. Every patch on the quilt had come from a dress she had made for herself through the years. In her more lucid moments, she'd talk Gregor through the quilt. "This polka-dotted swiss I wore to my cousin Lucy's graduation when I was eleven, this lemon yellow was a Sunday dress, and this white is in actual fact a corner of my wedding dress, I do not lie."

This, however, was not a lucid moment. "Simon," she said, her face showing relief at the sight of him. "I thought you forgot your lunch pail. You'll get hungry plowing."

His grandma had been raised on a farm in Virginia and had come to New York when she married his grandfather. She had never really taken to it. Sometimes Gregor was secretly glad that she could return to that farm in her mind. And a little envious. It wasn't any fun sitting around their apartment all the time. By now the bus would probably be arriving at camp and Lizzie and the rest of the kids would --

"Ge-go!" squealed a little voice. A curly head popped over the side of the crib. "Me out!" Boots stuck the soggy end of a stuffed dog's tail in her mouth and reached up both arms to him. Gregor lifted his sister high in the air and blew a loud raspberry on her stomach. She giggled and the dog fell to the floor. He set her down to retrieve it.

"Take your hat!" said Grandma, still somewhere back in Virginia.

Gregor took her hand to try to focus her attention. "You want a cold drink, Grandma? How about a root beer?"

She laughed. "A root beer? What is it, my birthday?"

How did you answer something like that?

Gregor gave her hand a squeeze and scooped up Boots. "I'll be right back," he said loudly.

His grandma was still laughing to herself. "A root beer!" she said, and wiped her eyes.

In the kitchen, Gregor filled a glass with icy root beer and made Boots a bottle of milk.

"Code," she beamed, pressing it to her face.

"Yes, nice and cold, Boots," said Gregor.

A knock on the door startled him. The peephole had been useless for a good forty years. He called through the door, "Who is it?"

"It's Mrs. Cormaci, darling. I told your mother I'd sit with your grandma at four!" a voice called back. Then Gregor remembered the pile of laundry he was supposed to do. At least he'd get out of the apartment.

He opened the door to find Mrs. Cormaci looking wilted in the heat. "Hello, you! Isn't it awful? I tell you I do not suffer heat gladly!" She bustled into the apartment patting her face with an old bandanna. "Oh, you dream, is that for me?" she said, and before he could answer she was gulping down the root beer like she'd been lost in the desert.

"Sure," Gregor mumbled, heading back to the kitchen to fix another. He didn't really mind Mrs. Cormaci, and today it was almost a relief to see her. "Great, Day One and I'm looking forward to a trip to the laundry room," Gregor thought. "By September, I'll probably be ecstatic when we get the phone bill."

Mrs. Cormaci held out her glass for a refill. "So, when are you going to let me read your tarot, Mister? You know I've got the gift," she said. Mrs. Cormaci posted signs by the mailboxes offering to read tarot cards for people at ten bucks a shot. "No charge for you," she always told Gregor. He

never accepted because he had a sneaking suspicion Mrs. Cormaci would end up asking a lot more questions than he would. Questions he couldn't answer. Questions about his dad.

He mumbled something about the laundry and hurried off to collect it. Knowing Mrs. Cormaci, she probably had a deck of tarot cards right in her pocket.

Down in the laundry room, Gregor sorted clothes as best he could. Whites, darks, colors ... what was he supposed to do with Boots's black-and-white-striped shorts? He tossed them in the darks feeling sure it was the wrong decision.

Most of their clothes were kind of grayish anyway -- from age, not bad laundry choices. All Gregor's shorts were just his winter pants cut off at the knees, and he only had a few T-shirts that fit from last year, but what did it matter if he was going to be locked in the apartment all summer?

"Ball!" cried Boots in distress. "Ball!"

Gregor reached his arm between the dryers and pulled out an old tennis ball Boots had been chasing around. He picked off the dryer lint and tossed it across the room. Boots ran after it like a puppy.

"What a mess," thought Gregor, laughing a little. "What a sticky, crusty, dusty mess!" The remains of her lunch, egg salad and chocolate pudding, were still evident on Boots's face and shirt. She had colored her hands purple with washable markers that Gregor thought maybe a sandblaster could remove, and her diaper sagged down around her knees. It was just too hot to put her into shorts.

Boots ran back to him with the ball, dryer lint floating in her curls. Her sweaty face beamed as she held out the ball. "What makes you so happy, Boots?" he asked.

"Ball!" she said, and then banged her head into his knee, on purpose, to speed him up. Gregor tossed the ball down the alley between the washers and the dryers. Boots flew after it.

As the game continued, Gregor tried to remember the last time he'd felt as happy as Boots did with her ball. He had had some decent times over the past couple of years. The city middle school band had gotten to play at Carnegie Hall. That was pretty cool. He'd even had a short solo on his saxophone. Things were always better when he played music; the notes seemed to carry him to a different world altogether.

Running track was good, too. Pushing his body on and on until everything had been drummed out of his mind.

But if he was honest with himself, Gregor knew it had been years since he'd felt real happiness. "Exactly two years, seven months, and thirteen days," he thought. He didn't try to count, but the numbers automatically tallied up in his head. He had some inner calculator that always knew exactly how long his dad had been gone.

Boots could be happy. She wasn't even born when it happened. Lizzie was only four. But Gregor had been eight and had missed nothing; like the frantic calls to the police, who had acted almost bored with the fact that his dad had vanished into thin air. Clearly they'd thought he'd run off. They'd even implied it was with another woman.

That just wasn't true. If there was anything Gregor knew, it was that his father loved his mother, that he loved him and Lizzie, that he would have loved Boots.

But then -- how could he have left them without a word?

Gregor couldn't believe his dad would abandon the family and never look back. "Accept it," he whispered to himself. "He's dead." A wave of pain swept through him. It wasn't true. It couldn't be true. His dad was coming back because ... because ... because what? Because he wanted it so badly it must be true? Because they needed him? "No," thought Gregor. "It's because I can feel it. I know he's coming back."

The washer spun to a stop, and Gregor piled the clothes into a couple of dryers. "And when he gets back, he'd better have a really good explanation for where he's been!" muttered Gregor as he slammed the dryer door shut. "Like he got bumped on the head and forgot who he was. Or he was kidnapped by aliens." Lots of people got kidnapped by aliens on TV. Maybe it could happen.

He thought about different possibilities a lot in his head, but they rarely mentioned his dad at home. There was an unspoken agreement that his dad would return. All the neighbors thought he'd just taken off. The adults never mentioned it, and neither did most of the kids -- about half of them only lived with one parent, anyway. Strangers sometimes asked, though. After about a year of trying to explain it, Gregor came up with the story that his parents were divorced and his dad lived in California. It was a lie but people believed it, while no one seemed to believe the truth. Whatever that was.

"And after he gets home I can take him -- ," Gregor said aloud, and then stopped himself. He was about to break the rule. The rule was that he couldn't think about things that would happen after his dad got back. And since his dad could be back at any moment, Gregor didn't allow himself to think about the future at all. He had this weird feeling that if he imagined actual events, like having his dad back next Christmas or his dad helping to coach the track team, they would never happen. Besides, as happy as some daydream would make him, it only made returning to reality more painful. So, that was the rule. Gregor had to keep his mind in the present and leave the future to itself. He realized that his system wasn't great, but it was the best way he'd figured out to get through a day.

Gregor noticed that Boots had been suspiciously quiet. He looked around and felt alarmed when he couldn't spot her right away. Then he saw a scuffed pink sandal poking out from the last dryer. "Boots! Get out of there!" said Gregor.

You had to watch her around electrical stuff. She loved plugs.

As he hurried across the laundry room, Gregor heard a metallic klunk and then a giggle from Boots. "Great, now she's dismantling the dryer," thought Gregor, picking up speed. As he reached the far wall, a strange scene confronted him.

CHAPTER 2

Gregor twisted around in the air, trying to position himself so he wouldn't land on Boots when they hit the basement floor, but no impact came. Then he remembered the laundry room was in the basement. So what exactly had they fallen into?

The wisps of vapor had thickened into a dense mist that generated a pale light. Gregor could see only a few feet in any direction. His fingers clawed desperately through the white stuff, looking for a handhold, but came up empty. He was plummeting downward so fast, his clothes ballooned around him.

"Boots!" he hollered, and the sound bounced eerily back to him. "There must be sides to this thing," he thought. He called again, "Boots!"

A bright giggle came from somewhere below him. "Ge-go go wheee!" said Boots.

"She thinks she's on a big slide or something," thought Gregor. "At least she's not scared." He felt scared enough for the both of them. Whatever strange hole they had slipped into, it must have a bottom. There was only one way that this spinning through space could end.

Time was passing. Gregor couldn't tell exactly how much, but too much to make sense. Surely there was a limit to how deep a hole could be. At some point, you'd have to run into water or rock or the earth's platelets or something.

It was all like this horrible dream he had sometimes. He'd be up high, somewhere he wasn't supposed to be, usually like the roof of his school: As he walked along the edge, the solid matter under his feet would suddenly give way, and down he'd go. Everything would disappear but the sensation of falling, of the ground closing in on him, of terror. Then, just at the moment of impact, he'd jerk awake, soaked in sweat, heart pounding.

"A dream! I fell asleep in the laundry room and this is the same old crazy dream!" thought Gregor. "Of course! What else could it be?"

Calmed by the notion that he was asleep, Gregor began to gauge his fall. He didn't own a wristwatch, but anybody could count seconds.

"One Mississippi... two Mississippi... three Mississippi ..." At seventy Mississippi he gave up and began to feel panicky again. Even in a dream you had to land, didn't you?

Just then, Gregor noticed the mist beginning to clear a little. He could make out the smooth, dark sides of a circular wall. He seemed to be falling down a large, dark tube. He felt an updraft rising from below him. The last wisps of vapor blew away, and Gregor lost speed. His clothes gently settled back on his body.

Below him, he heard a small thump and then the patter of Boots's sandals. A few moments later, his own feet made contact with solid ground. He tried to get his bearings, not daring to move. Total darkness surrounded him. As his eyes adjusted, he became aware of a faint shaft of light off to his left.

A happy squeak came from behind it. "Bug! Beeg bug!"

Gregor ran toward the light. It leaked through a narrow crevice between two smooth walls of rock. He barely managed to squeeze himself through the opening. His sneaker caught on something, causing him to lose his balance. He tripped out from between the rock walls and landed on his hands and knees.

When he raised his head, Gregor found himself looking into the face of the largest cockroach he'd ever seen.

Now, his apartment complex had some big bugs. Mrs. Cormaci claimed a water bug the size of her hand had climbed out of her bathtub drain, and nobody doubted her. But the creature in front of Gregor rose at least four feet in the air. Granted, it was sitting up on its back legs, a very unnatural-looking position for a cockroach, but still ...

"Beeg bug!" cried Boots again, and Gregor managed to close his mouth. He pushed back onto his knees but he still had to tilt his head back to see the roach. It was holding some kind of torch. Boots scampered over to Gregor and tugged on the neck of his shirt. "Beeeeeg bug!" she insisted.

"Yes, I see, Boots. Big bug!" said Gregor in a hushed voice, wrapping his arms tightly around her. "Very ... big ... bug."

He tried hard to remember what cockroaches ate. Garbage, rotten food ... people? He didn't think they ate people. Not the little ones, anyway. Maybe they wanted to eat people but they kept getting stepped on first. At any rate, this wasn't a good time to find out.

Trying to appear casual, Gregor slowly edged his way back toward the crack in the rocks. "Okay, Mr. Roach, so we'll just be going, sorry we bugged you -- I mean, bothered you, I mean -- "

"Smells what so good, smells what?" a voice hissed, and it took Gregor a full minute to realize it had come from the cockroach. He was too stunned to make any sense of the strange words.

"Uh ... excuse me?" he managed.

"Smells what so good, smells what?" the voice hissed again, but the tone wasn't threatening. Just curious, and maybe a little excited. "Be small human, be?"

"All right, okay, I'm talking to a giant cockroach," thought Gregor. "Be cool, be nice, answer the bug. He wants to know 'Smells what so good, smells what?' So, tell him." Gregor forced himself to take a deep sniff and then regretted it. Only one thing smelled like that.

"I poop!" said Boots, as if on cue. "I poop, Ge-go!"

"My sister needs a clean diaper," said Gregor, somehow feeling embarrassed.

The roach, if he could read it right, acted impressed. "Ahhh. Closer come can we, closer come?" said the roach, delicately sweeping the space in front of it with a leg.

"We?" said Gregor. Then he saw the other forms rising out of the dark around them. The smooth black bumps he had taken for rocks were actually the backs of another dozen or so enormous cockroaches. They clustered around Boots eagerly, waving their antennas in the air and shuddering in delight.

Boots, who loved any kind of compliment, instinctively knew she was being admired. She stretched out her chubby arms to the giant insects. "I poop," she said graciously, and they gave an appreciative hiss.

"Be she princess, Overlander, be she? Be she queen, be she?" asked the leader, dipping its head in slavish devotion.

"Boots? A queen?" asked Gregor. Suddenly he had to laugh.

The sound seemed to rattle the roaches, and they withdrew stiffly. "Laugh why, Overlander, laugh why?" one hissed, and Gregor realized he had offended them.

"Because, we're, like, poor and she's kind of a mess and ... are you calling me Overlander?" he wound up lamely.

"Be you not Overlander human, be you? No Under lander you," said the torchbearing roach peering closely at him. "You look much like but smell not like."

Something seemed to dawn on the leader. "Rat bad." It turned to its comrades. "Leave we Overlanders here, leave we?" The roaches drew closely together in consultation and all began to talk at once.

Gregor caught snippets of their conversation, but nothing that made sense. They were so immersed in their debate that he thought about trying to escape again. He looked at his surroundings. In the dim torchlight, they appeared to be in a long, flat tunnel. "We need to go back up," thought Gregor. "Not sideways." He could never scale the walls of the hole they'd fallen down with Boots in his arms.

The roaches came to a decision. "You come, Overlanders. Take to humans," said the leader.

"Humans?" said Gregor, feeling relieved. "There are other humans down here?"

"Ride you, ride you? Run you, run you?" asked the roach, and Gregor understood it was offering him a lift. It didn't look sturdy enough to carry him, but he knew some insects, like ants, could carry many times their weight. He had a sickening image of trying to sit on the roach and crushing it.

"I think I'll walk -- I mean, run," said Gregor.

"Ride the princess, ride she?" said the roach hopefully, waving its antennas ingratiatingly and flattening itself on its stomach before Boots. Gregor would have said no, but the toddler climbed right up on the roach's back. He should have known. She loved to sit on the giant metal turtles at the Central Park Zoo.

"Okay, but she has to hold my hand," said Gregor, and Boots obediently latched on to his finger.

The roach took off immediately, and Gregor found himself jogging to keep up with it. He knew roaches could move fast; he'd watched his mother swat enough of them. Apparently these giant roaches had maintained their speed with their size. Fortunately the floor of the tunnel was even, and Gregor had only finished up track a few weeks ago. He adjusted his pace to match the roaches and soon found a comfortable rhythm.

The tunnel began to twist and turn. The roaches veered into side passages and even doubled back to choose a new route sometimes. In minutes, Gregor was hopelessly lost, and the mental picture of their path that he'd been making in his head resembled one of Boots's squiggly drawings. He gave up trying to remember directions and concentrated on

keeping up with the insects. "Man," he thought, "these bugs can really move!"

Gregor began to pant, but the roaches didn't show any visible signs of exertion. He had no idea how far they were going. Their destination could be a hundred miles away. Who knew how far these things could run?

Just when he was about to tell them he needed to rest, Gregor heard a familiar roar. At first he thought he was mistaken, but as they drew closer he felt sure. It was a crowd and, judging by the sound of it, a big one. But where could you fit a crowd in these tunnels?

The floor began to slope sharply, and Gregor found himself backpedaling to avoid stepping on the roach leader. Something soft and feathery brushed against his face and arms. Fabric? Wings? He passed through the stuff, and the unexpected light nearly blinded him. His hand instinctively covered his eyes as they tried to adjust.

A gasp went up from a crowd. He'd been right about that part. Then it got unnaturally quiet, and he had the sense that a great number of people were looking at him.

Gregor began to make out his surroundings. It wasn't really that bright -- in fact, it seemed like evening -- but he'd been in darkness so long, he couldn't tell. The first thing he made out was the ground, which appeared to be covered with a dusky green moss. Except it wasn't uneven, but smooth as pavement. He could feel its springiness under his feet. "It's a field," he thought. "For some kind of game. That's why there's a crowd. I'm in a stadium."

Slowly it came into focus. A polished wall enclosed a large oval cavern about fifty feet high. The top of the oval was ringed with bleachers. Gregor's eyes traveled up the distant rows of people as he tried to find the ceiling. Instead, he found the athletes.

A dozen bats were slowly spiraling around the top of the arena. They ranged in color from light yellow to black. Gregor guessed the smallest one had a wing-span of about fifteen feet. The crowd must have been watching them when he stumbled in, because the rest of the field area was empty. "Maybe it's like Rome, and they feed people to the bats. Maybe that's why the roaches brought us here," he thought.

Something fell from one of the bats. It hit the ground in the middle of the stadium and bounced fifty feet into the air. He thought, "Oh, it's just a --"

"Ball!" cried Boots, and before he could stop her she had slid off the roach, wiggled through the other bugs, and started to run across the mossy ground with her little flat-footed stride.

"Most graceful, the princess," hissed a roach dreamily as Gregor headed after her. The insects had shifted easily to let Boots by, but they were an obstacle course for him. Either they were intentionally trying to slow him down, or they were so taken with Boots's beauty that they had forgotten about him entirely.

The ball hit the ground a second time and bounced back in the air. Boots ran after it, reaching her arms high above her head to follow its path.

As Gregor broke free of the roaches and ran for his sister, a shadow passed over him. He looked up and to his horror saw a golden bat diving straight down at Boots. He'd never reach her in time. "Boots!" he screamed, feeling his stomach contract.

She turned around to him and saw the bat for the first time. Her face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Bat!" she shouted, pointing at the monstrous animal above her.

"Geez!" thought Gregor. "Doesn't anything scare her?"

The bat swooped over Boots, lightly brushing her finger with its belly fur, and then soared back into the air in a loop. At the top of the arc, while the bat was flat on its back, Gregor noticed for the first time that someone was sitting on it. The rider had its legs wrapped around the bat's neck. He realized it was a girl.

The upside-down girl released her legs and dropped off the bat's back. She executed a perfect double back-flip, twisting around at the last moment to face

Gregor's direction, and landed on the ground as lightly as a cat in front of Boots. One hand went out, and the ball fell into it in what was either a feat of remarkable timing or incredible luck.

CHAPTER 3

Hands down, she was the strangest-looking person Gregor had ever seen. Her skin was so pale, he could see every vein in her body. He thought of the section on the human anatomy in his science book. Flip one page, see the bones. Next, the digestive system. This girl was a walking circulatory system.

At first he thought her hair was gray like his grandma's, but that wasn't right. It was really more of a silver color, like blond hair with a metallic tint. The hair was woven in an intricate braid down her back and was tucked into a belt at her waist. A thin band of gold encircled the girl's head. It could have been some kind of hair band, but Gregor had a bad feeling it was a crown.

He didn't want this girl to be in charge. He could tell by the upright way she held herself, by the slight smile at the left corner of her mouth, by the way she managed to be looking down at him even though he was a good six inches taller than she was, that she had real attitude. That's what his mom would say about certain girls he knew. "She's got real attitude." She would shake her head, but Gregor could tell she approved of these girls.

Well, there was having attitude and then there was just being a total show-off.

Gregor felt sure she'd done that fancy trick off the bat completely for his benefit. One flip would have been plenty. It was her way to intimidate him, but he wouldn't be intimidated. Gregor looked straight into the girl's eyes and saw that her irises were a dazzling shade of light purple. He held his ground.

Gregor didn't know how long they might have stood there sizing each other up if Boots hadn't intervened. She plowed into the girl, knocking her off balance. The girl staggered back a step and looked at Boots in disbelief.

Boots grinned winningly and held up a pudgy hand. "Ball?" she said hopefully.

The girl knelt on one knee and held out the ball to

Boots, but she kept her fingers wrapped tightly around it. "It is yours if you can take it," she said in a voice like her eyes: cold, and clear, and foreign.

Boots tried to take the ball, but the girl didn't release it. Confused, she pulled on the girl's fingers. "Ball?"

The girl shook her head. "You will have to be stronger or smarter than I am."

Boots looked up at the girl, registered something, and poked her right in the eye. "Pu-ple!" she said. The girl jerked back, dropping the ball. Boots scrambled after it and scooped it up.

Gregor couldn't resist. "I guess she's smarter," he said. It was a little mean, but he didn't like her messing with Boots that way.

The girl narrowed her eyes. "But not you. Or you would not say such things to a queen."

So, he had been right: She was royalty. Now she'd probably chop off his head or something. Still, he felt it would be bad if he acted scared. Gregor shrugged. "No, if I'd known you were a queen, I'd probably have said something a lot cooler."

"Cool-er?" she said, raising her eyebrows.

"Better," said Gregor, for lack of a cooler word.

The girl decided to take it as an apology. "I will forgive it as you are not knowing. What are you called, Overlander?"

"My name's Gregor. And that's Boots," he said, pointing to his sister. "Well, her name's not really Boots, it's Margaret, but we call her Boots because in the winter she steals everybody's boots and runs around in them and because of this musician my dad likes." That sounded confusing even to Gregor. "What's your name?"

"I am Queen Luxa," said the girl.

"Louk-za?" said Gregor, trying to get the odd inflection right.

"What means this, what the baby says? Pu-ple?" she asked.

"Purple. It's her favorite color. And your eyes, she's never seen purple eyes before," explained Gregor.

Boots heard the word and came over holding up her palms, which were still dyed purple from the marker. "Pu-ple!"

"I have never seen brown before. Not on a human," said Luxa, staring into Boots's eyes. "Or this." She caught Boots's wrist and ran her fingers over the silky, light brown skin. "It must need much light."

Boots giggled. Every inch of her was ticklish. Luxa purposely ran her fingers up under Boots's chin, making her laugh. For a second, Luxa lost her attitude, and Gregor thought she might not be so bad. Then she

straightened up and resumed her haughty manner. "So, Gregor the Overlander, you and the baby must bathe."

Gregor knew he was sweaty from running through the tunnels, but that was pretty rude. "Maybe we should just go."

"Go? Go where?" asked Luxa in surprise.

"Home," he said.

"Smelling like you do?" said Luxa. "You will be thrice dead before you reach the Waterway, even if you knew the path to take." She could see he didn't understand. "You smell of the Overland. That is not safe for you here. Or for us."

"Oh," said Gregor, feeling a little foolish. "I guess we should rinse off before we go home, then."

"It is not so simple. But I will let Vikus explain," said Luxa. "You have had rare luck today, being found so quickly."

"How do you know we were found quickly?" asked Gregor.

"Our lookouts noted you shortly after you landed. As you were the crawlers' find, we let them present you," she said.

"I see," said Gregor. Where had the lookouts been? Concealed in the gloom of the tunnels? Hidden somewhere in the mist he'd fallen through? Until the stadium, he hadn't seen anyone but the roaches.

"These were headed here, in any case," she said, gesturing to the roaches. "See, they carry torches. They would not bother if they were not visiting us."

"Why's that?" said Gregor.

"Crawlers do not need light. But they show themselves to us to let us know they come peacefully. Did you not wonder at how easily you arrived here?" she asked. Without waiting for an answer, she turned to the group of cockroaches who had been standing patiently off to the side. "Crawlers, what take you for the Overlanders?"

The head roach scurried forward. "Give you five baskets, give you?" he hissed.

"We will give three grain baskets," said Luxa.

"Rats give many fish," said the roach, cleaning its antennas casually.

"Take them to the rats, then. It will give you no time," said Luxa.

Gregor didn't know exactly what they were talking about, but he had the uneasy sense he was for sale.

The insect considered Luxa's last offer. "Give you four baskets, give you?" it said.

"We will give four baskets, and one for thanks," said a voice behind Gregor. He turned and saw a pale, bearded man approaching them on foot. His close-cropped hair really was silver, not just the silvery blond.

Luxa glared at the old man but didn't contradict him.

The cockroach painstakingly added up four and one on its legs. "Give you five baskets, give you?" it asked, as if the whole idea was a new one.

"We will give five baskets," said Luxa less than graciously, giving the roach a terse bow. It bowed back and scampered off with the other bugs out of the stadium.

CHAPTER 4

It was as if someone had splashed water in Gregor's face and brought reality rushing back. Ever since he'd fallen through the hole in the wall, things had been happening so fast, it was all he could do to keep up with them. Now, in this momentary calm, the words "New York City" came as a shock.

Yes! He was a kid who lived in New York City and had to do the laundry and get back upstairs with his little sister before his mother -- *his mother!*

"I have to get home now!" Gregor blurted out.

His mom worked as a receptionist at a dentist's office. She usually got off right at five and was home by five-thirty. She'd be worried sick if she came in and found that he and Boots had disappeared. Especially after what had happened to his dad. He tried to figure out how much time had passed since he was in the laundry room. "We probably fell for, let's say, five minutes and then we must have run for about twenty with the roaches and we've been here maybe ten," he thought. Thirty-five minutes.

"Okay, so the clothes should be about dry!" he said aloud. "If we get back up there in the next twenty minutes it should be okay." No one would think to look for them before that, and he could just take the laundry up and fold it in the apartment.

"Really, I need to go back up right now," he said to Vikus.

The old man was still examining him closely. "It is simple to fall down, but the going up requires much giving."

"What do you mean?" asked Gregor, his throat tightening.

"He means you cannot go home," said Luxa flatly. "You must stay with us in the Underland."

"Uh, no! No, thank you!" said Gregor. "I mean, you're all great, but I've got stuff to do ... upstairs!" he said. "Thanks again! Nice meeting you! Come on, Boots!"

Gregor scooped up his sister and headed for the arched opening the roaches had left by. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Luxa raise her hand. For a moment he thought she was waving good-bye, but that couldn't be right. Luxa wasn't friendly enough to wave. "If it's not a wave, then it's a signal!" he muttered to Boots. Then he bolted for the doorway.

He might have made it if he hadn't been hauling Boots, but he couldn't really run with her in his arms. Ten yards from the exit the first bat swept in front of him, knocking him flat on his back on the ground. His body cushioned Boots's fall, and she immediately sat up on his stomach to enjoy the show.

Every bat in the arena had dived for them. They flew in a tight circle around Gregor and Boots, locking them in a prison of wings and fur. Each one had a rider as pale and silver-haired as Luxa. Despite the close proximity and speed of the bats, none of the people had any trouble staying mounted. In fact, only a few bothered to hold on at all. One cocky-looking guy on a glossy black bat actually lay in a reclining position, propping up his head with one hand.

The riders couldn't take their eyes off the captives. As they flashed by, Gregor could see their expressions ranged from amusement to outright hostility.

Boots bounced on his stomach and clapped her tiny hands. "Bats! Bats! Bats! Bats!"

"Well, at least one of us is enjoying this," thought Gregor.

Boots loved bats. At the zoo, she'd stand in front of the large plate-glass window of the bat habitat forever if you let her. In the small, dark display, hundreds of bats managed to flit around continuously without knocking into one another. They could do that because of something called echolocation. The bats would emit a sound that would echo off something solid and they'd be able to tell where it was located. Gregor had read the card on echolocation about a billion times waiting for Boots to get tired of the bats. He felt like something of an expert on the subject.

"Bats! Bats! Bats!" chanted Boots, using his stomach for a trampoline. Feeling queasy, Gregor pushed himself up on his elbows and scooted her onto the ground. The last thing he needed was to throw up in front of these people.

He got to his feet. Boots tucked her arm around his knee and leaned against him. The circle of bats shrunk in even closer. "What? Like I'm going somewhere?" said Gregor with aggravation. He heard a couple of the riders laugh.

Luxa must have given another signal, because the bats peeled off one at a time and began wheeling around the arena in complicated patterns. Gregor saw that neither she nor Vikus had bothered to move from where he

had left them. He looked at the doorway and he knew it was pointless. Still... these people were a little too smug for their own good.

Gregor sprinted three steps for the exit before he whipped around and headed back to Luxa, catching his sister's hand on the way. Taken by surprise, the bats broke out of their formation and zoomed down, only to find themselves with no one to capture. They pulled up in an awkward clump, and while they didn't actually collide, Gregor felt gratified to see several riders struggling to stay on their bats.

The crowd, which had been amazingly quiet since their appearance, broke out in appreciative laughter. Gregor felt a little more confident. At least he wasn't the only one who'd looked like an idiot. "Faked them out," he said to Boots.

Luxa's gaze was icy, but Gregor saw Vikus trying to suppress a smile as he walked up. "So, you said something about a bath?" he said to Luxa.

"You will follow to the palace *now*," said Luxa crossly. She flicked her hand, and her golden bat swept down behind her. Just as it was about to crash into her, Luxa leaped in the air. She lifted her legs straight out to the sides and touched her toes in a move Gregor thought he'd maybe seen cheerleaders do. The bat ducked under her, and she landed on its back easily. It arched up, missing Gregor by inches. Then it righted itself in the air and sped out of the stadium.

"You're wasting your time with that stuff!" called Gregor, although Luxa was out of earshot. He felt angry with himself because, in fact, he had to admit this girl had some moves.

Vikus had heard him, though. His smile broadened. Gregor scowled at the old man. "What?"

"Will you follow to the palace, Overlander?" asked Vikus politely.

"As what, your prisoner?" said Gregor bluntly.

"As our guest, I hope," replied Vikus. "Although Queen Luxa has no doubt ordered the dungeon readied for you." His violet eyes literally twinkled, and Gregor found himself liking the man in spite of himself. Maybe because he was pretty sure Vikus liked him. He resisted the temptation to smile.

"Lead the way," said Gregor indifferently.

Vikus nodded and waved him toward the far side of the arena. Gregor followed a few steps behind him, towing Boots.

The stands were beginning to empty. High in the air, the people filed out through exits between their bleachers. Several bats still wove around the stadium doing aerodynamic maneuvers. Whatever game had been in progress had ended when Gregor arrived. The remaining bats and riders were hanging around to keep an eye on him.

As they neared the main entrance of the stadium, Vikus dropped back and fell in step with Gregor. "You must feel as if you are trapped in a dream, Overlander."

"I was thinking nightmare," said Gregor evenly.

Vikus chuckled. "Our bats and crawlers -- no, what is it you call them? Cockhorses?"

"Cockroaches," corrected Gregor.

"Ah, yes, cockroaches," agreed Vikus. "In the Overland, they are but handfuls while here they grow largely."

"How do you know that? Have you been to the Overland?" said Gregor. If Vikus could get there, then so could he and Boots.

"Oh, no, such visits are as rare as trees. It is the Overlanders who come at times to us. I have met six or seven. One called Fred Clark, another called Mickey, and most recently a woman known as Coco. What are you called, Overlander?" asked Vikus.

"Gregor. Are they still here? Are the other Overlanders still here?" asked Gregor, brightening at the thought.

"Sadly, no. This is not a gentle place for Overlanders," said Vikus, his face darkening.

Gregor stopped, pulling Boots up short. "You mean you killed them?" Now he'd insulted the guy.

"We? We humans kill the Overlanders? I know of your world, of the evils that transpire there. But we do not kill for sport!" said Vikus severely. "Today we have taken you in among us. Had we denied you, count on it, you would not be breathing now!"

"I didn't mean you ... I mean, I didn't know how it worked here," stammered Gregor. Although he should have guessed that it wasn't very diplomatic to suggest Vikus was a murderer. "So, the roaches would have killed us?"

"The crawlers kill you?" said Vikus. "No, it would give them no time."

There was that expression again. What did it mean to give the roaches time?

"But no one else even knows we're here," said Gregor.

Vikus looked at him gravely. Concern had replaced his anger. "Believe me, boy, by this time, every creature in the Underland knows you are here."

Gregor resisted an impulse to look over his shoulder. "And that's not a good thing, is it?"

Vikus shook his head. "No. That is not in any manner a good thing."

The old man turned to the exit of the stadium. Half a dozen pale, violet-eyed guards flanked two gigantic stone doors. It took their combined efforts to push the doors open a few feet and to allow Vikus to pass.

Gregor led Boots through the doors, and they closed immediately behind him. He followed Vikus down a tunnel lined with stone torches to a small arch filled with something dark and fluttery. Gregor thought it might be more bats, but on closer inspection he saw it was a cloud of tiny black moths. Was this what he had passed through when he stumbled into the stadium?

Vikus gently slid his hand into the insects. "These moths are a warning system peculiar to the Underland, I believe. The moment their pattern of flight is disturbed by an intruder, every bat in the area discerns it. I find it so perfect in its simplicity," he said. Then he vanished into the moths.

Behind the curtain of wings, Gregor could hear his voice beckoning. "Gregor the Overlander, welcome to the city of Regalia!"

Gregor glanced down at Boots, who had a puzzled look on her face. "Go home, Ge-go?" she asked.

He picked her up and gave her what he hoped was a reassuring hug. "Not now, baby. We have to do some things first. Then we'll go home."

CHAPTER 5

The velvety wings brushed past his cheek, and he caught his first sight of Regalia. "Wow!" he said, stopping in his tracks.

Gregor didn't know what he'd expected. Maybe stone houses, maybe caves -- something primitive. But there was nothing primitive about the magnificent city that spread before him.

They stood on the edge of a valley filled with the most beautiful buildings he'd ever seen. New York was known for its architecture, the elegant brownstones, the towering skyscrapers, the grand museums. But compared with Regalia, it looked unplanned, like a place where someone had lined up a bunch of oddly shaped boxes in rows.

The buildings here were all a lovely misty gray, which gave them a dreamlike quality. They seemed to rise directly out of the rock as if they had been grown, not made by human hands. Maybe they weren't as tall as the skyscrapers Gregor knew by name, but they towered high above his head, some at least thirty stories and finished in artful peaks and turrets. Thousands of torches were placed strategically so that a soft, dusky light illuminated the entire city.

And the carvings ... Gregor had seen cherubs and gargoyles on buildings before, but the walls of Regalia crawled with life. People and cockroaches and fish and creatures Gregor had no name for fought and feasted and danced on every conceivable inch of space.

"Do just people live here, or roaches and bats, too?" asked Gregor.

"This is a city of humans. The others have their own cities, or perhaps 'lands' might be a more accurate word," said Vikus. "The majority of our people live here, although some dwell in the suburbs, if their work so dictates. There stands our palace," said Vikus, directing Gregor's eye to a huge, circular fortress at the far edge of the valley. "There we are headed."

The lights shining from the city's many windows gave it a festive look, and Gregor felt his heart lightening a little. New York City glittered all night long, too. Maybe this place wasn't so foreign after all.

"It's really great," he said. He would have loved to explore it, if he didn't need to get home so badly.

"Yes," said Vikus, as his eyes took in the city fondly. "My people have much love of stone. Had we time, I think we might create a land of rare

beauty."

"I think maybe you already have," said Gregor. "I mean, it's way more beautiful than anything in the Overland."

Vikus seemed pleased. "Come, the palace has the fairest view of the city. You will have time to admire before we dine."

As Gregor followed him down the road, Boots tilted back her head, turning it from side to side. "What'dyou lose, Boots?"

"Moon?" said Boots. Usually you couldn't see the stars from where they lived, but the moon was visible on clear nights. "Moon?"

Gregor looked up into the inky black sky and then realized that, of course, there was no sky. They were in some kind of gigantic underground cavern. "No moon, little girl. No moon tonight," he said.

"Cow jump moon," she said matter-of-factly.

"Mm-hm," agreed Gregor. If roaches talked, and bats played ball games, then probably there was a cow jumping a moon somewhere, too. He sighed as he pictured the tattered nursery rhyme book in the box by Boots's crib at home.

People stared openly at them from the windows as they passed. Vikus acknowledged a few, nodding or calling out a name, and they'd raise their hands in greeting back.

Boots noticed and began to wave. "Hi!" she called. "Hi!" and while none of the adults answered her, Gregor saw a few little kids wave back.

"You hold great fascination for them," said Vikus, indicating the people in the windows. "We do not get many visits from the Overland."

"How did you know I was from New York?" asked Gregor.

"There are but five known gateways to the Underland," said Vikus. "Two lead to the Dead Land, but you would never have survived those. Two gateways open into the Waterway, but your clothing is quite dry. You are alive, you are dry, from this I surmise you have fallen through the fifth gateway, the mouth of which I know to be in New York City."

"It's in my laundry room!" Gregor blurted out. "Right in our apartment building!" Somehow the fact that his laundry room connected to this strange place made him feel invaded.

"Your laundry room, yes," said Vikus thoughtfully. "Well, your fall coincided most favorably with the currents."

"The currents? You mean that misty stuff?" asked Gregor.

"Yes, they allowed you to arrive here in one piece. Timing is all," said Vikus.

"What happens if the timing is off?" asked Gregor, but he already knew the answer.

"Then we have a body to bury instead of a guest," said Vikus quietly. "That, in truth, is the most common outcome. A living Overlander like yourself, plus your sister, well, this is most singular."

It took a good twenty minutes to reach the palace, and Gregor's arms began to tremble from carrying Boots. Somehow he didn't want to put her down. It didn't seem safe with all the torches around.

As they approached the magnificent structure, Gregor noticed there was nothing carved on it. The sides were as smooth as glass, and the lowest window opened two hundred feet above the ground. Something was off, but he couldn't quite place it. Something was missing. "There's no door," he said aloud.

"No," said Vikus. "Doors are for those who lack enemies. Even the most accomplished climber cannot find a foothold here."

Gregor ran his hand along the polished stone wall. There wasn't a crack, not even the tiniest nick in the surface. "So, how do you get inside?"

"We usually fly, but if one's bat cannot accommodate ..." Vikus gestured above his head. Gregor craned his neck back and saw that a platform was being rapidly lowered from a large, rectangular window. It caught on the ropes that supported it about a foot from the ground, and Vikus stepped aboard.

Gregor climbed on with Boots. His recent fall to the Underland had only reinforced how much he disliked heights. The platform immediately rose, and he grabbed hold of the side rope to steady himself. Vikus stood calmly with his hands folded before him, but then Vikus wasn't holding a wiggly two-year-old, and he'd probably ridden this thing a million times.

The ascent was rapid and even. The platform leveled off at the window before a small, stone staircase.

Gregor carried Boots inside a large room with vaulted ceilings. A group of three Underlanders, all with the same translucent skin and violet eyes, waited to greet them.

"Good late day," said Vikus, nodding to the Underlanders. "Meet you Gregor and Boots the Overlanders, brother and sister, who have most

recently fallen among us. Please bathe them and then proceed to the High Hall." Without a backward glance, Vikus strode out of the room.

Gregor and the Underlanders stared awkwardly at one another. None of them had Luxa's arrogance or Vikus's easy commanding presence. "They're just regular people," he thought. "I bet they feel as weird as I do."

"Nice to meet you," he said, shifting Boots over to his other hip. "Say 'Hi,' Boots."

"Hi!" said Boots, waving at the Underlanders and looking completely delighted. "Hi! Hi, you!"

The Underlanders' reserve melted like butter in a skillet. They all laughed, and the stiffness went out of their bodies. Gregor found himself laughing, too. His mom said Boots never knew a stranger, which meant she thought everybody in the world was her friend.

Gregor sometimes wished he could be more like that. He had a couple of good friends, but he avoided becoming part of any one clique at school. It all came down to who you ate lunch with. He could've sat with the guys he ran track with. Or the band kids. But instead he liked being with Angelina, who was always in some school play, and Larry, who just... well, mostly he just drew stuff. Some people who didn't really know him thought Gregor was stuck-up, but he was mostly just private. He had more trouble opening up to people after his dad left. But even before that, he'd never been as friendly as Boots.

A young woman who looked about fifteen stepped forward and held out her arms. "I am called Dulcet. May I take you, Boots? You would care for a bath?" Boots looked at Gregor for confirmation.

"It's okay. Bath-time. You want a bath, Boots?" he asked.

"Ye-es!" cried Boots happily. "Bath!" She reached out for Dulcet, who took her from Gregor's arms.

"Meet you Mareth and Perdita," said Dulcet, indicating the man and woman next to her. They were both tall and muscular and, although they didn't carry weapons, Gregor had a feeling they were guards.

"Hey," he said.

Mareth and Perdita both gave him formal, but friendly, nods.

Dulcet wrinkled her nose and poked Boots gently in the tummy. "You have need of a clean catch cloth," she said.

Gregor could guess what a catch cloth was. "Oh, yeah, her diaper needs to be changed." It had been a while. "She's going to get a rash."

"I poop!" said Boots without apology, and tugged on her diaper.

"I will attend to it," said Dulcet with an amused smile, and Gregor couldn't help thinking how much nicer she was than Luxa. "You will follow to the waters, Gregor the Overlander?"

"Yes, thank you, I will follow to the waters," said Gregor. He was struck by how formal he sounded and he didn't want the Underlanders to think he was making fun of them. The roaches had been so easy to insult. "I mean, yeah, thanks."

Dulcet nodded and waited for him to fall in step beside her. Mareth and Perdita followed a few steps behind. "They're guards, all right," thought Gregor.

The group left the entrance room and walked down a spacious hallway. They passed dozens of arched doorways that opened into large chambers, staircases, and halls. Gregor quickly realized he'd need a map to navigate the place. He could ask directions, but that wouldn't be too smart if he was trying to escape. They could call him their guest, but it didn't change the fact that he and Boots were prisoners. Guests could leave if they wanted to. Prisoners had to escape. And that was exactly what he intended to do.

But how? Even if he could find his way back to the platform, no one would let him down, and he couldn't jump two hundred feet to the ground. "But there must be other ways to enter the palace," he thought. "There must be -- "

"I have never met an Overlander before," said Dulcet, interrupting his train of thought. "It is only because of the baby I meet you now."

"Because of Boots?" said Gregor.

"I take care of the young ones for many," said Dulcet. "I would not usually meet so important a person as an Overlander," she said shyly.

"Well, that's too bad, Dulcet," said Gregor, "because you're the nicest person I've met here yet."

Dulcet blushed, and boy, when these people blushed, they really blushed! Her skin turned pink as ripe watermelon. Not just her face, either; she colored to the tips of her fingers.

"Oh," she stammered, very embarrassed. "Oh, that is too kind for me to accept." Behind him, the two guards murmured something to each other.

Gregor guessed he had said something way out of line, but he didn't know what. Maybe you weren't supposed to imply a nanny was nicer than

the queen. Even if it was true. He was going to have to be more careful about what he said.

Fortunately, just then they stopped at a doorway. He could hear water running, and steam wafted out into the hall.

"Must be the bathroom," he thought. He looked inside and saw that a wall divided the room into two sections.

"I will take Boots, and you go in here," said Dulcet, indicating one side.

Gregor guessed it must be girls on one side, boys on the other, like locker rooms. He thought maybe he should stay with Boots, but he felt as if he could trust Dulcet, and he didn't want to upset her again. "Okay, Boots? See you soon?"

"Bye-bye!" waved Boots over Dulcet's shoulder. Clearly she wasn't having any separation anxiety.

Gregor veered off to the right. The place did kind of resemble a locker room if locker rooms were gorgeous and smelled good. Exotic sea creatures were carved into the walls, and oil lamps cast a golden glow. "Okay, but it's got benches and lockers, sort of," he thought, taking in the rows of stone benches and the open cubicles that lined one side of the room.

Mareth had followed him in. He addressed Gregor nervously. "This place is the changing room. Here are the rooms for relief and cleansing. Can I get you anything, Gregor the Overlander?"

"No, thanks, I think I can figure it out," said Gregor.

"We shall be in the hall if you have need," said Mareth.

"Okay, thanks a lot," said Gregor. When the Underlander ducked out the door he felt the muscles in his face release. It was good to be alone.

He made a quick inspection of the place. The relief room held only a solid stone chair with an opening cut in the middle. Looking inside, Gregor saw water ran continuously in a stream underneath it. "Oh, it must be the toilet," he thought.

The cleansing room had a small, steaming pool with steps that led down into the water. A fragrant smell filled the air. His whole body ached to get into the water.

Gregor quickly returned to the changing room and stripped off his sweaty clothes. Feeling self-conscious, he peed in the toilet. Then he hurried to the pool. He tested the temperature with his toe and slowly walked down into the steamy water. It reached his waist, but he discovered the pool had a bench around it. When he sat down, the water licked his ears.

A current washed over him, releasing the knots in his shoulders and back. Gregor cut the surface of the pool with his hand, and the water ran through his fingers. Like the water in the toilet, it flowed in one end of the bath and out the other.

"It must be some kind of underground stream," he thought.

He sat straight up as the idea hit him. The water came from somewhere! It went somewhere!

CHAPTER 6

Gregor scrubbed himself down using a sponge and Ml some gloopy stuff he found in a bowl by the pool. He lathered his hair and even cleaned inside his ears wanting to get every bit of Overlander smell off him. If he was going to try to escape, he needed to be as indistinguishable from his hosts as possible.

On hooks by the pool hung a row of white towels. Gregor couldn't identify the thick woven fabric. "Sure not cotton," he muttered, but the towel was soft and absorbed water much better than the thin, worn ones they used at home.

He walked back into the changing room drying his hair and found his clothes had disappeared. In their place was a neat pile of smoky blue garments. A shirt, pants, and what seemed to be underwear. They were much finer than the towels -- the cloth ran silkily through his fingers. "What is this stuff?" he wondered, slipping into the shirt.

He slid his feet into a pair of braided straw sandals and padded out of the changing room. Mareth and Perdita were waiting.

"So, what happened to my clothes?" asked Gregor.

"They have been burned," said Mareth apprehensively. Gregor sensed Mareth was afraid he'd be mad.

"It is most dangerous to keep them," said Perdita, by way of explanation. "The ash carries no scent."

Gregor shrugged to show he didn't care. "That's cool," he said. "These fit me fine."

Mareth and Perdita looked grateful. "After a few days of our food, you will be without much odor, too," said Perdita encouragingly.

"That'll be nice," said Gregor dryly. These Underlanders were sure obsessed with his smell.

Dulcet emerged from the left side of the bathroom carrying a squeaky clean Boots. She had on a soft, rose-colored shirt, and a clean diaper made from the same material as Gregor's bath towel. She extended her leg and pointed proudly to the new sandal on her foot. "San-da," she said to Gregor.

He stuck out his foot to show her his shoes. "Me, too," he said. He assumed they'd burned Boots's clothes, as well. He tried to remember what she'd been wearing in case he had to explain the missing stuff to his mom.

One dirty diaper, no loss. One pair of scuffed pink sandals her feet were growing out of, anyway. One stained T-shirt. It would probably be okay.

Gregor didn't know exactly what he would tell his mom about the Underland. The truth would scare her to death. He'd work out something when they got back to the laundry room, but the sooner that happened, the simpler the story could be.

Boots reached out her arms and Gregor took her, pressing his nose into her damp curls. She smelled fresh and a bit like the ocean.

"She is well grown," said Dulcet. "Your arms must be tired." She went back into the changing room and came out with some kind of pack. It fitted on his back with straps, and Boots could ride in it looking over his shoulder. He had seen people carrying kids in specially designed backpacks, but his family didn't have money for that sort of stuff.

"Thanks," he said casually, but he was secretly elated. It would be a lot easier to escape with Boots in a backpack than in his arms.

Dulcet led them up several staircases and through a maze of halls. They eventually wound up in a long room that opened out on to a balcony.

"We call this the High Hall," said Dulcet.

"I think you guys forgot the roof," said Gregor. While the walls were decorated with the greatest care, there was nothing but the black cavern above their heads.

Dulcet laughed. "Oh, no, it is meant to be so. We entertain here often, and many bats can arrive at once." Gregor imagined the bottleneck a hundred bats would cause trying to get in the door downstairs. He could see the advantage of a bigger landing strip.

Vikus was waiting for them by the balcony with an older woman. Gregor guessed she might be around his grandma's age, but his grandma was stooped and moved painfully from arthritis. This woman stood very straight and looked strong.

"Gregor and Boots the Overlanders, my wife, Solovet," said Vikus.

"Hey," said Gregor, "nice to meet you."

But the woman stepped forward and offered both her hands to him. The gesture surprised him. No one else had made any effort to touch him since he'd landed.

"Welcome, Gregor. Welcome, Boots," she said in a low, warm voice. "It is an honor to have you among us."

"Thanks," Gregor mumbled, confused because she was throwing his prisoner status off balance. She really made him feel like someone special.

"Hi, you!" said Boots, and Solovet reached up to pat her cheek.

"Vikus tells me you are very anxious to return home. It pains me that we cannot aid you immediately, but to seek the surface tonight would be impossible," she said. "The Underland buzzes with news of your arrival."

"I guess everyone wants to look at us, like we're freaks or something. Well, they'd better look fast," thought Gregor. But he said, "Then I'll get to see some stuff down here."

Vikus waved him over to the low wall that ringed the balcony. "Come, come, there is much to view," he said.

Gregor joined Vikus at the wall and felt his stomach lurch. He involuntarily took a few steps backward.

The balcony, it seemed, hung out over the side of the palace. Only the floor separated him from the dizzying drop.

"Do not fear, it is well built," said Vikus.

Gregor nodded but didn't move forward again. If the thing started collapsing he wanted to be able to make it back to the High Hall. "I can see fine from here," he said. And he could.

Regalia was even more impressive from above. On the ground, he couldn't see that the streets, which were paved in various shades of stone, were laid out in a complex geometric pattern so that the city looked like a giant mosaic. He also hadn't realized how big the place was. It extended out several miles each direction. "How many people live down here?" asked Gregor.

"We number three thousand or so," said Vikus. "More, if the harvest reaps well."

Three thousand. Gregor tried to get a mental picture of how many people that would be. His school had about six hundred kids in it, so five times that.

"So, what are you guys doing down here, anyway?" asked Gregor.

Vikus laughed. "We are amazed it has taken you so long to ask. Well, it is a marvelous tale," said Vikus, taking a deep breath to begin it. "Once many years ago there lived -- "

"Vikus," interrupted Solovet. "Perhaps the tale would go well with supper."

Gregor silently thanked her. He was starving, and he had a feeling Vikus wasn't the kind of guy to leave out any details.

The dining room was off the High Hall. A table had been set for eight. Gregor hoped Dulcet would be joining them, but after tucking Boots in a sort of high chair, she backed up several feet from the table and stood. Gregor didn't feel comfortable eating with her standing there, but he thought he might get her in trouble if he said something.

Neither Vikus nor Solovet took a chair, so Gregor decided to wait, too. Soon Luxa swept into the room in a dress that was a lot fancier than the clothes she'd worn in the stadium. Her hair was loose and fell like a shiny silver sheet to her waist. She was with a guy who Gregor guessed was about sixteen. He was laughing at something she'd just said. Gregor recognized him from the stadium. It was the rider who'd felt cocky enough to lie down on his bat as they'd swirled around his head.

"Another show-off," thought Gregor. But the guy gave him such a friendly look that Gregor decided not to jump to conclusions. Luxa was annoying, but most of the other Underlanders were okay.

"My cousin, Henry," said Luxa shortly, and Gregor wanted to laugh. Here among all these strange names was a Henry.

Henry gave Gregor a low bow and came up grinning. "Welcome, Overlander," he said. Then he grabbed Gregor's arm and spoke in his ear in a dramatically hushed voice. "Beware the fish, for Luxa plans to poison you directly!"

Vikus and Solovet laughed, and even Dulcet smiled. It was a joke. These people actually had a sense of humor.

"Beware *your* fish, Henry," returned Luxa. "I gave orders to poison scoundrels, forgetting you would be dining as well."

Henry winked at Gregor. "Switch plates with the bats," he whispered, and at that moment two bats swooped into the room from the High Hall. "Ah, the bats!"

Gregor recognized the golden bat Luxa had been riding earlier. A large gray bat fluttered into a chair near Vikus, and everyone else took a seat.

"Gregor the Overlander, meet you Aurora and Euripedes. They are bonded to Luxa and myself," said Vikus, extending a flexed hand to the gray bat on his right. Euripedes brushed the hand with his wing. Luxa and her golden bat Aurora performed the same exchange.

Gregor had thought the bats were like horses, but now he could see they were equals. Did they talk?

"Greetings, Overlander," said Euripedes in a soft purring voice.

Yeah, they talked. Gregor began to wonder if his fish dinner would want to chat as he sliced into it.

"Nice to meet you," said Gregor politely. "What does that mean, that you're bonded to each other?"

"Soon after we arrived in the Underland we humans formed a special alliance with the bats," said Solovet. "Both sides saw the obvious advantages to joining together. But beyond our alliance, individual bats and humans may form their own union. That is called bonding."

"And what do you do if you're bonded to a bat?" asked Gregor. "I mean, besides play ball games together."

There was a pause in which glances were exchanged around the table. He'd said something wrong again.

"You keep each other alive," said Luxa coldly.

It had seemed like he was making fun of something serious. "Oh, I didn't know," said Gregor.

"Of course, you did not," said Solovet, shooting a look at Luxa. "You have no parallel in your own land."

"And do you bond with the crawlers, too?" Gregor asked.

Henry snorted with laughter. "I would as soon bond with a stone. At least it could be counted on not to run away in battle."

Luxa broke into a grin. "And perhaps you could throw it. I suppose you could throw a crawler...."

"But then I would have to touch it!" said Henry, and the two cracked up.

"The crawlers are not known for their fighting ability," said Vikus, by way of explanation to Gregor. Neither he nor Solovet were laughing. He turned to Luxa and Henry. "Yet they live on. Perhaps when you can comprehend the reason for their longevity you will have more respect for them."

Henry and Luxa attempted to look serious, although their eyes were still laughing.

"It is of little consequence to the crawlers whether I respect them or not," said Henry lightly.

"Perhaps not, but it is of great consequence whether Luxa does. Or so it will be in some five years when she comes of age to rule," said Vikus. "At

that time, foolish jokes at the crawlers' expense may make the difference between our existence and our annihilation. They do not need to be warriors to shift the balance of power in the Underland."

This sobered Luxa up for real, but it killed the conversation. An awkward pause stretched into an embarrassing silence. Gregor thought he understood what Vikus had meant. The crawlers would make better friends than enemies, and humans shouldn't go around insulting them.

To Gregor's relief, the food arrived, and an Underlander servant placed a half circle of small bowls around him. At least three contained what looked like various types of mushrooms. One had a ricelike grain, and the smallest contained a handful of fresh greens. He could tell by the skimpy portion that the leafy stuff was supposed to be a big treat.

A platter with a whole grilled fish was set in front of him. The fish resembled the ones Gregor was used to except it had no eyes. He and his dad had once watched a show on TV about fish that lived way down deep in some cave and didn't have eyes, either. The weird thing was that when the scientists brought some up to study in a lab, the fish had sensed the light and had grown eyes. Not right away, but in a few generations.

His dad had gotten very excited over the show and had taken Gregor to the American Museum of Natural History to look for eyeless fish. They had ended up at the museum a lot, just the two of them. His dad was crazy about science, and it seemed as if he wanted to pour everything in his brain right into Gregor's head. It was a little dangerous, because even a simple question could bring on a half-hour explanation. His grandma had always said, "Ask your daddy the time, and he tells you how to make a clock." But he was so happy explaining, and Gregor was just happy being with him. Besides, Gregor had loved the rain forest exhibit, and the cafeteria with french fries shaped like dinosaurs. They had never really figured out how the fish had known to grow eyes. His dad had had some theories, of course, but he couldn't explain how the fish had been able to change so fast.

Gregor wondered how long it took people to become transparent with purple eyes. He turned to Vikus. "So, you were going to tell me how you got down here?"

While Gregor tried not to wolf his food, which turned out to be delicious, Vikus filled him in on the history of Regalia.

Not all of it was clear, but it seemed the people had come from England in the 1600s. "Yes, they were led here by a stonemason, one Bartholomew

of Sandwich," said Vikus, and Gregor had to work to keep a straight face. "He had visions of the future. He saw the Underland in a dream, and he set out to find it."

Sandwich and a group of followers had sailed to New York, where he got on famously with the local tribe. The Underland was no secret to the Native Americans, who had made periodic trips below the earth for ritual purposes for hundreds of years. They had little interest in living there and didn't care if Sandwich was mad enough to want to.

"Of course, he was quite sane," said Vikus. "He knew that one day the earth would be empty of life except what was sustained beneath the ground."

Gregor thought it might be rude to tell Vikus that billions of people lived up there now. Instead, he asked, "So, everybody just packed up and moved down here?"

"Heavens, no! It was fifty years before the eight hundred were down and the gates to the Overland sealed. We had to know we could feed ourselves and have walls to keep us safe. Rome was not built in a day." Vikus laughed. "This was how Fred Clark the Overlander said it."

"What happened to him?" asked Gregor, spearing a mushroom. The table got quiet.

"He died," said Solovet softly. "He died without your sun."

Gregor lowered the mushroom to his plate. He looked over at Boots, who was covered from head to toe in some kind of mushy baby stew. She sleepily finger-painted on the stone tabletop with the gravy.

"Our sun," thought Gregor. Had it set? Was it bed time? Had the police gone, or were they still there questioning his mom? If they'd gone, he knew where she'd be. Sitting at the kitchen table. Alone in the dark. Crying.

CHAPTER 7

The darkness pressed down on Gregor's eyes until he felt it had physical weight, like water. He'd never been completely without light before. At home, streetlights, car headlights, and the occasional flashing fire truck shone in the tiny window of his bedroom. Here, once he'd blown out the oil lamp, it was as if he'd lost the sense of sight entirely.

He'd been tempted to relight the lamp. Mareth had told him that torches burned all night long in the corridor outside his room and he could rekindle the flame there. But he wanted to save the oil. He'd be lost without it once he got out of Regalia.

Boots made a snuffling sound and pressed her back deeper into his side. His arm tightened around her.

Servants had prepared separate beds for them, but Boots had climbed right in with Gregor.

It hadn't been hard to get the Underlanders to excuse them for bed. Everyone could see Boots could barely keep her eyes open, and he must have looked pretty ragged himself. He wasn't. Adrenaline was pumping through him so fast, he was afraid that people could hear his heart beating through the heavy curtains that shut off their bedroom from the hall. The last thing he could do was sleep.

They had been invited to bathe again before bed. It was something of a necessity for Boots, who, in addition to stew, had conditioned her curls with some kind of pudding. Gregor hadn't objected, either. The water gave him a quiet place to think out his escape plan.

It also gave him a chance to ask Dulcet about the water system in the palace without seeming suspicious. "How do you guys have hot and cold running water?" he asked.

She told him the water was pumped from a series of hot and cold springs.

"And then it just empties back into a spring?" he asked innocently.

"Oh, no, that would not be fresh," said Dulcet.

"The dirty water falls into the river beneath the palace and then flows to the Waterway."

It was just the information he needed. The river beneath the palace was their way out. Even better, it led to the Waterway. He didn't know what that

was exactly, but Vikus had mentioned it had two gateways to the Overland.

Boots stirred again in her sleep, and Gregor patted her side to quiet her. She had not seemed to miss home until bedtime. But she looked worried when he told her it was time to go to sleep.

"Mama?" she asked. "Liz-ee?"

Was it only that morning that Lizzie had ridden off to camp on the bus? It seemed like a thousand years ago.

"Home? Mama?" insisted Boots. Even though she was exhausted, he had a hard time getting her to sleep. Now he could tell by how restless she was that she was having vivid dreams.

"Probably full of giant cockroaches and bats," he thought.

He had no way to tell how much time had passed. An hour? Two? But what little noise he'd been able to hear through the curtain had ceased. If he was going to do this thing, he needed to get started.

Gregor gently disengaged himself from Boots and stood up. He fumbled in the dark and found the sling Dulcet had given him. Trying to position Boots inside it proved tricky. Finally he just squeezed his eyes shut and let his other senses work. That was easier. He slid her in and slung the pack on his back.

Boots murmured, "Mama," and her head fell against his shoulder.

"I'm working on it, baby," he whispered back, and searched the table for the lamp. That was all he was taking. Boots, the pack, and the lamp. He'd need his hands for other things.

Gregor groped his way to the curtain and pushed the edge aside. There was enough torchlight from the far hall for him to make out the passage was empty. The Underlanders had not bothered to post guards at his door now that they knew him better. They were making an effort to make him feel like a guest and, anyway, where would he go?

"Down the river," he thought grimly. "Wherever that leads."

He crept along the hall taking care to place each of his bare feet silently. Thankfully Boots slept on. His plan would disintegrate if she woke before he got out of the palace.

Their bedroom was conveniently close to the bathroom, and Gregor followed his way to the watery sound. His plan was simple. The river ran under the palace. If he could make his way to the ground floor without losing the sound of water, he should find the place it drained into the river.

If the plan was simple, its execution was not. It took Gregor several hours to weave his way down through the palace. The bathrooms were not always near the stairs, and he found himself having to backtrack so he wouldn't lose the sound of rushing water. Twice he had to duck into rooms and hide when he spotted Underlanders. There weren't many about, but some sort of guards patrolled the palace at night.

Finally the sound of water became stronger, and he made his way to the lowest level of the building. He followed his ears to where the roar was loudest and sneaked through a doorway.

For a moment, Gregor almost abandoned his plan. When Dulcet had said "river," he had pictured the rivers that flowed through New York City. But this

Underland river looked like something out of an action adventure movie. It wasn't terribly wide, but it ran with such speed that the surface was churned into white foam. He couldn't guess its depth, but it had enough power to carry large boulders by as if they were empty soda cans. No wonder the Underlanders didn't bother to post a guard on the dock. The river was more dangerous than any army they could assemble.

"But you must be able to travel on it -- they have boats," thought Gregor, noticing half a dozen crafts tied up above the rush of the current. They were made out of some kind of skin stretched over a frame. They reminded him of the canoes at camp.

Camp! Why couldn't he just be at camp like a normal kid?

Trying not to think of the bobbing boulders, he lit his oil lamp from a torch by the dock. On reflection, he took the torch as well. Where he was going, light would be as important as air. He blew out the oil lamp to save fuel.

He carefully climbed into one of the boats and checked it out. The torch slid into a holder clearly designed for it.

"How do you get this thing down in the water?" he wondered. Two ropes held it aloft. They were attached to a metal wheel that was affixed to the dock. "Well, here goes nothing," Gregor said, and gave the wheel a yank. It gave a loud creak, and the boat fell straight into the river, knocking Gregor on his rear end.

The current swept up the boat like it was a dried leaf. Gregor grasped the sides and hung on as they shot into the darkness. Hearing voices, he managed to look back at the dock for a moment. Two Underlanders were

screaming something after him. The river curved and they vanished from sight.

Would they come after him? Of course they would come after him. But he had a head start. How far was it to the Waterway? *What* was the Waterway, arid once he got there, where did he go next?

Gregor would have been more concerned about these questions if he wasn't trying so hard to stay alive. Along with the boulders, he had to dodge the jagged black rocks that jutted out of the water. He found an oar lying along the bottom of the boat and used it to deflect the canoe off the rocks.

The temperature of the Underland had felt comfortably cool since he'd arrived, especially after the ninety-degree heat of his apartment. But the cold wind whipping up off the water made goose bumps rise on his flesh.

"Gregor!" He thought he'd heard someone call his name.

Was it his imagination or -- no! There it was again. The Underlanders must be closing in on him.

The river swerved and suddenly he could see a little better. A long cavern lined with crystals shimmered around him, reflecting back his torchlight.

Gregor made out a glittering beach flanking one side of the river up ahead. A tunnel led from the beach into the dark. On impulse, Gregor pushed off a rock and pointed the canoe toward the beach. He paddled desperately with the oar for the shore. Staying on the river was no use. The Underlanders were breathing down his neck. Maybe he had time to pull up on the beach and hide in the tunnel. After they'd passed by, he could wait a few hours and try the river again.

The canoe slammed into the beach. Gregor caught himself just before his face hit the boat bottom. Boots jerked partly awake and cried a little, but he soothed her back to sleep with his voice as he struggled to pull his craft across the sand with one hand while carrying the torch with the other. "It's okay, Boots. Shhh. Go back to sleep."

"Hi, Bat," she murmured and her head plopped back on his shoulder.

Gregor heard his name in the distance and sped up. He had just reached the mouth of the tunnel when he ran headfirst into something warm and furry. Startled, he staggered back a few paces, dropping the torch. The something stepped out into the dim light. Gregor's knees turned to jelly and he sunk slowly to the sand.

CHAPTER 8

"Ah, here you are at last," said the rat idly. "By your reek we expected you ages ago. Look,

Fangor, he has brought the pup."

A long nose poked over the first rat's shoulder. It had a friend.

"What a tidbit she is," said Fangor in a smooth, rich voice. "I will allow you the entire boy if I may have the sweetness of the pup to myself, Shed."

"It is tempting, but he is more bone than meat, and she is such a morsel," said Shed. "I find myself quite torn by your offer. Stand you, boy, and let us better tell your stuffing."

The cockroaches had been freaky, the bats intimidating, but these rats were purely terrifying. Sitting back on their haunches, they were a good six feet tall, and their legs, arms, whatever you called them, bulged with muscle under their gray fur. But the worst part of all was their teeth, six-inch incisors that protruded out of their whiskered mouths.

No, the worst part was that they were clearly planning to eat Gregor and Boots. Some people thought rats didn't eat people, but Gregor knew better. Even the regular-sized rats back home would attack a person if they were helpless. Rats preyed on babies, old people, the weak, the defenseless. There were stories ... the homeless man in the alley ... a little boy who'd lost two fingers ... they were too horrible to think about.

Gregor slowly got to his feet, retrieving the torch, but keeping it down at his side. He pressed Boots back against the cavern wall.

Fangor's nose quivered. "This one had fish for supper. Mushrooms, grain, and just a bit of leaf. Now that's flavorful, you must admit, Shed."

"But the pup has gorged on stewed cow and cream," returned Shed. "Not to mention, she is clearly milk-fed herself."

Now Gregor knew what all the fuss about bathing had been. If the rats could detect the handful of greens he'd eaten hours earlier, they must have an unbelievable sense of smell.

The Underlanders hadn't been rude when they'd wanted him to bathe. They had been trying to keep him alive!

He went from attempting to evade them to wishing desperately that they'd find him. He had to hold the rats off. It would give him time. The

expression startled him. Vikus had said killing him would give the roaches no time. By "time," did the Underlanders simply mean more life?

He brushed off his clothes and tried to adopt the rats' casual banter. "Do I have any say in this?" he asked.

To his surprise, Fangor and Shed laughed. "He speaks!" said Shed. "What a treat! Usually we get nothing but shrieks and whimpers! Tell us, Overlander, what makes you so brave?"

"Oh, I'm not brave," said Gregor. "Bet you can smell that."

The rats laughed again. "True, your sweat carries much fear, but still you have managed to address us."

"Well, I thought you might like to get to know your meal better," said Gregor.

"I like him, Shed!" howled Fangor.

"I like him, too!" choked Shed. "The humans are commonly most dreary. Say we may keep him, Fangor."

"Oh, Shed, how is that to be? It would entail much explaining, and besides, all this laughter gives me hunger," said Fangor.

"And me," said Shed. "But you must agree, to eat such amusing prey is a great pity."

"A great pity, Shed," said Fangor. "But without remedy. Shall we?"

And with that, both rats bared their teeth and moved in on him. Gregor slashed at them with the torch sending a trail of sparks through the air. He held it in front of him with both hands, like a sword, fully illuminating his face.

The rats pulled up short. At first he thought they were afraid of the flame, but it was something more. They looked stunned.

"Mark you, Shed, his shade," said Fangor in a hushed voice.

"I mark it, Fangor," said Shed quietly. "And he is but a boy. Think you he is ...?"

"He is not if we kill him!" Fangor growled, and lunged for Gregor's throat.

The first bat came in so silently that neither Gregor nor the preoccupied rats saw it. It caught Fangor mid-leap, knocking him off course.

Fangor plowed into Shed, and the rats landed in a heap. Instantly they regained their feet and turned on their assailants.

Gregor saw Henry, Mareth, and Perdita zigzagging their bats above the rats' heads. Besides avoiding one another in limited space, they had to

dodge the wicked claws of the rats. Fangor and Shed could easily leap ten feet in the air, and the sparkling ceiling of the cavern over the beach was not much higher.

The humans began to dive at the rats, wielding swords. Fangor and Shed fought back viciously with claws and teeth. Blood began to stain the beach, but Gregor couldn't tell whose it was.

"Flee!" Henry shouted at Gregor as he whipped past him. "Flee, Overlander!"

Part of him wanted to, badly, but he couldn't. First of all, he had no idea where to go. His boat was high on the beach, and the tunnel ... well, he'd rather take his chances in the open than in the tunnel if he had to deal with the rats.

More important, he knew the Underlanders were only here because of him. He couldn't just run away and leave them to face the rats.

But what could he do?

At that moment, Shed caught the wing of Mareth's bat in his teeth and hung on. The bat struggled to free itself, but Shed held fast. Perdita came in behind Shed, taking off his ear with one stroke of her sword. Shed gave a howl of pain, releasing Mareth's bat.

But as Perdita pulled out of her dive, Fangor leaped onto her bat, ripping a chunk of fur off its throat and hurling her to the ground. Perdita hit her head on the cavern wall as she landed and was knocked out. Fangor loomed over her and aimed his teeth at her neck.

Gregor didn't remember thinking of his next move, it just happened. One minute he was pressed against the wall, and the next he had jumped forward and thrust his torch into Fangor's face. The rat shrieked and stumbled backward, right into Henry's sword. Fangor's lifeless body fell to the ground, taking the sword with it.

Fangor's shriek finally woke Boots, who took one look over Gregor's shoulder and began wailing at the top of her lungs. Her cries echoed off the walls, sending Shed into a frenzy and disorienting the bats.

"How fly you, Mareth?" yelled Henry.

"We can hold!" cried Mareth, although his bat was spraying blood from its wounded wing.

Things didn't look good. Mareth's bat was losing control, Henry was unarmed, Perdita was unconscious, her bat was gasping for air on the

ground, Boots was screeching, and Shed was insane with pain and fear. Though bleeding badly, he had lost none of his speed or strength.

Mareth was trying desperately to keep the rat from Perdita, but he was just one guy. Henry flew interference, but he couldn't get in too close without a sword. Gregor crouched over Perdita holding the torch. It seemed a fragile defense against the crazed Shed, but he had to do something.

Then Shed leaped, catching Mareth's bat by the feet. The bat slammed into the wall and so did Mareth. The rat turned on Gregor.

"Now you die!" screamed Shed. Boots screamed back in terror as Shed lunged at them. Gregor braced himself, but Shed never made it. Instead, the rat let out a gasp and pawed at the blade that jutted through its throat.

Gregor caught a glimpse of Luxa's bat, Aurora, flipping upright. He had no idea when she'd arrived. Luxa must have been flying completely upside down when she'd stabbed Shed. Even though Luxa had flattened herself on the bat's back, Aurora barely managed to pull out of the maneuver without scraping her off on the ceiling.

Shed slumped back against the cavern wall, but there was no fight left in him. His eyes burned into Gregor's. "Overlander," he gurgled, "we hunt you to the last rat." And with that, he died.

Gregor had only a moment to catch his breath before Henry landed beside him. Pushing Gregor out onto the beach, he lifted Perdita in his arms and took off, yelling, "Scorch the land!"

Blood pouring down his face from a gash on his forehead, Mareth was already wrenching the swords from Shed and Fangor. He dragged the rats into the river, and it quickly carried their bodies away. His bat shakily regained the use of its wings and he hurdled onto its back. Mareth caught Boots's backpack and hoisted Gregor onto his stomach in front of him.

Gregor saw Aurora hook her clawed feet into the fur at the shoulders of Perdita's injured bat. Luxa had at some point retrieved the oil lamp from the boat. As they rose into the air, she smashed it onto the ground.

"Drop the torch!" yelled Mareth, and Gregor managed to straighten his fingers, releasing it.

CHAPTER 9

Gregor watched the water flash under his eyes as he clung to the bat. For a moment, he felt relieved to have escaped the rats. But the fear of hurtling through the air on a wounded bat quickly overcame him.

Boots had her arms clasped so tightly around his neck that he could barely breathe, let alone speak. And what would he say to Mareth, anyway? "Wow, I'm really sorry about that whole thing back on the beach?"

He'd had no idea, of course, about the rats. But hadn't the Underlanders tried to warn him? No, they had spoken of danger, but no one had specifically mentioned rats except the cockroaches. "Rat bad," one had said. And later they had talked about how much the rats would pay to bargain with Luxa. He and Boots could have been sold to the rats, and then what?

He felt nauseous and shut his eyes to block out the churning water. The image of the carnage on the beach filled his head, and he decided the view of the water was better. It turned to blackness as the light from the fire diminished. When light flickered off the waves again he knew they were nearing Regalia.

A group of Underlanders waited on the dock. They whisked the unconscious Perdita and her bleeding bat away. They tried to take Mareth on a stretcher, but he brushed them off and insisted on helping to carry his bat inside.

Gregor sat on the dock, where Mareth had shoved him as they'd landed, wishing he could disappear. Boots was quiet now, but he could feel her little muscles were rigid with fear. Fifteen, twenty minutes passed, maybe. He couldn't tell.

"Up!" someone snarled at him, and he saw Mareth glaring down at him. The gash on his forehead was bandaged, the right side of his face bruised and swollen. "Find your feet, Overlander!" Mareth barked. Had he actually thought this guy was shy a few hours ago?

Gregor slowly straightened his stiff legs and stood. Mareth tightly tied his hands behind his back. No question about it this time: He was definitely a prisoner. Another guard joined Mareth, and they marched Gregor ahead of them. His legs moved numbly. What would they do to him now?

He paid no attention to where they were going. He just walked whatever way he was pushed. He had a vague sense of climbing a lot of stairs before

he entered a large diamond-shaped room. There was a table in the middle of it. Mareth pushed him down on a stool by a roaring fireplace. The two guards stepped back a couple of paces, watching him like hawks.

"I'm that dangerous," he thought foggily.

Boots began to stir on his back. She tugged on one of his ears. "Home?" she pleaded. "Go home, Ge-go?" Gregor had no answer for her.

People were hurrying past the door, talking in excited voices. Some peered in at him, but no one came in.

In the warmth of the fire, he realized he was frozen. He was soaked in river water up to his waist and shivering from the wind and the horror of what he'd witnessed. Of what he'd taken part in.

Boots was in better condition. Her backpack seemed to be waterproof, and she was pressed up against him. Still, her toes felt like ice when they brushed his arm.

Fatigue washed over Gregor, and he wished he could lie down, just lie down and fall asleep and wake up in his bed where he could see the car lights flashing across the walls. But he had given up thinking this was a dream.

What had happened to the Underlanders? Perdita? Her wounded bat? And Mareth's? If they died, it would be his fault. He wouldn't even try to argue that.

Just then Luxa appeared. Burning white with fury, she crossed the room and struck him on the face. His head snapped to the side and Boots let out a cry.

"No hitting!" she squeaked. "No, no, no hitting!" She shook her tiny index finger at Luxa. Hitting was absolutely forbidden in Gregor's house, and it had only taken Boots a few time-outs to realize it.

Apparently it wasn't acceptable among the Underlanders, either, because Gregor heard Vikus's voice ring out sharply from the doorway. "Luxa!"

Looking like she'd love to slap him again, Luxa stalked to the mantel and glared into the fire.

"For shame, Luxa," Vikus said, crossing to her.

She turned on him, spitting venom. "Two fliers are down, and we cannot awaken Perdita because the Overlander must escape! Strike him? I say we throw him into the Dead Land and let him take his chances!" shouted Luxa.

"Be that as it may, Luxa, this is not seemly," said Vikus, but Gregor could see the news had upset him. "Both rats are dead?" he asked.

"Dead and in the river," said Luxa. "We scorched the land."

"This matter of 'we' you and I shall take up later," said Vikus severely. "The council is not pleased."

"I care not what pleases the council," muttered Luxa, but she avoided Vikus's gaze.

"So she wasn't supposed to be there," thought Gregor. "She's in trouble, too." He wished he could enjoy the moment, but he was too wracked with worry, guilt, and exhaustion to care. Besides, Luxa had saved his life taking out Shed. He owed her one, he guessed, but he was still stinging from the slap, so he didn't bring it up.

"No hitting," said Boots again, and Vikus turned to them.

Like Luxa, Gregor was unable to meet his eyes.

"What did the Overlander, Luxa? Fight or flee?" asked Vikus.

"Henry says he fought," Luxa admitted grudgingly. "But without skill or knowledge of weapons."

Gregor felt like saying, "Hey, all I had was a stupid torch!" But why bother?

"Then he has much courage," said Vikus.

"Courage without caution makes for early death, or so you tell me daily," said Luxa.

"So I tell you and do you hear?" said Vikus, raising his eyebrows. "You hear not as he hears not. You are both very young for deafness. Unleash his hands and leave us," he said to the guards.

Gregor felt a blade cut through the ropes on his wrists. He rubbed the marks trying to restore circulation to his hands. His cheek throbbed, but he wouldn't give Luxa the satisfaction of seeing him touch it.

Boots reached over his shoulder and touched the creases on his wrists. "Ow," she whimpered. "Ow."

"I'm okay, Boots," he said, but she just shook her head.

"Gather us here," said Vikus, sitting at the table. Neither Gregor nor Luxa moved. "Gather us here, for we must discuss!" said Vikus, slapping his hand on the stone surface. This time, they both took seats as far from each other as possible.

Gregor pulled Boots up over his head and out of the backpack. She settled on his lap, wrapping Gregor's arms tightly around her and looking at Vikus and Luxa with large, solemn eyes.

"I guess after tonight Boots won't think the whole world is her friend," thought Gregor. She had to find out sometime, but it still made him sad.

Vikus began, "Gregor the Overlander, there is much you do not understand. You do not speak, but your face speaks for you. You are worried. You are angered. You believe you were right to flee those who kept you against your will, but feel sorely that we have suffered in your saving. We told you not of the rats, yet Luxa blames you for our losses. We seem to be your enemy, and yet we gave you time."

Gregor didn't answer. He thought that pretty much summed things up except for the fact that Luxa had hit him.

Vikus read his mind. "Luxa should not have struck you, but your fight invited horrible death to those she loved. This is greatly felt by her, as both her parents were killed by rats."

Luxa gasped. "That is not his affair!"

She looked so distressed that Gregor almost objected as well. Whatever she'd done to him, this wasn't his business.

"But I make it so, Luxa, as I have cause to believe that Gregor may himself lack a father," continued Vikus.

Now it was Gregor's turn to look shocked. "How do you know that?"

"I do not know for sure, I only guess. Tell me, Gregor the Overlander, recognize you this?" Vikus reached in his cloak and pulled something out.

It was a metal ring. Several keys dangled from it. But it was the roughly braided loop of red, black, and blue leather that made Gregor's heart stop. He had woven it himself during crafts class at the very same summer camp that Lizzie was at now. You could make three things: a bracelet, a bookmark, or a key chain. Gregor had picked the key chain.

His father never went anywhere without it.

PART 2

The Quest

CHAPTER 10

When Gregor's heart started up again, it beat so hard, he thought it might break through his chest. His hand reached out on its own, his fingers grasping for the key chain. "Where'd you get that?"

"I told you other Overlanders have fallen. Some years ago we rescued one very like you in face and feature. I cannot recall the exact date," said Vikus, placing the key chain in Gregor's hand.

"Two years, seven months, and thirteen days ago," thought Gregor. Aloud, he said, "It belongs to my dad."

Waves of happiness washed over him as he ran his fingers over the worn leather braid and the metal snap that allowed you to attach it to your belt loop. Memories flashed through his mind. His dad fanning out the keys to find the one to open the front door. His dad jingling the keys in front of Lizzie in her stroller. His dad on a picnic blanket in Central Park, using a key to pry open a container of potato salad.

"Your father?" Luxa's eyes widened, and a strange expression crossed her face. "Vikus, you do not think he -- "

"I do not know, Luxa. But the signs are strong," said Vikus. "My mind has been on little else since he arrived."

Luxa turned to Gregor, her violet eyes quizzical.

What? What was her problem now?

"Your father, like you, was desperate to return home. With much difficulty we persuaded him to stay some weeks, but the strain proved too great and one night, also like you, he slipped away," said Vikus. "The rats reached him before we did."

Gregor smashed into reality, and the joy drained out of him. Of course, there were no other living Overlanders in Regalia. Vikus had told him that in the stadium. His dad had tried to get home and had met up with the same fate Gregor had. Only the Underlanders hadn't been there to save him. He swallowed the lump in his throat. "He's dead then."

"So we assumed. But then came rumor the rats had kept him living," said Vikus. "Our spies confirm this regularly."

"He's alive?" asked Gregor, feeling hope rush back through him, "But why? Why didn't they kill him?"

"We know not why with certainty, but I have suspicions. Your father was a man of science, was he not?" asked Vikus.

"Yeah, he teaches science," said Gregor. He couldn't make sense of what Vikus was saying. Did the rats want his dad to teach chemistry?

"In our conversations, it was clear he understood the workings of nature," said Vikus. "Of trapped lightning, of fire, of powders that explode."

Gregor was beginning to catch his drift. "Look, if you think my dad's making guns or bombs for the rats, you can forget it. He would never do that."

"It is hard to imagine what any of us would do in the caves of the rats," said Vikus gently. "To keep sanity must be a struggle, to keep honor a Herculean feat. I am not judging your father, only seeking to explain why he survives so long."

"The rats fight well in close range. But if we attack from afar, they have no recourse but to run. Of all things, they wish a way to kill us at a distance," said Luxa. She didn't seem to be accusing his father, either. And she didn't seem mad at him anymore. Gregor wished she'd stop staring at him.

"My wife, Solovet, has a different theory," said Vikus, brightening a little. "She believes the rats want your father to make them a thumb!"

"A thumb?" asked Gregor. Boots held up her thumb to show him. "Yeah, little girl, I know what a thumb is," he said, smiling down at her.

"Rats have no thumbs and therefore cannot do many things that we can. They cannot make tools or weapons. They are masters of destruction, but creation evades them," said Vikus.

"Be glad, Overlander, if they believe your father can be useful. It is all that will give him time," said Luxa sadly.

"Did you meet my dad, too?" he asked. "No," she replied. "I was too young for such meetings."

"Luxa was still concerned with her dolls then," said Vikus. Gregor tried hard to imagine Luxa with a doll and couldn't.

"My parents met him, and spoke him well," said Luxa.

Her parents. She'd still had parents then. Gregor wondered about how the rats had killed them, but knew he'd never ask.

"Luxa speaks true. At present, the rats are our bitter enemies. If you meet a rat outside the walls of Regalia, you have two choices: to fight or be

killed. Only the hope of a great advantage would keep a human alive in their paws. Especially an Overlander," said Vikus.

"I don't see why they hate us so much," said Gregor. He thought of Shed's burning eyes, his last words, "Overlander, we hunt you to the last rat." Maybe they knew how people in the Overland tried to trap, poison, and kill off all the rats aboveground. Except the ones they used in lab experiments.

Vikus and Luxa exchanged a look. "We must tell him, Luxa. He must know what he faces," said Vikus.

"Do you really think it is he?" she said.

"Who? He, who?" said Gregor. He had a bad feeling about where this conversation was going.

Vikus rose from the table. "Come," he said, and headed out the door.

Gregor got up, willing his stiff arms to carry Boots. He and Luxa reached the door at the same time and stopped. "After you," he said.

She glanced at him sideways and followed Vikus.

The halls were lined with Underlanders who watched them pass in silence and then broke into whispers. They did not have far to go before Vikus stopped at a polished wooden door. Gregor realized it was the first wooden thing he'd seen in the Underland. What had Vikus said about something being "as rare as trees"? For trees, you needed lots of light, so how would they grow here?

Vikus pulled out a key and opened the door. He took a torch from a holder in the hall and led the way in.

Gregor stepped into a room that seemed to be an empty stone cube. On every surface were carvings. Not just the walls but the floor and ceiling, too. These weren't the frolicking animals he'd seen elsewhere in Regalia, these were words. Tiny words that must've taken forever to chisel out.

"A-B-C," said Boots, which is what she always said when she saw letters. "A-B-C-D," she added for emphasis.

"These are the prophecies of Bartholomew of Sandwich," said Vikus. "Once we sealed the gates, he devoted the rest of his life to recording them."

"I bet he did," thought Gregor. It sounded like just the kind of thing crazy old Sandwich would do. Drag a bunch of people underground and then lock himself in a room and chip out more crazy stuff on the walls.

"So, what do you mean, prophecies?" asked Gregor, although he knew what prophecies were. They were predictions of what would happen in the future. Most religions had them, and his grandma loved a book of them by a guy named Nostra-something. To hear her talk, the future was pretty depressing.

"Sandwich was a visionary," said Vikus. "He foretold many things that have happened to our people."

"And a bunch that haven't?" asked Gregor, trying to sound innocent. He hadn't ruled out prophecies entirely, but he was skeptical about anything Sandwich came up with. Besides, even if someone told you something that would happen in the future, what could you do about it?

"Some we have not yet unraveled," admitted Vikus. "He foretold my parents' end," said Luxa sorrowfully, running her fingers over part of the wall. "There was no mystery in that."

Vikus put his arm around her and looked at the wall. "No," he agreed softly. "That was as clear as water."

Gregor felt awful for about the tenth time that night. From now on, whatever he thought, he would try to talk about the prophecies with respect.

"But there is one that hangs most heavily over our heads. It is called 'The Prophecy of Gray,' for we know not whether it be fair or foul," said Vikus. "We do know that it was to Sandwich the most sacred and maddening of his visions. For he could never see the outcome, although it came to him many times."

Vikus gestured to a small oil lamp that illuminated a panel of the wall. It was the only light in the room besides the torch. Maybe they kept it burning constantly.

"Will you read?" asked Vikus, and Gregor approached the panel. The prophecy was written like a poem, in four parts. Some of the lettering was odd, but he could make it out.

"A-B-C," said Boots, touching the letters. Gregor began to read.

Beware, Underlanders, time hangs by a thread. The hunters are hunted, white water runs red. The gnawers will strike to extinguish the rest. The hope of the hopeless resides in a quest.

An Overland warrior, a son of the sun, -May bring us back light, he may bring us back none. But gather your neighbors and follow his call Or rats will most surely devour us all.

Two over, two under, of royal descent, Two flyers, two crawlers, two spinners assent. One gnawer beside and one lost up ahead. And eight will be left when we count up the dead.

The last who will die must decide where he stands.

The fate of the eight is contained in his hands. So bid him take care, bid him look where he leaps, AS life may be death and death life again reaps.

Gregor finished the poem and didn't know quite what to say. He blurted out, "What's that mean?"

Vikus shook his head. "No one knows for certain.

It tells of a dark time when the future of our people is undecided. It calls for a journey, not just of humans but of many creatures, which may lead either to salvation or ruin. The journey will be led by an Overlander."

"Yeah, well, I got that part. This warrior guy," said Gregor.

"You asked why the rats hate Overlanders so deeply. It is because they know one will be the warrior of the prophecy," said Vikus.

"Oh, I see," said Gregor. "So, when's he coming?"

CHAPTER 11

Gregor awoke from a fitful sleep. Images of bloodred rivers, his dad surrounded by rats, and

Boots falling into bottomless caverns had woven in and out of his dreams all night long.

Oh, yeah. And then there was that warrior thing.

He had tried to tell them. When Vikus had implied that he was the warrior in "The Prophecy of Gray," Gregor had actually laughed. But the man was serious.

"You've got the wrong guy," Gregor had said. "Really, I promise, I'm not a warrior."

Why pretend and get their hopes up? Samurai warriors, Apache warriors, African warriors, medieval warriors. He'd seen movies. He'd read books. He didn't in any way resemble any warrior. First of all, they were grown up and they usually had a lot of special weaponry. Gregor was eleven and, unless you counted a two-year-old sister as special weaponry, he'd come empty-handed.

Also, Gregor was not into fighting. He'd fight back if someone jumped him at school, but that didn't happen often. He wasn't all that big, but he moved fast and people didn't like to mess with him. Sometimes he'd step in if a bunch of guys were pounding a small kid; he hated seeing that. But he never picked fights, and wasn't fighting what warriors mainly did?

Vikus and Luxa had listened to his protests. He thought he might have convinced Luxa -- she didn't have a very high opinion of him, anyway -- but Vikus was more persistent.

"How many Overlanders survive the fall to the Underland, do you suppose? I would guess a tenth. And how many survive the rats after that? Perhaps another tenth. So out of a thousand Overlanders, let us say ten survive. How passing strange is it that not only your father but you and your sister came alive to us," said Vikus.

"I guess it's kind of strange," admitted Gregor. "But I don't see why that makes me the warrior."

"You will when you better understand the prophecy," said Vikus. "Each person carries their own destiny. These walls tell of our destiny. And your destiny, Gregor, requires you to play a role in it."

"I don't know about this destiny thing," said Gregor. "I mean, my dad and Boots and I... we all have the same laundry room and we landed somewhere pretty close to you, so I'm thinking it's more of a coincidence. I'd like to help, but you guys are probably going to have to wait a little longer for your warrior."

Vikus just smiled and said they would put it before the council in the morning. This morning. Now.

Despite all of his worries, and he had plenty, Gregor couldn't deny a feeling of giddy happiness that shot through him periodically. His dad was alive! Almost instantly another wave of anxiety would rush over him. "Yeah, he's alive but imprisoned by rats!" Still, his grandma always said, "Where there's life, there's hope."

Boy, wouldn't his grandma love it if she knew he was talked about in a prophecy? But, of course, that wasn't him. That was some warrior guy who would hopefully make an appearance really soon and help him get his dad free.

That was his main goal now. How could he rescue his dad?

The curtain pulled open and Gregor squinted at the light. Mareth stood in the doorway. The swelling in his face had gone down, but his bruises were going to be there for a while.

Gregor wondered if the guard was still angry with him, but Mareth sounded calm. "Gregor the Overlander, the council requests your presence," he said. "If you make haste, you may wash and eat first."

"Okay," said Gregor. He started to rise and realized Boots's head was cradled on his arm. He eased himself up without waking her. "What about Boots?"

"She may sleep on," said Mareth. "Dulcet will watch over her."

Gregor bathed quickly and dressed in fresh clothes. Mareth led him to a small room where a meal was laid out, then stood watch at the door. "Hey, Mareth," he said, drawing the guard's attention. "How is everybody? I mean, Perdita and the bats? Are they okay?"

"Perdita has woken finally. The bats will mend," said Mareth evenly.

"Oh, that's great!" said Gregor with relief. After his father's situation, the thing pressing most on him had been the condition of the Underlanders.

He wolfed down bread, butter, and a mushroom omelette. He drank hot tea made of some sort of herb, and energy seemed to pour through him.

"Are you ready to face the council?" asked Mareth, seeing his empty plate.

"All set!" said Gregor, springing up. He felt better than he had since he had reached the Underland. News of his dad, the Underlanders' recovery, sleep, and food had revived him.

The council, a group of a dozen older Underlanders, had gathered at a round table in a room off the High Hall. Gregor saw Vikus and Solovet, who gave him an encouraging smile.

Luxa was also there, looking tired and defiant. Gregor bet she'd been chewed out for joining the rescue party last night. He was sure she hadn't acted one bit sorry.

Vikus introduced the people around the table. They all had funny-sounding names that Gregor immediately forgot. The council began to ask him questions. All kinds of things, like when he was born and did he know how to swim and what he did in the Overland. He couldn't figure out why a lot of the stuff was important. Did it really matter that his favorite color was green? But a couple of Underlanders were scribbling down every word he said like it was golden.

After a while, the council seemed to forget he was there, and they argued among themselves. He caught phrases like "a son of the sun" and "white water runs red" and knew they were talking about the prophecy.

"Excuse me," he finally broke in. "I guess Vikus didn't tell you, but I'm not the warrior. Look, please, what I really need is for you guys to help me bring my dad home."

Everyone at the table stared at him for a moment and then began to talk with greater excitement. Now he kept hearing the words "follow his call."

Finally Vikus rapped on the table for order. "Members of the council, we must decide. Here sits Gregor the Overlander. Who counts him the warrior of 'The Prophecy of Gray'?"

Ten of the twelve raised their hands. Luxa kept her hands on the table. Either she didn't think he was the warrior or she wasn't allowed to vote. Probably both.

"We believe you to be the warrior," said Vikus. "If you call us to help you regain your father, then we answer your call."

They were going to help him! Who cared why?

"Okay, great!" said Gregor. "Whatever it takes! I mean, believe whatever you want. That's fine."

"We must begin the journey with all haste," said Vikus.

"I'm ready!" said Gregor eagerly. "Let me just get Boots and we can go."

"Ah, yes, the baby," said Solovet. And another round of arguments ensued.

"Wait!" shouted Vikus. "This costs much time. Gregor, we do not know that the prophecy includes your sister."

"What?" said Gregor. He couldn't remember the prophecy very well. He had to ask Vikus if he could get in the room and read it again.

"The prophecy mentions twelve beings. Only two are described as Overlanders. You and your father fill that number," said Solovet.

"The prophecy also speaks of one lost. That one may be your father, in which case Boots is the second Overlander. But it may also be a rat," said Vikus. "The journey will be difficult. The prophecy warns that four of the twelve will lose life. It may be wisest to leave Boots here."

From around the table came a general murmur of assent.

Gregor's head began to swim.

Leave Boots? Leave her here in Regalia with the Underlanders? He couldn't do that! It wasn't that he thought they'd mistreat her. But she'd be so lonely, and what if he and his dad didn't make it back? She'd never get home. Still, he knew how vicious the rats were. And they would be hunting him. To the last rat.

He didn't know what to do. He looked at the set faces and thought the Underlanders had already decided to split them up.

"Stay together!" Wasn't that what his mom always told him when he took his sisters out? "Stay together!"

Then he noticed Luxa was avoiding his gaze. She had intertwined her fingers on the stone table before her and was staring at them tensely. "What would you do if it were your sister, Luxa?" he asked. The room got very quiet. He could tell the council didn't want to hear her opinion.

"I have no sister, Overlander," said Luxa.

Gregor felt disappointed. He heard a murmur of approval from some of the council members. Luxa's eyes flashed around the table and she scowled. "But if I did, and I were you," she said passionately, "I would never take my eyes off her!"

He said, "Thank you," but he didn't think she could hear him in the loud round of objections that poured from the council. He raised his voice. "If

Boots doesn't go, I don't go!"

The room was in an uproar when a bat veered through the doorway and crashed onto the table, silencing everyone. A ghostly woman slumped over the bat, pressing her hands to her chest to stem the flow of blood. One of the bat's wings folded in, but the other extended at an awkward angle, clearly broken.

"Anchel is dead. Daphne is dead. The rats found Shed, Fangor. King Gorger has launched his armies. They come for us," gasped the woman.

Vikus caught the woman as she collapsed. "How many, Keeda?" he asked.

CHAPTER 12

"Sound the alarm!" shouted Vikus, and the place exploded in frantic activity. Horns began blowing, people rushed in and out, bats swooped in for orders and disappeared again without taking the time to land.

Everyone ignored Gregor as they shifted into emergency mode. He wanted to ask Vikus what was going on, but the old man stood in the High Hall in a blur of bat wings giving commands.

Gregor went out on the balcony and could see Regalia swarming like a beehive. Many rats were coming. The Underlanders were going into defense mode. Suddenly he realized they were at war.

The terrifying thought -- and the height of the balcony -- made Gregor light-headed. As he stumbled back inside, a strong hand caught his arm. "Gregor the Overlander, prepare yourself, for we leave shortly," said Vikus.

"For where? Where are we going?" asked Gregor.

"To rescue your father," said Vikus.

"Now? We can go with the rats attacking?" said Gregor. "I mean, there's a war starting, - right?"

"Not any war. We believe it is the war foretold in 'The Prophecy of Gray.' The one that may bring about the complete annihilation of our people," said Vikus. "Pursuing the quest for your father is our best hope of surviving it," said Vikus.

"I can take Boots, right?" asked Gregor. "I mean, I'm taking her," he corrected himself.

"Yes, Boots shall come," said Vikus.

"What should I do? You said to prepare myself," asked Gregor.

Vikus thought for a second and called Mareth over. "Take him to the museum, let him choose whatever he thinks may aid him on the journey. Ah, here is the delegation from Troy!" said Vikus. He stepped into another storm of wings.

Gregor ran after Mareth, who had sprinted for the door. Three staircases and several halls later they arrived at a large chamber filled with loaded shelves.

"Here is that which has fallen from the Overland. Remember what you choose you must carry," instructed Mareth, thrusting a leather bag with a drawstring into his hands.

The shelves were filled with everything from baseballs to car tires. Gregor wished he had time to go through the stuff more carefully; some of it must have been hundreds of years old. But time was a luxury he didn't have. He tried to focus.

What could he take that would help on the trip? What did he need most in the Underland? Light!

He found a flashlight in working condition and collected batteries from every electrical thing he could find.

Something else caught his eye. It was a hard hat like construction workers wore. There was a built-in light on the front, so they could see in the inky tunnels beneath New York City. He grabbed the hat and crammed it on his head.

"We must go!" ordered Mareth. "We must get your sister and take flight!"

Gregor turned to follow him and then he saw it.

Root beer! An honest-to-goodness, unopened, only slightly dented can of root beer. It looked pretty new. He knew it was an extravagance, that he should only take essentials, but he had to have it. It was his favorite drink, plus it made him think of home. He stuffed the can in his bag.

The nursery was nearby. Gregor ran in and saw Boots sitting happily among three Underlander toddlers having a tea party. For a second, he almost changed his mind and left her there. Wouldn't she be safer here in the palace? But then he remembered the palace would soon be under siege by rats. Gregor knew he couldn't leave her to face that alone. Whatever happened, they would stay together.

Dulcet quickly helped Gregor into a backpack and slid Boots inside. She fastened a small bundle to the base of the backpack. "Catch cloths," she said. "A few toys and some treats."

"Thanks," said Gregor, grateful someone had thought of the practical side of traveling with Boots.

"Fare you well, sweet Boots," said Dulcet. She kissed the baby's cheek.

"Bye-bye, Dul-cee," said Boots. "See you soon!"

That was what they always parted with at Gregor's house. Don't worry. I'll be back. I'll see you soon.

"Yes, I will see you soon," said Dulcet, but her eyes filled with tears.

"Take care, Dulcet," said Gregor, giving her hand an awkward shake.

"Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander," she said.

In the High Hall, the mission was readying for departure. Several bats had lit on the ground and were being loaded with supplies.

Gregor saw Henry hugging a painfully thin teenage girl good-bye. She was weeping uncontrollably despite his attempts to comfort her.

"The dreams, brother," she sobbed, "they have worsened. Some terrible evil awaits you."

"Do not distress yourself, Nerissa, I have no plans to die," said Henry soothingly.

"There are evils beyond death," said his sister. "Fly you high, Henry. Fly you high." They embraced, and Henry swung up onto his velvety black bat.

Gregor watched nervously as the girl came his way. He could never think of the right things to say when people cried. But she had pulled herself together by the time she'd reached him. She held out a small roll of paper. "For you, Overlander," she said. "Fly you high." And before he could answer, she had moved away, leaning on the wall for support.

He opened the paper, which wasn't paper but some sort of dried animal skin, and saw that "The Prophecy of Gray" had been carefully written upon it. "That's so weird," thought Gregor. He had been wishing he could read it again to maybe figure more of it out. He had meant to ask Vikus but had forgotten in the rush. "How did she know I wanted this?" he murmured to Boots.

"Nerissa knows many things. She has the gift," said a boy mounting a golden bat beside him. On second glance, Gregor realized it was Luxa, but her hair had been cropped off close to her head.

"What happened to your hair?" asked Gregor, stuffing the prophecy in his pocket.

"Long locks are dangerous in battle," said Luxa carelessly.

"That's too bad, I mean -- it looks good short, too," said Gregor quickly.

Luxa burst out laughing. "Gregor the Overlander, think you my beauty is of any matter in such times?"

Gregor's face felt hot with embarrassment. "That's not what I meant."

Luxa just shook her head at Henry, who was grinning back at her. "The Overlander speaks true, cousin, you look like a shorn sheep."

"All the better," said Luxa.. "For who would attack a sheep?"

"Baa," said Boots. "Baaaa." And Henry laughed so hard, he almost fell off his bat. "Sheep says baa," Boots said defensively, which set him off again.

Gregor almost laughed, too. For a moment, he had felt as if he were among friends. But these people had a long way to go before he could consider them friends. To cover his slip, he concentrated on finding a comfortable way to carry his leather bag that would leave his hands free. He tied it to the side strap of the pack.

When he glanced up, he found Luxa looking at him curiously. "What wear you on your head, Overlander?" she asked.

"It's a hard hat. With a light," said Gregor. He flicked it on and off to show her. He could tell she was itching to try it, but she didn't want to ask. Gregor quickly weighed his options in his head. True, they weren't friends ... but it was better to get along with her if he could. He needed her to get his dad. Gregor held out the hat. "Here, check it out."

Luxa tried to appear indifferent, but her fingers worked the light switch eagerly. "How do you keep the light inside without air? Does it not get hot on your head?" she asked.

"It runs on a battery. It's electricity. And there's a layer of plastic between the light and your head. You can try it on if you want," said Gregor.

Without hesitation, Luxa popped the hat on her head. "Vikus has told me of electricity," she said. She shot the beam of light around the room before returning it to Gregor reluctantly. "Here, you must save your fuel."

"You will begin a new fashion," said Henry cheerfully. He grabbed one of the small stone torches off the wall and laid it on top of his head. Flames seemed to be shooting out of his forehead. "What think you, Luxa?" he asked, showing her his profile with exaggerated haughtiness.

"Your hair is alight!" she suddenly gasped and pointed. Henry dropped the torch and beat at his hair as Luxa went into hysterics.

Realizing it was a joke, Henry caught her in a headlock and rubbed her short hair with his knuckles while she laughed helplessly. For a minute, they could have been a couple of kids in the Overland. Just a brother and sister, like Gregor and Lizzie, wrestling around.

Vikus strode across the hall. "You two are in a merry mood, considering we are at war," he said with a frown as he vaulted onto his bat.

"It is only an excess of spirit, Vikus," said Henry, releasing Luxa.

"Save your spirit -- you will have need of it where we are going. Ride you with me, Gregor," said Vikus, extending a hand. Gregor swung up behind him on his big gray bat.

Boots kicked his sides with anticipation. "Me ride, too. Me, too," she chirped.

"Mount up!" called Vikus, and Henry and Luxa leaped onto their bats. Gregor could spot Solovet and Mareth preparing to leave also. Mareth was riding a bat he hadn't seen before. Probably his other bat was still recovering.

"To the air!" ordered Solovet, and the five bats lifted off in a V formation.

As they rose up in the air, Gregor felt like he would burst from excitement and happiness. They were going to get his dad! They would rescue him and take him home and his mother would smile, really smile, again, and there would be holidays to celebrate, not to dread, and music and -- and he was getting ahead of himself. He was breaking his rule right and left and in a minute he would stop but for that minute he would go ahead and imagine as much as he wanted.

As they veered sideways over the city of Regalia, Gregor was reminded of the gravity of their task by the manic activity below. The gates to the stadium were being fortified with huge stone slabs. Wagons of food clogged the roads. People carrying children and bundles were hurrying toward the palace. Extra torches were being lit in all quarters, so the city looked almost bathed in sunlight.

"Wouldn't you want it darker if there's going to be an attack?" asked Gregor.

"No, but the rats would. We need our eyes to fight, they do not," said Vikus. "Most of the creatures in the Underland, the crawlers, the bats, the fish, they have no need of light. We humans are lost without it."

Gregor tucked that bit of information away in his brain. The flashlight had been the best thing to bring after all.

The city quickly gave way to farmland, and Gregor had his first glimpse of how the Underlanders fed themselves. Great fields of some kind of grain grew under row upon row of hanging white lamps.

"What runs the lamps?" asked Gregor.

"They burn with gas from the earth. Your father was most impressed with our fields. He suggested a plan for lighting our city, too, but at the moment, all light must go for food," said Vikus.

"Did an Overlander show you how to do that?" asked Gregor.

"Gregor, we did not leave our minds in the Overland when we fell. We have inventors just as you do, and light is most precious to us. Think you we poor Underlanders might not have stumbled upon some manner of harnessing it ourselves?" said Vikus good-naturedly.

Gregor felt sheepish. He had sort of thought of the Underlanders as backward. They still used swords and wore funny clothes. But they weren't stupid. His dad said even the cavemen had geniuses among them. Somebody had thought up the wheel.

Solovet flew parallel to them, but she was deep in conversation with a pair of bats that had joined the party. She uncurled a large map on her bat's back and scrutinized it.

"Is she trying to find where my dad is?" Gregor asked Vikus.

"She is forming a plan of attack," said Vikus. "My wife leads our warriors. She goes with us not to direct the quest but to gauge the level of support we may expect from our allies."

"Really? I thought you were in charge. Well, you and Luxa," he said, because really, he couldn't tell how that all worked out. Luxa seemed able to order people around, but she could still get in trouble for stuff.

"Luxa will ascend the throne when she turns sixteen. Until then Regalia is ruled by the council. I am but a humble diplomat who spends his spare time trying to teach prudence to the royal youth. You see how well I succeed," Vikus said wryly. He glanced at Henry and Luxa, who were flipping wildly in the sky trying to knock each other off their bats. "Do not let Solovet's gentle demeanor fool you. In the planning of battles, she is more cunning and wily than a rat."

"Wow," said Gregor. Her gentle demeanor *bad* fooled him.

Gregor shifted his weight on the bat and something poked his leg. He pulled the prophecy Nerissa had given him from his pocket and unrolled it. Maybe now would be a good time to ask Vikus some questions. "So, do you think you could explain this 'Gray Prophecy' to me?"

"The Prophecy of Gray," corrected Vikus. "What of it puzzles you?"

"The whole thing," thought Gregor, but he said, "Maybe we could just go through it a piece at a time." He studied the poem.

Beware, Underlanders, time hangs by a thread.

Well, that seemed pretty clear. It was a warning.

The hunters are hunted, white water runs red.

He asked Vikus to unravel the second line. "The rats are traditionally the hunters of the Underland, for they would happily track and kill the rest of us. Last night, we hunted them to save you. So, the hunters were hunted. White water ran red when we left their bodies to the river."

"Oh," said Gregor. Something was bothering him, but he couldn't put his finger on it.

The gnawers will strike to extinguish the rest.

"Are 'the gnawers' the rats?" he asked. "Exactly so," said Vikus.

The hope of the hopeless resides in a quest.

The quest to get his dad. So, he'd escaped, the Underlanders had saved him, and now they were at war and off on the quest. Gregor suddenly knew what was bothering him. "So ... this whole thing is my fault!" he said. "It never would've happened if I hadn't tried to escape!" He thought of the approaching army of rats. What had he done?

"No, Gregor, put that from your mind," said Vikus firmly. "You are but one player in a very long and difficult tale. 'The Prophecy of Gray' trapped you, as it trapped us, long ago."

Gregor was silent. He didn't exactly feel better.

"Read on," said Vikus, and Gregor's head drooped to the page. The lights of Regalia had faded away, and he had to squint to read by the faint torchlight.

An *Overland* warrior, a son of the sun, May bring us back light, he may bring us back none. But gather your neighbors and follow his call Or rats will most surely devour us all.

"So, you say this next part is about me," he said unhappily.

"Yes, you are the 'Overland warrior,' for obvious reasons," said Vikus, although Gregor didn't think the reasons were too obvious. "You are 'a son of the sun' as an Overlander, but also the son who seeks his father. This is the sort of comedic wordplay Sandwich delighted in."

"Yeah, he was a funny guy," said Gregor glumly. Ha ha.

"Now the lines that follow are most gray," said Vikus. "Sandwich could never clearly see if in fact you succeed in bringing back light or if you fail. But he most adamantly insisted we attempt the venture or die by the rats'teeth."

"Well, that's not too inspiring," said Gregor. But for the first time Sandwich had struck a chord with him. The possibility that Gregor might fail made the whole prophecy more plausible.

"What sort of light am I supposed to bring back?" asked Gregor. "Is there a sacred torch or something?"

"That is a metaphor. By 'light,' Sandwich means 'life.' If the rats can truly extinguish our light, they extinguish our life as well," said Vikus.

A metaphor? Gregor thought an actual torch would be easier to bring back. How could he bring back some metaphor thing he didn't really understand? "That could be tricky," he said. He read on.

TWO over, two under, of royal descent, TWO fliers, two crawlers, two spinners assent.

"What are all those twos about?" asked Gregor.

"That tells us whom we must persuade to accompany us on the quest. We are proceeding as if the 'two over' are you and your sister. 'Two under' of royal descent are Luxa and Henry. Henry's sister, Nerissa, as you might have gleaned, was not a possible choice. Fliers are bats. Crawlers are cockroaches. Spinners are spiders. We go now to assemble our neighbors in the order that the prophecy dictates. First the bats."

The number of bats had been increasing as they flew. Henry led the party into a vast cave. Gregor gave a little jump when he realized the ceiling was bumpy with hundreds and hundreds of hanging bats.

"But don't we already have bats?" asked Gregor.

"We need official permission to take them on the quest," said Vikus. "Also, there are matters of war to discuss."

A towering cylinder of stone sat in the center of the cave. Its sides were as slick as those of the palace. On the round, flat top a group of bats waited.

Vikus turned back to Gregor and whispered, "We humans know you to be the warrior, but other creatures may have doubts. Whoever you think you may or may not be, it is essential that our neighbors believe you are the one."

Gregor was trying to unwind that in his head when they landed next to the bats on the huge pillar of stone. The humans all dismounted. Deep bows and greetings followed on both sides.

One particularly impressive, silvery white bat appeared to be in charge. "Queen Athena," Vikus said, and presented him. "Meet you Gregor the Overlander."

"Be you the warrior? Be you he who calls?" asked the bat in a soft purr.

"Well, actually I -- " Gregor saw Vikus frown and pulled up short. He'd been about to go into his spiel about how he wasn't the warrior, but then

what? Vikus had whispered something about others believing he was the one. There was a war beginning. The bats weren't likely to send off valuable fliers on a wild-goose chase. If he denied he was the warrior now, the quest would be called off, and his father would be as good as dead. That sealed it.

Gregor stood up straight and tried to control the quaver that slipped into his voice. "I am the warrior. I am he who calls."

The bat was still for a moment, then nodded. "It is he." She spoke with such certainty that for a second Gregor succeeded in thinking of himself as a warrior. A bold, brave, powerful warrior that the Underlanders would tell stories about for centuries. He could almost see himself leading a squadron of bats into battle, stunning the rats, saving the Underland from --

"Ge-go, I pee!" announced Boots.

And there he stood, a boy in a goofy hard hat with a beat-up flashlight and a bunch of batteries he hadn't even tested to see if they still had juice.

CHAPTER 13

Vikus and Solovet arranged to have some sort of private war meeting with the bats.

"Do you need me to go along?" asked Gregor. It was less that he thought he could contribute to the meeting and more that he felt safer when Vikus was around. Being stranded on top of a tall pillar surrounded by hundreds of bats made him a little uncomfortable.

And who would be in charge if anything came up? Luxa? That was no good.

"No, thank you, Gregor. We will be discussing battle position for our forces, not the efforts of the quest. We shall not be absent long," said Vikus.

"No problem," said Gregor, but inside he wasn't so sure.

Before they left, Vikus's big gray bat murmured something in Luxa's ear. She smiled, looked at Gregor, and nodded.

"Probably laughing at me saying I'm a warrior," thought Gregor. But that was not it.

"Euripedes says you're bruising his sides," said Luxa. "He wants me to teach you to ride."

That bothered Gregor. He thought he'd been doing pretty well for a first timer. "What's he mean, I'm bruising his sides?"

"You hold on too strongly with your legs. You must trust the bats. They will not drop you," said Luxa. "It is the first lesson we teach the babies."

"Huh," said Gregor. Luxa had a way of putting him down even when she wasn't trying.

"It is easier for the babies," said Mareth quickly. "Like your sister, they have not yet learned much fear. We have a saying down here. 'Courage only counts when you can count.' Can you count, Boots?" Mareth held his fingers up before Boots, who was busy trying to tug off Gregor's sandal.

"One ... two ... three!"

Boots grinned and held up her pudgy fingers in imitation. "No, me! One ... two ... free ... four seven ten!" she said, and lifted both hands in the air at her accomplishment.

Henry scooped up Boots and held her at arm's length, the way someone might hold a wet puppy. "Boots has no fear, nor will she when she masters

counting. You like to fly, do you not, Boots? Go for a ride on the bat?" he said mischievously.

"I ride!" said Boots, and wiggled to get out of Henry's uncomfortable hold.

"Then ride you!" said Henry, and tossed her right off the side of the pillar.

Gregor gasped as he saw Boots, as if in slow motion, sail out of Henry's hands and into the dark.

"Henry!" said Mareth, in shock. But Luxa was cracking up.

Gregor staggered to the side of the pillar and squinted into the darkness. The faint torchlight provided by the bats illuminated only a few yards. Had Henry really thrown Boots to her death? He couldn't believe it. He couldn't

--

A happy squeal came from above his head. "More!"

Boots! But what was she doing up there? Gregor fumbled with his flashlight. The beam was strong and cut a wide swath of light through the blackness.

Twenty bats were wheeling around the cave, playing some kind of game of catch with Boots. One would take her up high and flip over, sending the toddler free-falling to the ground. But long before she reached it, another bat would scoop her up gently, only to rise and flip her off again. Boots was giggling ecstatically. "More! More!" she ordered the bats each time she landed. And each time they dropped her, Gregor's stomach lurched into his throat.

"Stop it!" he snapped at the Underlanders. Henry and Luxa looked surprised. Either no one had ever yelled at these royal brats, or they hadn't seen Gregor lose his temper yet. He grabbed Henry by the front of the shirt. "Bring her in now!" Henry could probably cream him, but he didn't care.

Henry put up his hands in mock surrender. "Take ease, Overlander. She is not in danger," he said, grinning.

"In truth, Gregor, she is safer with the bats than in human hands," said Luxa. "And she is not afraid."

"She's two!" screamed Gregor, wheeling on her.

"She's going to think she can jump off anything and be caught!"

"She can!" said Luxa, not seeing the problem.

"Not at home, Luxa! Not in the Overland!" said Gregor. "And I don't plan on staying in this creepy place forever!"

They may not have known exactly what he meant by "creepy," but it was pretty clear it was an insult.

Luxa raised her hand, and a bat coasted by lightly flipping Boots into Gregor's arms. He caught her and squeezed her tightly. The Underlanders were no longer laughing.

"What means this 'creepy'?" said Luxa coolly.

"Never mind," said Gregor. "It's just something we Overlanders say when we see our baby sisters being tossed around by bats. See, for us, that's creepy."

"It was meant to be entertaining," said Henry.

"Oh, yeah. You guys should open a theme park. You'll have a line stretched from here to the surface," said Gregor.

Now they really had no idea what he was saying, but his tone was so sarcastic, they couldn't miss it.

Boots wriggled from his arms and ran toward the edge of the pillar. "More, Ge-go!" she piped.

"No, Boots! No, no! No jump!" said Gregor, catching her just in the nick of time. "See, this is just what I'm talking about!" he said to Luxa.

He stuffed Boots into the pack and heaved her onto his back.

The Underlanders were baffled by his anger and stung by his tone, even if they couldn't understand his words.

"Well, it was not Boots who needed the lessons, anyway," said Luxa. "It was you."

"Oh, abandon the thought, Luxa," Henry sneered. "The Overlander would never give himself to the bats. Why, when he returns home, he may forget he is no longer in our 'creepy' land and jump from his own roof!"

Luxa and Henry gave an unfriendly laugh. Mareth just looked embarrassed. Gregor knew it was a dare, and one part of him itched to take it. Just run and jump into the darkness and leave the rest up to the bats. Another part of him didn't want to play this little game. Luxa and Henry wanted him to leap so they could laugh at him flailing around in the air. He guessed they both hated being ignored, though. So he gave them a look of contempt and walked away.

He could feel Luxa positively steaming behind him.

"I could have you thrown off the side, Overlander, and have no one to answer to!" said Luxa.

"So, do it!" said Gregor, holding out his arms. He knew it was a lie. She'd have Vikus to answer to.

Luxa bit her lip in vexation.

"Oh, let the 'warrior' be, Luxa," said Henry. "He is no good to us dead ... yet... and even the bats may not be able to compensate for his clumsiness. Come, I will race you to the pitch pool." She hesitated for a moment, then ran for the edge. She and Henry launched into the air like a pair of beautiful birds and vanished, presumably on their bats.

Gregor stood there, hands on his hips, hating them. He had forgotten Mareth was behind him.

"You must not take what they say to heart," said Mareth softly. Gregor turned and saw the conflict on Mareth's face. "They were both kinder as children, but when the rats took their parents, they changed."

"The rats killed Henry's parents, too?" said Gregor.

"Some years before Luxa's. Henry's father was the king's younger brother. After the Overlanders, the rats would most like to see the royal family dead," said Mareth. "When they were killed, Nerissa became as frail as glass, Henry as hard as stone."

Gregor nodded. He could never hate people very long because he always ended up finding out something sad about them that he had to factor in. Like this kid at school everybody hated because he was always pushing little kids around and then one day they found out his dad had hit him so much, he was in the hospital. With stuff like that, all Gregor could feel was bad.

When Vikus arrived a few minutes later, Gregor got onto his bat without a word. As they took off, he realized how tightly his legs clutched the bat's sides, and tried to loosen up. Vikus rode with his legs swinging free. Gregor let his legs go and found it was actually easier to stay on. More balanced.

"Now we must visit the crawlers," said Vikus. "Do you wish to continue dissecting the prophecy?"

"Maybe later," Gregor answered. Vikus didn't press it. He probably had plenty on his mind with the war and all.

Something else was eating at Gregor now that he had his temper under control. He knew he hadn't refused to jump off the pillar only to make Luxa and Henry mad. And it wasn't only because they'd laugh at him. No mystery why he'd mentioned theme parks. Roller coasters, bungee jumps, parachute drops -- he hated them. He went on them sometimes because everybody

would think he was a chicken if he didn't, but they weren't fun. What was fun about feeling the world drop out from under your feet? And those rides at least had seat belts.

CHAPTER 14

They flew through dark tunnels for hours. Gregor felt Boots's little head sink down on his shoulder and he let her go. You couldn't let her nap too long during the day or she'd wake up in the middle of the night wanting to play, but how could he keep her awake when it was dark and she couldn't move? He'd deal with it later.

The gloom brought all Gregor's negative thoughts back. His dad imprisoned by rats, his mom crying, the dangers of taking Boots on this unknown voyage, and his own fear at the pillar.

When he felt the bat coasting down for a landing, he was relieved at the distraction, although he disliked meeting up with Luxa and Henry again. He was sure they would be more smug and patronizing than ever.

They dipped into a cavern that was so low, the bats' wings brushed both the ceiling and floor. When they landed, Gregor dismounted but couldn't straighten up without bumping his hard hat. The place reminded him of a pancake, round and large and flat. He could see why the cockroaches had chosen it. The bats couldn't fly well, and the humans and rats couldn't fight properly with four-foot-high ceilings.

He roused Boots, who seemed to enjoy her new surroundings. She toddled around, standing on tiptoe to touch the ceiling with her fingers. Everyone else just sat on the ground and waited. The bats hunched over, twitching at what Gregor supposed were sounds he couldn't even hear.

A delegation of roaches appeared and bowed low. The humans got to their knees and bowed back, so Gregor did the same. Not one to stand on ceremony, Boots ran up with her arms extended in greeting. "Bugs! Beeg bugs!" she cried.

A happy murmur ran through the group of roaches. "Be she the princess, be she? Be she the one, Temp, be she?"

Boots singled out one roach in particular and patted it between the antennas. "Hi, you! Go ride? We go ride?"

"Knows me, the princess, knows me?" said the roach in awe, and all the other roaches gave little gasps. Even the humans and bats exchanged looks of surprise.

"We go ride? More ride?" said Boots. "Beeg Bug take Boots ride!" she said, patting him more vigorously on the head.

"Gentle, Boots," said Gregor, hurrying to catch her hand. He placed it softly on the bug's head. "Be gentle, like with puppy dogs."

"Oh, gen-tle, gen-tle," said Boots, lightly bouncing her palm on the roach. It quivered with joy.

"Knows me, the princess, knows me?" the roach whispered. "Recalls she the ride, does she?"

Gregor peered closely at the roach. "Oh, are you the one who carried her to the stadium?" he asked.

The roach nodded in assent. "I be Temp, I be," he said.

Now Gregor knew what all the fuss was about. To his eyes, Temp looked exactly like the other twenty roaches sitting around. How on Earth could Boots have picked him out of the crowd? Vikus looked at him with raised eyebrows as if asking for an explanation, but Gregor could only shrug in reply. It was pretty weird.

"More ride?" pleaded Boots. Temp fell on his face reverently, and she clambered onto his back.

For a minute, everybody just watched them pattering around the chamber. Then Vikus cleared his throat. "Crawlers, we have grave matters to place before you. Take us to your king, take us?"

The roaches reluctantly tore themselves away from watching Boots and led Vikus and Solovet away.

"Oh, great," thought Gregor. "Here we are again." He felt even less comfortable than when Vikus had left the first time. Who knew what Henry and Luxa might do now? And then there was the matter of the giant roaches. He didn't feel particularly safe in the bugs' land. Just yesterday they had considered trading him and Boots to the rats. Well, at least there was Mareth, who seemed decent enough. And the bats weren't too bad.

Temp and one other roach named Tick had stayed behind. They completely ignored the rest of the party while they took turns giving the toddler rides.

The five bats gathered together in a clump and fell asleep, exhausted from the day's flight.

Mareth placed the torches together to make a small fire and put on some food to warm. Henry and Luxa sat apart speaking in low voices, which was fine with Gregor. Mareth was the only one he felt like talking to, anyway.

"So, can you tell the crawlers apart, Mareth?" asked Gregor. He dumped all his batteries on the ground to sort out the dead ones while they talked.

"No, it is most rare that your sister can. Among us are few that can make distinctions. Vikus is better than most. But to pick one from so many ... it is passing strange," said Mareth. "Perhaps it is a gift of the Overlanders?" he suggested.

"No, they look identical to me," said Gregor. Boots was really good at those games where they gave you four pictures that looked alike except one had a tiny difference. Like there were four party hats and one had seven stripes instead of six. And if they were all drinking from paper cups, she always knew whose was whose even if they got mixed up on the table together. Maybe every roach really did look distinctly different to her.

Gregor opened up the flashlight. It took two D-size batteries. He swapped the other batteries in and out, trying to determine which ones still had power. As he worked, he inadvertently flipped the switch on when the flashlight was pointing at Luxa and Henry. They jumped, unaccustomed to sudden bursts of light. He did it a couple more times on purpose, which was childish, but he liked seeing them flinch. "They'd last about five seconds in New York City," he thought. That made him feel a little better.

Of the ten batteries, all but two still had juice. Gregor opened up the compartment on his hat and found it ran on some special rectangular battery. Not having any replacements, he would have to use it sparingly. "Maybe I should save this for last. If I lose the others or they go dead, I'll still have this on my head," he thought. He clicked off the light on the hat.

Gregor put the good batteries back in his pocket and set the other two aside. "These two are duds," he said to Mareth. "They don't work."

"Shall I burn them?" asked Mareth, reaching for the batteries.

Gregor caught his wrist before he could toss them in the flames. "No, they might explode!" He didn't really know what would happen if you put a battery in the fire, but he had a vague memory of his dad saying it was a dangerous thing to do. Out of the corner of his eye he caught Luxa and Henry exchanging uneasy glances. "You could blind yourself," he added, just for effect.

Well, that *might* happen if they exploded.

Mareth nodded and gingerly set the dead batteries back by Gregor. He rolled them around with his sandal, making Luxa and Henry nervous. But when he saw that Mareth looked nervous, too, he stuck the duds in his pocket.

Vikus and Solovet returned just as the food was ready. They looked worried.

Everyone gathered around as Mareth passed out fish, bread, and something that reminded Gregor of a sweet potato but wasn't.

"Boots! Dinnertime!" said Gregor, and she ran over.

When she realized they weren't following, she turned her head and waved impatiently to the roaches. "Temp! Ticka! Din-uh!"

An awkward social moment. No one else had thought to invite the roaches. Mareth had not prepared enough food. Clearly it wasn't standard to dine with roaches. Fortunately they shook their heads.

"No, Princess, we eat not now." They started to scurry away.

"Stay dere!" said Boots, pointing at Temp and Tick. "You stay dere, beeg bugs." And the roaches obediently sat down.

"Boots!" said Gregor, embarrassed. "You don't have to stay -- she orders everybody around," he told the roaches. "It's just she wants to keep playing with you but she has to eat first."

"We will sit," said one stiffly, and Gregor had the feeling the bug wanted him to mind his own business.

Everyone ate hungrily except Vikus, who seemed distracted.

"So when leave we?" asked Henry, through a mouthful of fish.

"We do not," said Solovet. "The crawlers have refused to come."

Luxa's head snapped up indignantly. "Refused? On what grounds?"

"They do not wish to invite the anger of King Gorgor by joining our quest," said Vikus. "They have peace with both humans and rats now. They do not want to unseat it."

"Now what?" thought Gregor. They needed two roaches. It said so in "The Prophecy of Gray." If the roaches didn't come, could they still rescue his father?

"We have asked them to rethink the proposition," said Solovet. "They know the rats are on the march. This may sway them in our direction."

"Or in the rats'," muttered Luxa, and Gregor secretly agreed. The roaches had debated trading Overlanders to the rats even when they knew the rats would eat them. And that was yesterday when there was no war. If Boots hadn't been so appealing, no doubt they would be dead now. The roaches weren't fighters. Gregor thought they would do what was best for their species, and the rats were probably the stronger ally. Or they would be if you could trust them.

"What makes the roaches think they can believe the rats?" asked Gregor.

"The crawlers do not think in the same manner we do," said Vikus.

"How do they think?" asked Gregor.

"Without reason or consequence," Henry broke in angrily. "They are the stupidest of creatures in the Underland! Why, they can barely even speak!"

"Silence, Henry!" said Vikus sharply.

Gregor glanced back at Temp and Tick, but the roaches gave no sign they had heard. Of course they had. The roaches didn't seem too bright, but it was just rude to say it in front of them. Besides, that wasn't going to make them want to come along.

"Remember you, when Sandwich arrived in the Underland the crawlers had been here for countless generations. No doubt they will remain when all thought of warm blood has passed," said Vikus.

"That is rumor," said Henry dismissively.

"No, it's not. Cockroaches have been around, like, three hundred and fifty million years, and people haven't even been here six," said Gregor. His dad had showed him a time line of when different animals had evolved on Earth. He remembered being impressed by how old cockroaches were.

"How do you know this?" Luxa spoke abruptly, but Gregor could tell she was actually interested.

"It's science. Archaeologists dig up fossils and stuff, and they can tell how old things are. Cockroaches -- I mean crawlers -- are really old and they've never changed much," said Gregor. He was getting on shaky ground here, but he thought that was true. "They're pretty amazing." He hoped Temp and Tick were listening.

Vikus smiled at him. "For a creature to survive so long, it is, no doubt, as smart as it need be."

"I do not believe in your science," said Henry. "The crawlers are weak, they cannot fight, they will not last. That is how nature intended it."

Gregor thought of his grandma, who was old and dependent on the kindness of stronger people now. He thought of Boots, who was little and couldn't yet open a door. And there was his friend Larry, who had to go to the hospital emergency room three times last year when his asthma flared up and he couldn't get air into his lungs.

"Is that what you think, Luxa?" said Gregor. "Do you think something deserves to die if it's not strong?"

"It does not matter what I think, if that is the truth," said Luxa evasively.

"But is it the truth? That is an excellent question for the future ruler of Regalia to ponder," said Vikus.

They ate quickly and Vikus suggested they all try to sleep. Gregor had no idea if it was night or not but he felt tired and didn't object.

While he spread out a thin, woven blanket at the edge of the chamber, Boots tried to teach Temp and Tick to play Patty-Cake. The roaches waved their front legs in confusion, not understanding what was going on.

"Pat cake, pat cake, baka man. Bake me cake fast you can. Pat it, pick it, mark wif a B. Put in ofen for Beeg Bug and me!" sang Boots as she clapped and touched the roaches' feet.

The bugs were completely baffled. "What sings the princess, what sings?" asked Temp. Or maybe it was Tick.

"It's a song we sing with babies in the Overland," said Gregor. "She put you in it. That's a big honor," he said. "She only puts someone in a song if she really likes them."

"Me like Beeg Bug," said Boots with satisfaction, and sang the song again with the roaches.

"Sorry, guys, she has to sleep now," said Gregor. "Come on, Boots. Sleepy time. Say good night."

Boots spontaneously hugged the roaches. "Night, Beeg Bug. Seep tight." Gregor was glad she left out "don't let the bedbugs bite."

Gregor snuggled down with her under the blanket on the hard stone floor. After her long nap, she wasn't very sleepy. He let her play with the flashlight awhile, clicking it on and off, but he was afraid she'd run down the batteries, and it was making the Underlanders restless. Finally he got her to settle down and sleep. As he drifted off, he thought he heard Temp, or maybe it was Tick, whispering, "Honors us, the princess, honors us?"

He didn't know what woke him. By the stiffness in his neck, he must've been lying on the hard floor for hours. He drowsily reached over to pull Boots's warm body next to him but he found only cold stone. His eyes snapped open and he sat up. His lips parted to call her name as his vision came into focus. No sound came out.

Boots was in the center of the big round chamber, rocking from foot to foot as she turned calmly in a circle. The flashlight she held illuminated the room in sections. He could see the figures stretching out in every direction in perfect concentric rings. They swayed in unison, some to the left, some to the right, with slow, mesmerizing movements.

CHAPTER 15

"Ah, geez, they're going to eat her!" thought Gregor, springing to his feet and smacking his head into the ceiling. "Ow!" It had been a mistake to take off his hard hat to sleep.

A hand grasped his shoulder to steady him, and he made out Vikus with a finger pressed to his lips. "Sh! Halt them not!" he whispered urgently.

"But they're going to hurt her!" Gregor whispered back. He hunched down and put a hand to his head. He could feel a big lump already rising out of his scalp.

"No, Gregor, they honor her. They honor Boots in a manner most sacred and rare," whispered Solovet from somewhere next to Vikus.

Gregor looked back at the roaches and tried to make sense of it. Boots didn't seem in any immediate

danger. None of the bugs was actually touching her. They just swayed and turned and bowed in their slow, rhythmic dance. There was something else, the solemnity of the scene, the complete silence, the absorption. It hit him: The roaches weren't just honoring Boots -- they were *worshipping* her!

"What are they doing?" Gregor asked.

"It is the Ring Dance. It is said the crawlers perform it only in the greatest secrecy for ones they believe to be chosen," answered Vikus. "In our history, they have only performed it for one other human, and that was Sandwich."

"Chosen for what?" whispered Gregor, worried. He hoped the cockroaches didn't think they could keep Boots just because they did some dance around her.

"Chosen to give them time," said Vikus simply, as if that explained it all. Gregor translated that in his head to mean "chosen to give them life."

Maybe it was something simpler. From the moment they'd landed in the Underland, the roaches had felt a special connection to Boots. If they'd just found him, he'd have had a one-way ticket to the rats, end of story. But Boots had befriended them so quickly. She hadn't been repulsed or superior or scared. Gregor thought the fact that she had liked the roaches had made a great impression on them. Most of the humans had such a low opinion of them.

Then there was that strange thing about recognizing Temp ... he still couldn't explain that.

The roaches did a series of turns and landed flat on the ground facing Boots. Then, circle by circle, they melted away into the darkness. Boots watched them go without comment. When the chamber had cleared, she gave a head-splitting yawn and padded over to Gregor. "I seepy," she said. Then she curled up against him and nodded right off.

Gregor took the flashlight from her hand and in its beam saw that all the other Underlanders were awake, staring at them. "She's sleepy," he said as if nothing unusual had happened. He clicked off the light.

When they woke, the roaches announced that Temp and Tick would be joining the quest. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that they were coming because of Boots.

Gregor was torn between being very proud and wanting to laugh his head off. It turned out Boots was special weaponry after all.

The party quickly readied itself to depart. Temp and Tick absolutely refused to ride on any bat without Boots. This caused a brief argument because Boots had to ride with Gregor and that meant one bat had to carry both the Overlanders and the roaches. The bats could handle the load, but it meant four inexperienced fliers would be alone on one bat.

Vikus gave the job to Henry's big black bat, Ares, as he was both strong and agile, and Henry rode with Luxa. Ares was instructed to fly above the others just in case one of the roaches fell off and had to be caught before it hit the ground.

None of this talk seemed to relax Temp and Tick, who were obviously terrified at the idea of soaring through wide-open spaces high above the ground. Gregor found himself trying to reassure them, which was ironic since he didn't much like flying, either. He also wished he could have any bat but Ares. Henry's bat probably disliked him as much as Henry did.

They didn't have time for breakfast, but Mareth passed out chunks of cake and dried beef to eat on the journey. Vikus told Gregor they would be flying several hours before they took a break, so he put a second diaper over Boots's first one. He also repositioned her in the backpack so that she was looking backward instead of over his shoulder -- that way, she could chatter with Temp and Tick and maybe distract them from their fear.

Gregor gingerly climbed up on Ares's back and dangled his legs off the bat's shoulders. Temp and Tick scrambled on behind and clung to Ares's

back fur for dear life. Gregor thought he saw the bat wince a little, but Ares didn't say anything. The bats hardly ever spoke out loud, though. It seemed to require a lot of effort. They probably talked to one another in squeaks too high for human ears to hear.

"We must now travel to the land of the spinners," said Vikus.

"Remember how frequently the rats patrol this area."

"Fly close together. We may have need of one another's protection," said Solovet. "To the air!"

The bats took off. Boots was pleased as punch with her new traveling companions. She sang her whole repertoire of songs, which included "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star"; "Hey, Diddle, Diddle"; "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider"; "The Alphabet Song"; and, of course "Patty-Cake, Patty-Cake." Having finished, she sang them again. And again. And again. On about the nineteenth round, Gregor decided to teach her "Row, Row, Row Your Boat" just for a little variety. Boots picked it up immediately and then tried to teach it to the roaches. She didn't seem to mind their off-key voices, although Gregor could feel the muscles in Ares's neck getting tighter with each verse.

Gregor could tell the roaches' domain sprawled over a much larger area than Regalia or the bats' caves. The humans and bats had small, densely populated lands that could be protected easily. The roaches lived across miles and miles of the Underland.

How did they keep themselves safe from attack with all this space to defend?

The answer came to him as they flew over a valley that held thousands of roaches. The crawlers had numbers -- huge numbers, compared with the humans. If they were attacked, they could afford to lose more fighters. And with so much space, they could retreat endlessly and make the rats follow them. Gregor thought about the roaches in their kitchen at home. They didn't fight. They ran for it. His mom swatted a lot of them, but they always came back.

After what seemed like an eternity, Gregor felt Ares coasting in for a landing. They settled down on the bank of a lazy, shallow river. Gregor hopped off and onto something soft and spongy. He reached down to investigate, and his hand came up filled with a grayish-green, leafy vine. Plants! Plants grew down here without the help of the gaslight the Underlanders used.

"How does this grow without the light?" he asked Vikus, holding out a handful of the stuff.

"It has light," said Vikus, pointing into the river. "There is fire from the earth." Gregor peered into the water and saw tiny jets of light shooting out of the river bottom. Fish darted in and out of a variety of plant-life. The long vines of certain plants crept onto the banks.

"Oh, they're like miniature volcanoes," thought Gregor.

"This river runs through Regalia as well. Our cattle live off the plants, but they are unfit for humans to eat," said Solovet.

Gregor had been eating beef jerky all morning without wondering what the cows ate. He could probably spend years in the Underland figuring out how it worked. Not that he wanted to.

Cockroaches who were fishing along the banks had a quick exchange with Temp and Tick and pulled several large fish out of the river with their mouths. Mareth cleaned them and set them on the torches to grill.

Gregor set Boots down to stretch her legs and asked the cockroaches to keep an eye on her. They ran up and down the bank steering her away from the water and letting her ride on their backs. Word of her arrival spread quickly, and soon dozens of bugs appeared. They settled down just to watch "the princess."

When the food was cooked, Vikus made a point of inviting Temp and Tick to join them. "It is time," he said in response to Henry's frown. "It is time those of the prophecy became of one journey, of one purpose, of one mind. All are equal here." Temp and Tick still sat off to the side, behind Boots, but they ate with everyone else.

"It is not far now," said Vikus, pointing at a small tunnel. "One could make it shortly even on foot."

"To my dad?" asked Gregor.

"No, to the spinners. We must persuade two to join us on the quest," said Vikus.

"Oh, yeah. The spinners," said Gregor. He hoped they were more into the trip than the roaches had been.

They were just finishing up the meal when all five bats jerked their heads up. "Rats!" hissed Ares, and everyone started moving.

Except for Temp and Tick, all the roaches vanished into the shallow tunnels that led away from the riverbank.

Vikus thrust Boots into Gregor's backpack and shoved them toward the tunnel he had pointed out earlier. "Run!" he ordered. Gregor tried to object, but Vikus cut him off. "Run, Gregor! The rest of us are expendable; you are not!"

The old man vaulted onto his bat and joined the other Underlanders in the air just as a squad of six rats stampeded onto the riverbank. The leader, a gnarled gray rat with a diagonal scar across his face, pointed at Gregor and hissed, "Kill him!"

Stranded on the riverbank without a weapon, Gregor had no choice but to sprint for the mouth of the tunnel. Temp and Tick scurried after him. He glanced back for a second and saw Vikus knock the scarred rat into the river with the hilt of his sword. The other Underlanders, blades flashing, were attacking the five remaining rats.

"Run, Gregor!" ordered Solovet in a rough voice so unlike the quiet one he was used to.

"Make haste, make you, make haste!" urged Temp and Tick.

Using his flashlight, Gregor started down the tunnel. It was just high enough that he could run upright. He realized he had lost Temp and Tick somewhere and turned back to see the entire tunnel, floor to ceiling, filling up with roaches. They weren't attacking the rats. They were using their bodies to form a barricade that would be nearly impossible to penetrate.

"Oh, no," thought Gregor. "They're just going to let themselves be killed!" He turned back to help them, but the roaches nearest him insisted, "Run! Run with the princess!"

They were right: He had to go. He had to get Boots out of there. He had to save his dad. Maybe he even had to save the Underland from the rats, he didn't know. But right now he could no more get through the fifty-foot wall of cockroaches to fight the rats than the rats could get to him.

He took off down the tunnel, setting a pace he thought he could maintain for half an hour.

CHAPTER 16

He ripped his face off the sticky ropes, and it felt like someone had yanked strips of adhesive tape off his skin. "Ow!" he said. He freed his flashlight arm, but the other remained enmeshed in the web. Boots was on his back, so she hadn't got caught.

"Hello!" he called. "Is anyone there? Hello!" He shone the flashlight around, but all he could see was web.

"I am Gregor the Overlander. I come in peace," he said. I come in peace. Where'd he get that? Probably from some old movie. "Anybody home?"

He felt a light tugging on his sandals and looked down. A huge spider was wrapping his feet together with a steady stream of silk.

"Hey!" yelled Gregor, trying to free his feet. But in seconds the spider had spun its way up to his knees. "You don't understand! I'm -- I'm the warrior! In the prophecy! I'm the one who calls!"

The spider busily worked its way up his body. "Oh, man," thought Gregor. "It's going to cover us completely!" He felt the arm that was caught in the web tighten up against his body.

"Ge-go!" squeaked Boots. The silk ropes pressed her against his back as they encircled his chest.

"Vikus sent me!" yelled Gregor, and for the first time the spider paused. He quickly followed up. "Yeah, Vikus sent me and he's on his way and he's going to be really mad you're wrapping us up!"

He waved his free arm with the flashlight for emphasis and caught the spider full in the face with the light. It skittered back a few yards, and Gregor got his first good look at the arachnid. Six beady black eyes, bristly legs, and massive jaws that ended in curved, pointed fangs. He quickly diverted the flashlight beam. No point in making it angry.

"So, do you know Vikus?" he asked. "He should be here any minute to have some official meeting with your king. Queen. Do you guys have a king or a queen? Or maybe it's something else. We have a presi dent, but that's different because you have to vote for them." He paused. "So, do you think you could unwrap us now?"

The spider leaned down and snapped a thread with its jaws. Gregor and Boots shot up fifty feet in the air and yo-yoed up and down like they were

on a big rubber band. "Hey!" Gregor yelled. "Hey!" His lunch sloshed around in his stomach. Eventually the bouncing stopped.

Gregor shone the flashlight around him. In every direction he could see spiders. Some were working busily; others seemed asleep. Every single one of them was ignoring him. This was new. The roaches and bats had greeted him civilly enough, a whole crowd of people in the stadium had fallen silent when he appeared, and the rats had gone into a rage when they'd met... but the spiders? They couldn't care less.

He yelled stuff at them for a while. Nice stuff. Crazy stuff. Annoying stuff. They didn't react. He got Boots to sing a couple rounds of "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider" since she had a special way with bugs. No response. Finally he just gave up and watched them.

An unlucky insect flew into their web. A spider ran over and drove its wicked fangs into the bug. It went still. "Poison," thought Gregor. The spider quickly wrapped the insect in silk, broke it into pieces, and shot some kind of juice inside it. Gregor looked away when the spider started sucking out the bug's liquefied insides. "Ugh, that could've been us. That still could be us!" he thought. He wished Vikus and the others would show up.

But would they show up? What had happened back on the riverbank? Had they been able to fight off the rats? Had anybody been hurt, or worse, killed?

He remembered Vikus's ordering him to run. "The rest of us are expendable, you are not!" He must have been talking about the prophecy. They could always find more crawlers, fliers, and spinners. Nerissa might be able to stand in if something happened to Luxa or Henry. Or maybe they would make someone else the king or queen. But Gregor and Boots, two Overlanders with a dad imprisoned by rats, they were irreplaceable.

Gregor thought grimly of the people sacrificing themselves back on the riverbank. He should have stayed and fought even if he didn't stand much of a chance. They were risking their lives because they thought he was the warrior. But he wasn't. Surely that was clear by now.

Minutes dragged by. Maybe the whole party had been wiped out and he and Boots were on their own. Maybe the spiders knew that and they were just letting them live so they could be nice and fresh when they decided to eat them.

"Ge-go?" said Boots.

"Yeah, Boots," said Gregor.

"We go home?" she asked plaintively. "See Mama?"

"Well, we have to get Daddy first," he said, trying to sound optimistic even though they were dangling helplessly in a spider's lair.

"Da-da?" said Boots curiously. She knew their father from photos, though she'd never seen him in person. "See Da-da?"

"We get Da-da. Then we go home," said Gregor.

"See Mama?" Boots insisted. Images of their mom began to make Gregor ache with sadness. "See Mama?"

A spider near them began to make a humming sound that was picked up by the other creatures. It was a soothing, soft melody. Gregor tried to remember the tune so he could play it for his dad on his saxophone. His dad played, too. Jazz, mostly. He'd bought Gregor his first saxophone, a used one from the pawnshop, when he was seven and started teaching him to play it. Gregor had just begun lessons at school when his dad had dropped out of sight and become a prisoner of the rats who probably hated music.

What were the rats doing to his dad, anyway?

He tried to distract himself with more positive thoughts but, given the circumstances, failed.

When Henry materialized on the stone floor below him, Gregor wanted to cry with relief. "He lives!" Henry called out, looking genuinely happy to see him.

From somewhere in the darkness Gregor heard Vikus call out, "Free you the Overlander, free you?" He felt himself being lowered to the ground. When his feet hit the stone, he fell on his stomach, unable to stand on his wrapped legs.

They instantly gathered around him, cutting the silk off with their swords. Even Luxa and Henry helped. Tick and Temp chewed through the cords around Boots's pack. Gregor counted the bats, ones two, three, four, five. He could see several wounds, but everybody was alive.

"We thought you lost," said Mareth, who was bleeding freely from his thigh.

"No, I couldn't get lost. The tunnel came straight here," said Gregor, kicking his legs free happily.

"Not lost in direction," said Luxa. "Lost forever." Gregor realized she meant dead.

"What happened with the rats?" he asked.

"All killed," said Vikus. "You need not fear that they have seen you."

"It's worse if they see me?" asked Gregor. "Why? They can smell I'm an Overlander from miles away. They know I'm here."

"But only the dead ones know you resemble your father. That you are 'a son of the sun,'" said Vikus. Gregor remembered how Fangor and Shed had reacted when they'd seen his face in the torchlight. "Mark you, Shed, his shade?" They hadn't just wanted to kill him because he was an Overlander. They'd thought he was the warrior, too! He wanted to tell Vikus about that, but a score of spiders were descending around them and perching in nearby webs.

One magnificent creature with beautifully striped legs swung down directly in front of Vikus. He bowed very low. "Greetings, Queen Wevox."

The spider rubbed her front legs over her chest as if she were playing the harp. An eerie voice came out of her although there was no movement of her mouth. "Greetings, Lord Vikus."

"Meet you, Gregor the Overlander, meet you," said Vikus, indicating Gregor.

"He makes much noise," said the queen distastefully, her front legs moving across her chest again. Gregor realized that was how she talked, by making vibrations on her body. She sounded sort of like Mr. Johnson in apartment 4Q who'd had some kind of operation and talked through a hole in his neck. Only scary.

"The Overlander ways are odd," said Vikus, shooting Gregor a look that told him not to object.

"Why come you?" strummed Queen Wevox.

Vikus told the whole tale in ten sentences using a soft voice. So apparently you spoke to spiders quickly and quietly. Screaming at them endlessly had been counterproductive.

The queen considered the story a moment. "As it is Vikus, we will not drink. Web them."

A horde of spiders surrounded them. Gregor watched a gorgeous, gauzy funnel of silk grow up around them as if by magic. It isolated the party and blocked all else from view. The spiders stopped spinning when it reached thirty feet. Two took positions as sentries at the top. It all happened in under a minute.

Everyone looked at Vikus, who sighed. "You knew it would not be simple," said Solovet gently.

"Yes, but I had hoped with the recent trade agreement ..." Vikus trailed off. "I hoped too high."

"We still breathe," said Mareth encouragingly. "That is no small thing with the spinners."

"What's going on?" said Gregor. "Aren't they coming with us?"

CHAPTER 17

"Prisoners!" exclaimed Gregor. "Are you at war with the spiders, too?"

"Oh, no," said Mareth. "We are on peaceful terms with the spinners. We trade with them, we do not invade each other's lands ... but it would be an exaggeration to call them our friends."

"I'll say," said Gregor. "So, did everybody know they would lock us up except me?" He had trouble keeping the irritation out of his voice. He was getting tired of finding out about things after the fact.

"I am sorry, Gregor," said Vikus. "I have worked long to build bridges between ourselves and the spinners. I thought perhaps they would be more agreeable, but I overestimated my influence with them."

He looked weary and old. Gregor hadn't meant to make him feel worse than he already did. "No, they really respect you. I mean, I think they were going to eat me until I mentioned your name."

Vikus brightened a little. "Truly? Well, that is something. Where there is life there is hope."

"That's so weird. That's what my grandma always says!" said Gregor. He laughed, and somehow that broke the tension.

"Ge-go, fesh di-pur!" said Boots crankily. She tugged at her pants.

"Yes, Boots, fresh diaper," said Gregor. She hadn't been changed for ages. He dug through the pack Dulcet had given him and realized he was down to two diapers. "Uh-oh," he said. "I'm almost out of catch cloths."

"Well, you could not be in a better place. The spinners weave all our catch cloths," said Solovet.

"How come they're not sticky?" asked Gregor, touching his face.

"Spinners can make six different kinds of silk, some sticky, some soft as Boots's skin. They make our garments as well."

"Really?" said Gregor. "Do you think they'd let us have more catch cloths? Even if we're prisoners?"

"I doubt it not. It is not the spiders' goal to antagonize us," said Solovet. "Only to hold us until they can determine what to do." She called up to a guard, and in a few minutes two dozen diapers came down on a thread. The spider also sent down three woven baskets filled with clean water.

Solovet began to work her way around the group, cleaning wounds and patching people up. Luxa, Henry, and Mareth paid close attention, as if she

were teaching a class. Gregor realized the ability to heal battle wounds was probably important if you lived down here.

Solovet began by cleaning the gash on Mareth's thigh and stitching it up with a needle and thread. Gregor winced on Mareth's behalf, but the guard's face was pale and set. Two bats required stitches on torn wings and, though they made a great effort to remain still while Solovet slid the needle in and out of their skin, the process was clearly agonizing for them.

Once all obvious bleeding had been stopped, Solovet turned to Gregor. "Let us attend to your face now."

Gregor touched his cheek and found that welts had formed where the webs had ripped off. Solovet soaked a catch cloth in water and placed it on his face. Gregor had to grit his teeth to keep from screaming.

"I know it burns," said Solovet. "But you must wash the glue from your skin or it will fester."

"Fester?" said Gregor. That sounded awful.

"If you could stand to splash water upon your face, it would be a more painful but faster process," said Solovet.

Gregor took a deep breath and dunked his whole head into one of the baskets of water. "Aaaa!" he screamed silently, and came up gasping. After five or six dunks, the pain faded.

Solovet nodded approvingly and gave him a small clay pot of ointment to dab on his face. While he gingerly applied the medicine, she cleaned and bound a series of smaller wounds and forced an uncooperative Vikus to let her wrap his wrist.

Finally she turned to Temp and Tick. "Crawlers, need you any assistance from me?"

Boots pointed out a bent antenna on one of the roaches. "Temp boo-boo," she said.

"No, Princess, we heal ourselves," said Temp. Gregor was sorry Temp was injured but, on the plus side, he could now tell the roaches apart.

"Ban-didge!" insisted Boots, and reached out to grab the crooked antenna.

"No, Boots!" said Gregor, blocking her hand. "No bandage on Temp."

"Ban-didge!" Boots gave Gregor a scowl and pushed him away.

"Oh, great," thought Gregor. "Here we go." In general, Boots was a very good-natured two-year-old. But she was still two and, every so often, she

would throw a tantrum that left the rest of the family exhausted. Usually it happened when she was tired and hungry.

Gregor dug in the pack. Hadn't Dulcet said something about treats? He pulled out a cookie. "Cookie, Boots?" She reluctantly took the cookie and sat down to gnaw on it. Maybe he had headed off the worst.

"Hates us, the princess, hates us?" asked Tick worriedly.

"Oh, no," said Gregor. "She just gets like this sometimes. My mom calls it the terrible twos. Sometimes she throws a fit for no reason."

Boots scowled at everybody and drummed her feet on the ground.

"Hates us, the princess, hates us?" murmured Temp sadly.

Baby roaches probably didn't have tantrums.

"No, really, she still thinks you're great," promised Gregor. "Just give her some space." He hoped the roaches wouldn't get so hurt by Boots's behavior that they'd want to go home. Not that anyone was going anywhere right now.

Vikus gestured him over to where the others had gathered. He spoke in a whisper. "Gregor, my wife fears the spinners may pass on our whereabouts to the rats. She advises that we escape with all speed."

"I'm good with that!" said Gregor. "But how?" Boots came up behind him and gave his arm a pinch for no reason. "No, Boots!" he said. "No pinching!"

"More cookie!" she said, tugging on him.

"No, not for pinchers. Cookies are not for pinchers," said Gregor firmly. Her lower lip began to tremble. She marched away from him, plunked herself down on the floor, and began to kick at the pack.

"Okay, sorry, what? What's the plan?" said Gregor, turning back to the group. "Can we just cut our way through the web and run?"

"No, outside this funnel web are scores of spinners ready to repair a hole and attack with poison fang. If we flee upward, they will leap on us from above," whispered Solovet.

"What's that leave?" said Gregor.

"Only one resort. We must damage the web so fully and so rapidly, they cannot repair it nor will it hold their weight," said Solovet. She paused.

"Someone must perform the Coiler."

Everyone looked at Luxa, so Gregor looked at her, too. Her golden bat, which stood behind her, dipped its head down and touched her neck. "We can do it," said Luxa softly.

"We do not insist, Luxa. The danger, particularly at the top, is very great. But in truth, you are our best hope," said Vikus unhappily.

Henry put his arm around her shoulder. "They can do it. I have seen them in training. They have both speed and accuracy."

Luxa nodded resolutely. "We can do it. Let us not wait."

"Gregor, ride you on Vikus's bat. Vikus, with me. Henry and Mareth, take one crawler each," said Solovet.

"We need a distraction to cover Luxa," said Mareth. "I could go through the side."

"Not with that leg," said Solovet, her eyes flashing around. "And no one goes through the side. It is certain death."

"The spinners are very sensitive to noise," said Vikus. "It is too bad we have no horns."

Gregor felt a pair of feet drumming angrily into his legs. He turned around and saw Boots on the floor kicking him. "Cut it out!" he snapped at her. "Do you need a time-out?"

"No time-out! You time-out! You time-out! Cookie! Cookie!" sputtered Boots. She was about to blow any minute.

"You need a noise?" said Gregor in frustration. "I've got a noise for you." He picked Boots up and wrestled her into the backpack.

"No! No! No!" Boots said, her voice rising in pitch and intensity.

"Everybody ready?" asked Gregor, pulling a cookie from Dulcet's bag. The Underlanders weren't exactly sure what he was doing, but in seconds they were prepared to take off.

Solovet gave him a nod. "We are ready."

Gregor held up the cookie. "Hey, Boots!" said Gregor. "Want a cookie?"

"No, cookie, no, cookie, no, no, no!" said Boots, way past the point of being pacified.

"Okay," said Gregor. "Then I'll eat it." And making sure she could see, he stuck the whole cookie in his mouth.

"Mine!" screamed Boots. "Mine! Mine! Miiiiiiiiine!" It was an eardrum-piercing shriek that rattled his brain.

"Go you, Luxa!" cried Solovet, and the girl took off on her bat. Now Gregor could understand why the Coiler was such a big deal. Luxa was rising up along the web spinning and twisting at a dizzying rate. She held her sword out straight above her head. It was slicing the funnel to shreds.

Only an extraordinary and flexible rider could have pulled off a move like that.

"Wow!" said Gregor. He jumped on Vikus's big gray bat.

"Miiiiiiine!" screeched Boots. "Miiiiine!"

Above him he could see Luxa spinning and slicing. The other Underlanders were following her, cutting straight up the sides of the funnel web. Gregor brought up the rear with Boots and her blinding screams.

At the top of the funnel, the golden bat hung in space performing an intricate, upside-down figure eight. Under the protection of Luxa's flashing sword, the Underlanders zipped out to freedom.

Gregor was the only one still in the funnel when it happened. From above, a jet of silk shot down, encircling Luxa's sword arm and jerking her from her bat. The pair of striped legs reeled her in like a fish.

CHAPTER 18

Gregor's mouth dropped open in horror. Luxa was seconds away from dying. She knew it, too. She was writhing in terror, trying to bite through the silk rope at her wrist with her teeth, but it was too strong.

He felt around desperately for a weapon. What did he have? Diapers? Cookies? Oh, why hadn't they given him a sword? He was the stupid warrior, wasn't he? His fingers dug in the leather bag and closed around the root beer can. Root beer! He yanked out the can shaking it with all his might. "Attack! Attack!" he yelled.

Just as the fangs were about to pierce Luxa's throat, he flew up and popped the soda can top. The stream of root beer shot out and smacked the spider queen right in the face. She dropped Luxa and began to claw at her six eyes.

Luxa fell and was swept up by her bat. They joined the rest of the Underlanders who were fighting their way back to help.

"Blade Wheel!" commanded Solovet, and the bats formed into the tight flying circle that had surrounded Gregor when he'd tried to escape from the stadium. The humans extended their swords straight out to the sides, and the formation began to move through the air like a buzz saw.

Boots's unearthly shrieks were causing many of the spiders to curl up in cowering balls. Whether it was the noise, the Blade Wheel, or fear of the root beer, Gregor didn't know. All he knew was that in a few minutes they were flying free and leaving the spiders far behind.

Gregor unclenched his legs when he realized he was probably squeezing the life out of his bat. In one hand he still held the half-empty can of root beer. He would have taken a drink if he'd thought he could swallow.

Boots's screams soon became whimpers. She put her head on his shoulder and crashed. She'd been so upset, she still made little gasping sounds in her sleep. Gregor turned and placed a kiss on her curly head.

Luxa was stretched out on her bat's back alive but wiped out. He saw Solovet and Vikus flying near her, speaking. She nodded but didn't sit up. They took the lead, and the bats sped even faster into the darkness.

They flew a long time down deserted passages. Gregor saw no sign of life, either animal or plant. Eventually, Solovet and Vikus waved them down, and the party landed in a vast cavern at the mouth of a tunnel.

Everybody practically fell off the bats and just lay on the ground. Temp and Tick seemed almost comatose from fear. The bats staggered together and pressed into a tight, trembling knot.

After a while, Gregor heard himself speak up. "So, isn't it time I had a sword?"

There was a moment of silence, then all the Underlanders burst out laughing. They went on and on. Gregor didn't really get the joke, but he laughed along with them, feeling the darkness drain out of his body.

The laughter woke Boots, who rubbed her eyes and said cheerfully, "Where spider?"

Somehow that set everybody off again. Pleased with the response, Boots kept repeating, "Where spider? Where spider?" to appreciative laughter.

"Spider go bye-bye," said Gregor finally. "How about a cookie?"

"Ye-es!" said Boots, without a trace of anger over the earlier cookie incident. That was one great thing about her. Once she'd melted down and napped, she transformed back into her own sweet self again.

When they realized the princess did not in fact hate them, Temp and Tick rallied and ran around playing tag with her.

Mareth started to prepare food, but Solovet ordered him to lie down and prop up his leg. She and Vikus made dinner while Henry and Mareth played some kind of card game.

Gregor went over to Luxa, who was sitting on a stone ledge. He sat beside her and could feel she was still shaking. "How are you doing?" he asked.

"I am fine," she said in a tight voice.

"That was really cool, that Coiler thing you did," he said.

"It was my first time in a real web," confessed Luxa. "Mine, too. Of course, in the Overland, spinners are small, and we don't call them our neighbors," said Gregor.

Luxa grimaced. "We do not mix much with spinners."

"Well, that's probably a good thing. I mean, who wants to mix with somebody who spends the whole time thinking about drinking you?" Gregor said.

Luxa looked shocked. "You would not joke so had the queen trapped you!"

"Hey, I was hanging there yelling for an hour before you guys decided to show up," said Gregor. "And they really hated me."

Luxa laughed. "I could tell. By what Queen Wevox said." She paused. Her next words were an effort. "Thank you."

"For what?" he said.

"Saving me with the ... What is this weapon?" She gestured to the root beer can.

"It's not a weapon. It's a root beer," Gregor said. He took a swig.

Luxa looked alarmed. "Should you drink it?" she asked.

"Sure, try it," he said. Gregor offered her the can.

She tentatively took a sip, and her eyes widened. "It bubbles on the tongue," she said.

"Yeah, that's why it exploded. I shook up a lot of bubbles. It's safe now. It's just like water. Go ahead, you can finish it," he said, and she continued to take tiny curious sips.

"Anyway, I owed you one," he said. "You saved me from that rat the first night. So we're even."

Luxa nodded but seemed troubled. "There is one other thing. I should not have struck you for trying to escape. I am sorry."

"And I'm sorry I called your home creepy. It's not like it's all creepy. Some of it's great," he said.

"Am I 'creepy' to you?" asked Luxa.

"Oh, no. Creepy is like spiders and rats and, you know, things that make chills run down your spine. You're just... difficult," said Gregor, trying to be honest but not flat-out rude.

"You, too. You are difficult to ... uh ... make do things," said Luxa.

Gregor nodded, but he rolled his eyes when she wasn't looking. It was hard to imagine anyone more stubborn than Luxa.

Vikus called them all to dine, and even the roaches felt comfortable enough to join the circle.

"I am drinking Gregor's spinner weapon," announced Luxa, holding up the root beer can. He had to explain about the root beer all over again, and then everybody had to try a sip.

When the can got to Boots, he said, "Well, that's the end of that," thinking she'd guzzled down the last few swallows. But instead she poured out two little puddles.

"Beeg bugs," she said, pointing to the first puddle. "Bats," she said, pointing to the second. Both sets of animals obligingly drank up the root beer.

"I believe Boots to be a natural ambassador," said Vikus, smiling. "She treats all with an equality I myself aspire to. Come, let us eat."

Everyone dug in like they'd never seen food before. When he'd slowed down enough to actually taste his food, Gregor asked the question that had been worrying him since they'd escaped from the spiders. "Can we still go on the quest without the spinners?"

"That is the question," said Vikus. "That is the question we must all consider. Clearly we cannot expect any spinners to join us willingly."

"We should have seized two when we had a chance," said Henry darkly.

"The prophecy says the spinners must assent," said Vikus. "However, we know the rats have taken many spinners prisoner. Perhaps we can free a few and persuade them to accompany us. I have often had good results with spinners."

"But you will not be there, Vikus," Solovet said quietly.

"What do you mean?" asked Gregor, feeling his mouth go dry.

Vikus paused a moment, taking in the group. "It is time for those of us not named by the prophecy to return home. Mareth, Solovet, and I will fly after we rest."

Gregor saw his surprise mirrored on Luxa's and Henry's faces.

"Nothing in the prophecy forbids you to come," said Luxa.

"We are not meant to be here. And beyond that we have a war to fight," said Solovet.

The thought of going anywhere without Vikus and Solovet filled Gregor with panic. "But you can't leave us. I mean, we don't even know where we're going," said Gregor. "Do you guys know where we're going?" he asked Luxa and Henry. They both shook their heads. "See?"

"You will manage. Henry and Luxa are well trained, and you show great resourcefulness," said Solovet. She spoke simply and definitely. She was thinking of the war, of the bigger picture, not of them.

Gregor instinctively knew he could not change her mind. He turned to Vikus. "You can't leave. We need you. We need someone -- someone who knows what they're doing!"

He looked at Luxa and Henry to see if they were insulted, but both were waiting anxiously for Vikus's reply. "They know," thought Gregor. "They act tough, but they know we can't get through this by ourselves."

"I do not plan to leave you stranded in the Dead Land," said Vikus.

"Oh, great, and we're in the Dead Land," said Gregor. "So, you're going to ... what? Draw us a map?"

"No, I have arranged a guide for you," said Vikus. "A guide?" asked Henry. "A guide?" echoed Luxa.

Vikus took a deep breath as if he was about to begin a long explanation. But then someone interrupted him.

"Well, I prefer to think of myself as a legend, but I suppose 'guide' will do," said a deep, world-weary voice from the dark.

Gregor shot his flashlight beam toward the sound.

Leaning in the mouth of the tunnel was a rat with a diagonal scar across his face. It took just a moment for Gregor to recognize him as the rat Vikus had knocked into the river.

PART 3

The Rat

CHAPTER 19

"Stay you!" cried Vikus, as Luxa, Henry, and Mareth sprang up, swords in hand. "Stay you!"

The rat regarded the three armed humans with amusement. "Yes, stay you or I shall be forced to move, and that always puts me in an ill humor," he said languidly.

Luxa and Mareth stopped uncertainly, but Henry ignored Vikus's command and lunged at the rat. Without moving another muscle, the rat flicked his tail. It cracked like a whip knocking the sword from Henry's hand. The blade spun across the stone floor and slammed into the cavern wall. Henry gripped his wrist in pain.

"The hardest lesson for a soldier to learn is to obey orders he believes are wrong," said the rat philosophically.

"Take care, lad, or you shall end up like me, stripped of any respectable rank and warming your shabby old hide at the fire of your enemies." The rat nodded at the old man. "Vikus."

"Ripred," said Vikus with a smile. "We have just commenced dining. Will you join us?"

"I thought you'd never ask," said Ripred, pushing himself off the wall and slouching over to the fire. He squatted back on his haunches next to Solovet. "My dear Solovet, how kind of you to fly out to greet me. And with a war on, too."

"I could scarcely have missed an opportunity to break bread with you, Ripred," said Solovet.

"Oh, come now, you know perfectly well you only tagged along to wheedle information out of me," said Ripred. "And to gloat over your victory at the Flames."

"I destroyed you," said Solovet with glee. "Your army turned tail and ran howling into the river."

"Army," snorted Ripred. "Why, they were as much an army as I am a butterfly. I'd have stood a better chance fighting with crawlers." The rat looked at Temp and Tick, who were cowering against the wall, and sighed. "Present company excepted, of course."

Boots frowned and toddled over to Ripred. She pointed her chubby finger up at him. "You mouse?"

"Yes, I'm a mouse. Squeak, squeak. Now shoo-shoo back to your little bug friends," said Ripred, picking up a hunk of dried beef. He tore off a piece with his teeth and noticed Boots hadn't moved. He pulled back his lips to reveal a row of jagged teeth and gave her a sharp hiss.

"Oh!" said Boots, scurrying to her roaches. "Oh!"

"Don't do that," said Gregor. The rat turned his glowing eyes on him, and Gregor was shocked by what he saw there. The intelligence, the deadliness, and, most surprisingly, the pain. This rat was not like Fangor and Shed. He was much more complicated and much more dangerous. For the first time in the Underland, Gregor felt completely out of his league. If he fought this rat, he wouldn't stand a chance. He would lose. He would be dead.

"Ah, this must be our warrior," said Ripred softly. "How very like your daddy you are."

"Don't scare my sister," said Gregor, trying to keep his voice steady. "She's only a baby."

"From what I hear, she's got more guts than the lot of you combined," said Ripred. "Of course, courage only counts when you can count. I'm presuming the rest of you can count, and will be screwing your courage to the sticking place any minute now."

The rat glanced around at Luxa, Mareth, and Henry, who were keeping their distance. The bats were extending and folding their wings, unsure of what to do. "Well, come on, then, isn't anyone else hungry? I hate dining alone. It makes me feel so unloved."

"I did not prepare them, Ripred," said Vikus.

"Clearly," said the rat. "Clearly my arrival is an unexpected pleasure." He went to work on his beef bone, making an awful scraping sound.

"Meet you, Ripred the gnawer," said Vikus to the group. "He shall be joining the quest as your guide."

There was a quick breathy sound, as half of those gathered inhaled sharply. A long pause followed in which no one exhaled. Gregor tried to make sense of what Vikus had announced so calmly. A rat. He was leaving them in the hands of a rat. Gregor wanted to object, but his throat had frozen.

Finally Luxa spoke up in a voice hoarse with hatred. "No, he shall not. We do not travel with rats."

" 'The Prophecy of Gray' requires it, Luxa," said Solovet. "One gnawer beside."

" 'Beside' could mean anything," snarled Henry. "Perhaps we leave the gnawer dead 'beside' us."

"Perhaps you do. But having witnessed your last attack, I doubt it," said Ripred, starting on a wedge of cheese.

"We have killed five rats since midday," said Luxa.

"You mean the idiots that I handpicked for cowardice and ineptitude? Oh, yes, bravo, Your Highness. That was a masterly piece of combat," said Ripred, his voice dripping with sarcasm. "Do not flatter yourself you have yet fought a rat."

"They themselves killed Fangor and Shed," said Mareth bravely.

"Well, then, I stand corrected. Fangor and Shed were excellent fighters, on the rare occasions they were sober," said Ripred. "However, I expect they were outnumbered and somewhat thrown by the arrival of our warrior. What say you, Warrior? Do you refuse to go with me as well?"

Gregor looked into Ripred's mocking, tortured eyes. He wanted to refuse, but if he did, could he ever find his dad?

As if following his thoughts, Vikus spoke up. "You need Ripred to guide you to your father. These tunnels are unmapped by humans. You would never find your way without him."

Still, he was a rat. Gregor had only been in the Underland a few days and he already despised rats. They had killed Luxa's and Henry's parents, imprisoned his father, and almost eaten him and Boots. He felt a kind of power surging through him when he thought of how much he hated them. But if all rats were bad, who was this strange creature staring at him from across the fire, offering to be their guide?

"So, what's in this for you?" said Gregor to Ripred.

"A fair question," said Ripred. "Well, Warrior, I am planning to overthrow King Gorgor and I need you to help me."

"By doing what?" said Gregor.

"I don't know," admitted Ripred. "None of us does."

Gregor rose and caught Vikus by the arm. "I have to talk to you alone," he said. The anger in his voice surprised even himself. Well, he *was* angry! The rat was not part of what he'd agreed to. This was not what he'd signed on for.

Vikus took Gregor's mood in stride. Maybe he had expected it. They walked about twenty yards away from the group. "So, how long have you had this plan with the rat?" asked Gregor.

Vikus thought a moment. "I am not sure exactly. Perhaps two or so years. Of course, it was all dependent upon your arrival."

"How come you didn't tell me about it before?" demanded Gregor.

"I do not believe in giving people more information than they can handle," said Vikus.

"Who says I can't handle it? I can handle it!" said Gregor, obviously not handling it.

"Perhaps you can, at least more easily than Luxa and Henry. I may well have told you if we had ever finished our discussion of 'The Prophecy of Gray,'" said Vikus. "No doubt you would have asked, and, yes, I may well have told you."

Gregor pulled the prophecy from his pocket and said, "Let's finish it now." He searched out the part of the prophecy where they'd left off.

One gnawer beside and one lost up ahead.

"So Ripred is the 'gnawer,' and my dad is the 'one lost up ahead,'" said Gregor. He read on.

And eight will be left when we count up the dead.

"What does that mean?" asked Gregor, pointing to the line.

"If you add up all the players in the prophecy, two over, two under, two fliers, two crawlers, two spinners, one gnawer, and one lost, you have twelve," said Vikus gravely. "By the end of the quest, only eight will remain alive. Four will be dead. But no one knows what four."

"Oh," said Gregor, stunned. He'd heard the words before, but they only registered now. "Four of us dead."

"But eight alive, Gregor," said Vikus gently. "And perhaps a world saved."

Gregor couldn't deal with that part now, wondering who would be left standing at the end of the day. He pushed on to the final stanza of the prophecy.

The last who will die must decide where he stands.

The fate of the eight is contained in his hands, so bid him take care, bid him look where he leaps, as life may be death and death life again reaps.

"I don't get this last part," said Gregor.

"Nor do I, nor does anyone. It is very cryptic. I believe no one will fully understand it until the final moment has arrived," said Vikus. "Gregor, it is not pleasant, it is not easy, but it is essential, what I ask you to do. Essential to you, if you wish to find your father. Essential for my people, if they are to survive."

Gregor felt his anger ebbing and fear filling the empty spaces it left. He took another tack. "I don't want to go with that rat," said Gregor, almost pleading. "He'll kill us."

"No, you cannot judge Ripred by what you know of other rats. He has wisdom unique in any creature. Things were not always so bad between humans and rats. When Solovet and Ripred and I were younger, we lived in relative peace. Ripred would see that restored, but King Gorger wishes all humans dead," said Vikus.

"So, you're saying Ripred's a good rat," said Gregor, choking on the words.

"If he were not, would I trust my granddaughter to his care?" asked Vikus.

"Your granddaughter?" said Gregor blankly. "Luxa's mother was my daughter, Judith," said Vikus.

"You're her grandpa? Why does she call you Vikus?" asked Gregor. These people were so weird and formal. How could he not have known that?

"It is our way," said Vikus. "Look after her. If this is hard for you, know it is torture for Luxa."

"I haven't said I'm going yet!" said Gregor. He looked into the old man's eyes. "All right, I'm going. Is there anything else I need to know that you haven't told me?"

"Only this: Despite what I said, I knew you were the warrior from the first moment I spied you," said Vikus.

"Thanks. Great. That's very helpful," said Gregor, and they returned to the group. "Okay, Boots and I are going with the rat. Who else is in?"

There was a pause. "Where goes the princess, go we," said Temp.

"What say you, Luxa?" said Vikus.

"What can I say, Vikus? Can I return to our people and tell them I withdrew from the quest when our survival hangs in the balance?" said Luxa bitterly.

"Of course you cannot, Luxa. This is why he times it so," said Henry.

"You could choose to -- " started Vikus.

"I could choose! I could choose!" retorted Luxa. "Do not offer me a choice when you know none exists!" She and Henry turned their backs on Vikus.

"Fliers?" said Solovet, as Vikus seemed to have lost the ability to talk.

"Aurora and I go with our bonds," muttered Ares.

"Then it is settled. Come, Mareth, we are needed at home," said Solovet.

A distraught Mareth quickly made up packs of food for the members of the quest. "Fly you high, all of you," he said in a strained voice, and climbed on his bat.

Solovet mounted her bat and unrolled her map. While Ripred helped her work out the safest route back to Regalia, Vikus moved to Henry and Luxa. Neither of them would turn to look at him.

"I would not part this way, but I understand your hearts. Perhaps one day you will be able to forgive me this moment. Fly you high, Henry. Fly you high, Luxa," said Vikus. He waited for a response, but none came. He turned and climbed heavily onto his bat.

As miserable as Gregor felt about being dumped with a rat, his heart ached for Vikus. He wanted to scream at Luxa, "Say something! Don't let your grandpa fly off like this! Four of us aren't coming back!" But the words caught in his throat. Part of him wasn't ready to forgive Vikus for abandoning them, either.

"Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander," said Vikus.

Gregor struggled with how to respond. Should he ignore Vikus? Let him know that none of them, not even an Overlander, could forgive him? Just as he had steeled himself against replying, Gregor thought of the last two years, seven months, and, was it fifteen days now? There were so many things he wished he'd said to his dad when he'd had the chance. Things like how special it was when they went on the roof at night and tried to find stars. Or how much he loved it when they took the subway out to the stadium to watch a baseball game. Or just that he felt lucky that out of all the people in the world, his dad was his dad.

He didn't have room inside him for any more unspoken words. The bats were rising into the air. He only had a second. "Fly you high, Vikus!" he yelled. "Fly you high!"

Vikus turned back, and Gregor could see tears shining on his cheeks. He lifted up a hand to Gregor in thanks.

CHAPTER 20

It was just the nine of them then. Gregor felt like all the grown-ups had gone home and left the kids with a rat for a baby-sitter. Inside, he felt sick and hollow and very young. He looked around the group and realized there was no one he could turn to for protection.

"We may as well get some rest," said Ripred with a big yawn. "Start fresh in a few hours." He brushed some cheese crumbs off his fur, curled up in a ball, and was snoring loudly within a minute.

No one else knew what to say. Gregor spread his blanket on the floor and called Boots over.

"Go bye-bye?" asked Boots, pointing in the direction Vikus had departed.

"They went bye-bye, Boots. We're going to sleep here. Beddy-bye time." He lay down on the blanket, and she curled up with him without protest. Temp and Tick positioned themselves on either side of them. Were they standing guard? Did they really think there was anything they could do if Ripred decided to attack them? Still, it was kind of comforting to have them there.

Luxa refused to lie down. Aurora came and wrapped her golden wings around her. Ares pressed his black, furry back against Aurora's, and Henry lay at his feet.

They could take whatever precautions they wanted to, but Gregor felt sure Ripred could kill all eight of them in a flash. "He'll take out Henry and Luxa first, since they're the only two with weapons, and then just pick off the rest of us one by one," thought Gregor. Maybe Ares or Aurora could escape, but the rest of them were sitting ducks. That was the truth, he might as well accept it.

Oddly enough, once he did accept it, Gregor felt more relaxed. He didn't have any choice but to trust Ripred. If he could trust Ripred, then he could go to sleep. So he let himself drift off, trying to push the images of striped spider legs and jagged rat teeth from his brain. What a rotten day it had been.

He awoke with a start to a loud slapping sound. He instinctively crouched over Boots until he realized it was just Ripred smacking his tail against the ground.

"Come on, come on," he growled. "Time to get moving. Feed yourselves and let's go."

Gregor crawled out from under his blanket and waited for Mareth to get the food. Then he remembered that Mareth was gone. "How do you want to handle this food thing?" he asked Henry.

"Luxa and I do not serve food, we are royalty," said Henry haughtily.

"Yeah, well, I'm the warrior and Boots is a princess. And you two are going to get pretty hungry if you're waiting for me to serve you," said Gregor. He was way over this royalty thing.

Ripred laughed. "Tell him, boy. Tell him your country fought a war so you wouldn't have to answer to kings and queens."

Gregor looked at Ripred in surprise. "How do you know that?"

"Oh, I know a great many things about the Overland that our friends here do not. I have spent much time there among your books and papers," said Ripred.

"You can read?" asked Gregor.

"Most rats read. Our frustration is, we cannot hold a pen to write. Now move, Overlander. Eat, don't eat, but let's go," ordered Ripred.

Gregor went to the packs of food to check out the supplies. It was mostly smoked meat, bread, and those sweet potato things. He guessed they might have enough food for three days, if they were careful. Of course, Ripred ate like a pig, and he would probably expect them to feed him. Okay, maybe two days.

Luxa came over and sat awkwardly at his side.

"What?" Gregor said.

"How do we ... make the food?" she asked.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"Henry and I, we have never actually prepared food," admitted Luxa.

Gregor could see Henry scowling at Luxa, but she did not look at him.

"You mean, you never even made yourself a sandwich?" asked Gregor. He couldn't cook much, but if his mom had to work late, he'd make dinner sometimes. Just stuff like scrambled eggs or macaroni and cheese, but he could get by.

"A sandwich? Is this a dish named in honor of Bartholomew of Sandwich?" she asked, puzzled.

Gregor said, "I don't really know. It's two slices of bread with meat or cheese or peanut butter or something between them."

"I have not made a sandwich," said Luxa.

"It's not hard. Here, slice off some pieces of meat. Not too thick," he said, handing her a knife. Gregor sawed away at the bread, managing to get eighteen slices out of one loaf. Luxa did a pretty good job with the meat, but then, she was used to handling blades. He showed her how to assemble the sandwiches, and she seemed somewhat pleased with her accomplishment. She took four for herself, her cousin, and the bats. Gregor took the other five. It would be asking too much of her to serve Ripred and the roaches.

He roused Boots, and she started right in on her sandwich. Temp and Tick gave polite nods of thanks for theirs. Then Gregor approached Ripred, who was leaning sulkily in the tunnel. He held out a sandwich. "Here," he said.

"For me?" said Ripred, with exaggerated surprise. "How very thoughtful of you. I'm sure the rest of your party would be happy to see me starve."

"If you starve, I'll never find my dad," said Gregor.

"Quite true," said Ripred, popping the entire sandwich in his mouth. "It's good we have this understanding. Mutual need is a strong bond. Stronger than friendship, stronger than love."

"Do rats love?" said Gregor dryly.

"Oh, yes," said Ripred with a smirk. "We love ourselves very much."

"Figures," thought Gregor. He went and sat with Boots, who was polishing off her sandwich.

"More," said Boots, pointing at Gregor's uneaten sandwich. He was ravenous, but he couldn't let her go hungry. He started to break his sandwich in half when Temp delicately pushed his sandwich in front of Boots.

"The princess may eat mine," said Temp.

"You need to eat, too, Temp," objected Gregor.

"Not much," said Temp. "Tick will share her food with me."

Her food. So Tick must be a girl roach.

"He will share with me," said Tick.

And Temp was a guy. Not that it made any difference to Gregor; it was just one more way he could avoid insulting the bugs.

Since Boots had already munched halfway through Temp's sandwich, Gregor accepted. He'd try to give them part of his food at the next meal.

Breakfast was finished in two minutes, and they packed up. They were starting to mount Ares and Aurora when Ripred stopped them. "Don't bother. You cannot fly where we go," he said, and indicated the tunnel. It was barely six feet high and only a few feet wide.

"We're going in there? Isn't there another way to get to my dad?" asked Gregor. He didn't want to head into the dark, narrow space with Ripred, even if they had mutual need.

"There is another way, but not a better way. Unless you know one," said Ripred.

Gregor could feel Ares and Aurora twitching in distress. "What about the bats?"

"I'm sure you'll work that out," drawled Ripred.

"Can you walk?" Gregor asked Ares.

"Not long. Not far," said Ares.

"Then we'll have to carry you," said Gregor.

"Ride you, fliers, ride you?" asked Temp.

"Fliers do not ride crawlers," said Aurora edgily.

"Why not? They rode on you," said Gregor. He was tired of everybody being snooty to the roaches. They never complained and they pulled their weight and they looked after Boots. All in all, the bugs were the easiest traveling companions.

The bats fluttered but didn't answer. "Well, I'm not carrying you. I've already got Boots and a pack of pot roasts. And Luxa and Henry can't carry you both. So, if you're too good to ride on the crawlers, I guess you'd better ask Ripred for a lift."

"Do not use that tone with them," snapped Luxa. "They do not sneer at the crawlers. It is the smallness of the tunnel. Fliers do not like a place they cannot spread their wings."

"Yeah, well, half of us haven't been having much fun flying hundreds of feet in the air, either," said Gregor. He realized he was beginning to sound like a jerk. Ares and Aurora had not been mean or impatient when he and the roaches were scared of flying. "Look, I know it'll be hard, but I'm sure the whole trip won't be in such small tunnels. Right, Ripred?"

"Oh, surely not the *whole* trip," said Ripred, bored to pieces by the argument. "Can we start, please? The war will be over before we decide our travel plans."

"*We will ride with the crawlers," said Ares shortly.

Gregor helped Luxa and Henry set the bats on the roaches' backs. They had to lie facedown and cling to the smooth shells with their claws. Gregor had to admit it looked like an uncomfortable way to travel. He tucked Boots in the backpack and picked up his share of the food. "Okay, lead the way," he said to Ripred.

"Finally," Ripred said, and slid into the black hole of the tunnel. Henry followed next, with a torch and a drawn sword. Gregor guessed he was trying to give the bats some feeling of protection. They went next, single file, on the roaches.

Gregor waited for Luxa to enter the tunnel, but she shook her head. "No, Overlander, I think it best that I cover our backs."

"Probably," said Gregor, realizing he still didn't have a sword. He went into the tunnel giving Boots the flashlight to hold. Luxa brought up the rear.

It was awful. Cramped and airless, with some foul liquid that smelled like rotten eggs dripping from the ceiling. The bats were stiff with discomfort, but the crawlers seemed at home.

"Ick," said Boots as a drop of liquid landed on Gregor's hard hat. "Icky."

"Yeah, ick, ick, icky," agreed Gregor. He hoped the tunnel wasn't long; you could go crazy pretty fast in here. He turned back to check on Luxa. She didn't look happy, but she was managing.

"What means this 'icky'?" she asked him.

"Um, icky, yucky, gross, nasty ... foul," said Gregor. "Yes, that describes well the rats' land," said Luxa with a sniff.

"Hey, Luxa," he said. "How come you were surprised when Ripred showed up? I mean, I don't really know the prophecy, but you do. Didn't you expect a rat?"

"No. I thought 'one gnawer beside' meant a rat would be tracking us, perhaps even chasing us. I never imagined he would be part of the quest," she said.

"Vikus said we can trust him," said Gregor.

"Vikus says many things," said Luxa. She sounded so angry that Gregor decided to let the conversation drop.

They trudged on for a while in silence. From the periodic splashes on his face, Gregor knew that Boots must be getting wet. He tried to put his hard hat on her, but it kept slipping off. Finally he dug out some catch cloths and tied them on Boots's head. The last thing they needed was for her to catch a cold.

After several dismal hours, everyone was soaked and miserable. Ripred led them into a small cavern. The smelly water ran down along the sides of the place like rain. The bats were so stiff that Luxa and Henry had to lift them off the roaches and help straighten out their wings.

Ripred lifted his nose in the air and took a deep sniff. "There. That has done much to conceal your odor," he said with satisfaction.

"You mean you just took us that way so we'd all smell like rotten eggs?" said Gregor.

"Quite necessary. As a pack, you were highly repugnant," said Ripred.

Gregor was too worn out to argue. He and Luxa opened up the packs and doled out food. No one felt like talking. Ripred swallowed his lunch in a gulp and stood in the entrance to the tunnel.

They were just finishing up when the bats went tense. "Spinners," warned Aurora.

"Yes, yes, they've been on our trail almost since we started our journey. I cannot smell how many in this place, with all the water. What can they want, I wonder?" Ripred flicked his tail at Luxa and Henry and gave an order. "Three-point arc, you two."

Luxa and Henry exchanged a look and didn't move.

"Three-point arc and this is no time to test my authority, pups!" growled Ripred, baring his terrible teeth. Henry and Luxa reluctantly took places on either side of Ripred, but back a few feet. The three formed a small arc between the rest of the party and the tunnel entrance. The bats took positions behind them.

Gregor strained his ears, but all he could hear was the water falling. Was there an army of spiders after them? He felt, as usual, unarmed and defenseless. He didn't even have a root beer this time.

Everyone became motionless. Gregor could tell that Temp and Tick sensed the invaders now, too. Boots solemnly sucked on a cookie, but didn't make a sound.

Gregor could see the muscles rippling in anticipation along Ripred's broad gray back as the spinners approached. He braced himself for a wave of bloodthirsty spiders, but it never came.

A large orange spider with a small brown spider on its back staggered in and collapsed on the floor. The brown one was oozing a strange blue liquid. It made a great effort to sit up. Its front legs brushed its chest as it spoke.

"Vikus sends us. Gnawers attacked webs. Many spinners lost. We two ... we join ... the quest."

CHAPTER 21

Gregor looked at the spider in shock. In its final moments, it had rolled onto its back and curled up its legs. Blue liquid seeped out of a wound in its belly staining the stone floor.

"So, we're all here," said Gregor softly.

"What do you mean?" asked Henry.

Gregor pulled the prophecy from his pocket. "Sandwich was right. We're all here together. At least we were for a few seconds." He read aloud:

"two over, two under, of royal descent, two fliers, two crawlers, two spinners assent. One gnawer beside and one lost up ahead. "

He couldn't bring himself to say the next line, but Ripred could. "And eight will be left when we count up the dead. Well, one down and three to go," said Ripred, poking the spider with the end of his tail. "Stop it!" said Gregor.

"Oh, what? We can't pretend that any of us was very attached to this spinner. We don't even know its name. Except maybe you," Ripred said to the orange spider.

"Treflex," said the orange spider. "I am she called Gox."

"Well, Gox, I suppose you're hungry after your journey, but our food is limited. None of us will think less of you if you'd like to dine on Treflex," said Ripred.

Gox immediately began to pump juice into Treflex.

"She's not going to -- oh, man!" said Gregor.

"Spiders are neither squeamish nor sentimental," said Ripred. "Thank goodness for that."

Gregor turned away so neither he nor Boots had to watch the cannibalism. He was glad to see that Henry and Luxa looked a little green, too.

"Look, if anything happens to me or Boots, don't let that spinner drink us. Toss us off the cliff, in a river, anything, okay?" he said.

They both nodded. "You will return the same favor for us?" said Luxa wanly. "And our bats?"

"And Tick and Temp, too. I promise," said Gregor.

He could hear the slow sucking sounds as Gox drained Treflex's body. "Geez," he added.

Fortunately it didn't take Gox long to eat. Ripred began to grill her about the rat attack. She told him an entire army -- several hundred rats, at least -- had invaded the land of the spiders. The spiders had held them off, but many had died on both sides before the rats had finally retreated. Vikus had come by after the carnage and had sent Gox and Treflex on his bat to the tunnel entrance. "Why?" asked Gox. "Why do the gnawers kill us?"

"I don't know. It may be that King Gorger has launched a total Underland attack. Or it may be they caught wind of two Overlanders heading toward our land. Did they mention the warrior of 'The Prophecy of Gray'?" asked Ripred.

"There were no words, only death," said Gox.

"It is quite fortunate you found us. It would have taken much time to free two spinners from King Gorger's prisons unnoticed, and we have no time to waste," said Ripred to Gox. He turned to Gregor. "This attack on the spinners does not bode well for your father."

"Why? What? Why not?" asked Gregor, feeling his insides go icy.

"Vikus has done a remarkable job of concealing you. No rat save me has seen you and lived to tell of it. The rats do not know the warrior has arrived. But the fact that humans have brought Overlanders to the spinners will make them suspicious," said Ripred. The wheels seemed to be visibly turning in his head. "Still, there is much confusion in war and no rat has identified you. We move on now!"

No one argued. They packed up and headed out the far side of the cavern into a drier, roomier tunnel. Aurora and Ares were able to fly now, although the space was dangerous for riders.

"We shall go on foot," Luxa told Aurora. "Even if you carry the rest of us, what will be done with the gnawer?" So, the bats took to the air with the remaining packs.

Gregor watched them enviously. "Lucky I'm not a bat. I might just fly out of here and not look back."

"Aurora and Ares would never do that. They are bonded to myself and Henry," said Luxa.

"How does that work exactly?" asked Gregor.

"When a bat and a human bond, they swear to fight to the death for each other," said Luxa. "Aurora would never leave me in danger, nor I her."

"Does everybody have a bat?" asked Gregor, thinking it would be nice to know somebody was going to hang around and defend you in this place.

"Oh, no. Some never find a bat to bond with. I became one with Aurora when I was quite young, but this is not common," said Luxa.

"How come you bonded so early?" asked Gregor.

"After my parents were killed, I went through a time where I never felt safe on the ground. I spent all my waking hours in the air on Aurora. It is why we fly so well together," she said simply. "Vikus convinced the council to allow us to bond early. After that I was not so afraid."

"Are you afraid now?" said Gregor.

"At times," she admitted. "But it is no worse than if I were in Regalia. You see, I tired of constant fear, so I made a decision. Every day when I wake I tell myself that it will be my last. If you are not trying to hold on to time, you are not so afraid of losing it."

Gregor thought this was the single saddest thing anyone had ever said to him. He couldn't answer.

"And then, if you make it to bedtime, you feel the joy of cheating death out of one more day," she said. "Do you see?"

"I think so," said Gregor numbly. An awful thought struck him. Wasn't Luxa's strategy just an extreme form of his own rule? True, he didn't think about dying every day, but he denied himself the luxury of thinking about the future with or without his dad. If he hadn't fallen through the grate in his laundry room and discovered his dad was still alive, if his dad had never come home, how long would he have gone on refusing to be happy? His whole life? "Maybe," he thought. "Maybe my whole life." Gregor hurried on with the conversation.

"So, how do you actually bond with a bat?" he asked Luxa.

"It is a simple ceremony. Many bats and humans gather. You stand face-to-face with your bat and say a vow. Like so," said Luxa, extending her hand and reciting a poem.

"Aurora the flier, I bond to you, Our life and death are one, we two. In dark, in flame, in war, in strife I save you as I save my life."

"And then your bat recites it back, but using your name. Then there is a feast," concluded Luxa.

"So what happens if one of you breaks the vow? Like if Aurora flew off and left you in danger," asked Gregor.

"Aurora would not, but a few vows have been broken. The punishment is severe. The one at fault is banished to live alone in the Underland," said Luxa. "And no one lives long in the Underland alone."

"Fascinating as your native rituals are, do you think we might proceed in silence? Given that the entire rat nation is on the lookout for us, it might be prudent," said Ripred.

Luxa and Gregor shut up. Gregor wished they could talk more. Luxa acted differently when she wasn't with Henry. Friendlier. Less arrogant. But Ripred was right about the noise.

Fortunately Boots dozed off. For several hours all they heard were the light tap of their footsteps and the scraping sound of Ripred's teeth on a bone he'd saved from lunch.

Gregor felt consumed with new worries about his dad. From what Ripred had said, it seemed like the rats might kill him to keep Gregor from reaching him. But why? That wouldn't change the prophecy, would it? He guessed no one really knew. And what about that last stanza? He unrolled the prophecy and read it so many times, he memorized it without trying.

The last who will die must decide where he stands. the fate of the eight is contained in his hands, so bid him take care, bid him look where he leaps, as life may be death and death life again reaps.

He couldn't make heads or tails of it. All he could figure out was that whoever died fourth had a pretty big responsibility to the eight who were still living. But how? What? Where? When? The final stanza of "The Prophecy of Gray" left out all the details that would have made it useful.

Ripred kept them moving until everyone was stumbling with fatigue. He gave the order to stop in a cavern that at least had a dry floor and a spring with drinkable water.

Gregor and Luxa passed around their dwindling food, which was disappearing much faster than he had anticipated. He tried to object when the roaches gave their food to Boots, thinking he would share his own.

"Let them feed her," said Ripred. "A crawler can live a month with no food if it has water. And don't bother feeding Gox. Treflex will hold her for longer than our journey will last."

The cavern was cold. Gregor stripped off Boots's damp clothes and put on a fresh set. Something was wrong with her; she seemed too quiet, and her skin was clammy and cold. He curled up under the blanket with her, trying to warm her up. What would he do if she got sick? They needed to be home with his mom, who always knew just the combination of juice and medicine and pillows to make it all right. He tried to console himself with the idea that his dad could help when they found him.

Everyone was so tired from their trek that they fell asleep immediately.

CHAPTER 22

Gregor opened his mouth to scream "No!" just as Ripred's eyes flickered. Henry was behind the rat. All Ripred could have seen was the expression on Gregor's face, but it was enough.

In the split second Henry drove the blade down, Ripred flipped onto his back and slashed his terrible claws. The sword cut across the rat's chest as Ripred tore a deep gash along Henry's arm.

About this time, Gregor's "No!" had actually left his mouth, and his yell woke up most of the party. Ripred rose up on his hind legs, bleeding, furious, and terrifying to see. Henry looked weak and small by comparison; he could barely lift his sword with his injured arm. Luxa and Aurora were instantly airborne. Ares flew straight for the rat.

But Gregor got there first. He sprang between Ripred and Henry with his arms spread out. "Stop!" he cried. "Stop!"

Unbelievably, everyone paused. Gregor guessed this was the first time any of them had ever seen someone try to come between a fighting rat and a human. Their second of hesitation gave him just enough time to blurt out, "Anybody who wants to kill anybody else has to go through me first!"

Not particularly poetic, but it had the desired effect. No one wanted Gregor dead. Everyone knew the warrior was essential to the quest.

"Move, Overlander, the rat will kill us all!" ordered Luxa, preparing to dive at Ripred.

"The rat was merely trying to sleep. Believe me, pup, if I had wanted to kill you we would not be having this conversation," said Ripred.

"Do not waste your lies on us, Gnawer!" said Luxa. "Do you think we would believe your word over one of our own?"

"It's true! He's telling the truth! He didn't start it! It was Henry!" Gregor shouted. "He was trying to kill Ripred in his sleep!"

Everyone turned to Henry, who spat back at them,

"Yes, and he would be dead now were it not for the Overlander!"

Now there was confusion. Gregor could tell by the look on Luxa's face she hadn't known about Henry's plan. She'd assumed Ripred had attacked first. She didn't know what to do next.

"Stop, Luxa! Please!" said Gregor. "We can't afford to lose any more questers here! We have to stick together!" He'd made up the word

"questers" on the spot, and it seemed right.

Luxa slowly descended to the ground, but stayed on Aurora's back. Ares hovered uncertainly in the air. Gregor wondered if the bat had known about Henry's plan. But if he had, why hadn't they attacked together from the air? It was so hard to tell what the bats were thinking.

Gregor noticed for the first time that Temp and Tick were literally standing over the sleeping Boots, shielding her. Gox still perched in the makeshift web she'd built at bedtime.

"It's over," Gregor said with an authority he didn't know he possessed. "Put down your sword, Henry. Ripred, just -- just sit down! It's over!"

Would they listen to him? Gregor didn't know, but he was determined to hold his ground. It was a long, tense moment. Then Ripred lowered his lips back over his bared fangs and broke into a laugh. "I will say this for you, Warrior, you do not lack boldness."

Henry let his sword clatter to the ground, which was no big concession since Gregor saw he could barely hold it. "Or treachery," said Henry softly.

Gregor narrowed his eyes at Henry. "You know, where I come from, we don't think much of someone who sneaks up and stabs a person in their sleep."

"He is not a person, he is a rat," said Henry. "If you cannot make the distinction, you may surely count yourself among the dead."

Gregor held Henry's cold gaze. He knew that later he would think of several tough things he should have said to Henry, but he couldn't think of any now. Instead, he turned to Luxa and said gruffly, "We'd better patch them up."

They weren't much better at first aid than they were at cooking, but Luxa at least knew what ointment to use. Gox turned out to be the biggest help of all. She spun a special web and instructed them to press handfuls of the silky threads into the injuries. In minutes, the bleeding on both Henry's arm and Ripred's chest had stopped.

While Gregor patted extra layers of silk onto Ripred's matted fur, the rat muttered, "I suppose I ought to thank you."

"Forget about it," said Gregor. "I only did it because I need you." He didn't want Ripred thinking they were friends or anything.

"Did you? I'm glad," said Ripred. "I thought I detected in you a sense of fair play. Most dangerous in the Underland, boy."

Gregor wished everybody would just shut up about what was dangerous to him in the Underland. The whole place was one big minefield. He ignored Ripred's comment and continued to apply the spider-webs. Behind him he heard Luxa whisper to Henry, "Why did you not tell us?"

"To keep you safe," Henry whispered back.

"Safe," thought Gregor. "Right." Even if he got back to the Overland, Gregor didn't think he would ever feel safe again.

"You must not do this again, Henry," he heard Luxa say. "You cannot take him alone."

"I could have, if the Overlander had not interfered," said Henry.

"No, the risk is too great, and we may have need of him," said Luxa. "Let the rat be."

"Is that an order, Your Highness?" asked Henry with a slight edge to his voice.

"If that is the only way you will heed my advice, then yes," said Luxa earnestly. "Hold your sword until we better understand our condition."

"You speak most exactly like that old fool Vikus," said Henry.

"No, I speak as myself," said Luxa, stung. "And as one who wishes us both to survive."

The cousins realized their voices had risen to the point where everyone could hear them, so they stopped talking. In the silence, Ripred resumed gnawing on the bone he'd been carrying around. The scraping grated on Gregor's nerves. "Do you think you could stop that, please?" he asked.

"No, actually I can't," said Ripred. "Rats' teeth continue to grow our entire lives, which necessitates gnawing to keep them at a manageable length. If I didn't gnaw frequently, my lower teeth would soon grow through the top of my skull and puncture my brain and alas, kill me."

"Glad I asked," said Gregor, slapping a last piece of web on Ripred and leaning back against the cavern wall. "So, now what?"

"Well, since obviously no one's going back to dreamland, we may as well make tracks for your father," said Ripred, rising to his feet.

Gregor went to get Boots. As soon as he touched her he felt alarmed. Her face was burning like a furnace. "Oh, no," he said helplessly. "Hey, Boots. Hey, little girl." He gently shook her shoulder. She whimpered something in her sleep but didn't wake up. "Luxa, something's wrong. Boots is sick," he said.

Luxa laid her hand on Boots's forehead. "She is fevered. She has caught some pestilence from the land of rats." Pestilence. Gregor hoped that wasn't as serious as it sounded. Luxa dug through the vials Solovet had left with them and held one up uncertainly. "I think this is for fever."

Ripred took a sniff and wrinkled his nose. "No, that kills pain." He buried his snout in the pack and rooted out a blue glass bottle. "You need this one.

Give her only a few drops. She cannot handle more at her size."

Gregor was reluctant to give her any of the strange medicine, but Boots was so hot. He slipped a few drops between her lips and thought she swallowed it. He tried to lift her up to put her in the pack, and she moaned in pain. He bit his lip. "She can't ride with me; it hurts her."

They laid Boots on a blanket on Temp's back. Gox spun a web to secure her to the shell.-Gregor felt sick with worry.

And eight will be left when we count up the dead.

He couldn't lose Boots. He just couldn't. He had to get her home. He should have left her in Regalia. He should never have agreed to the quest. If anything happened to Boots, it would be his fault.

The gloom of the tunnel soaked through his skin and into his veins. He wanted to scream out in pain, but the darkness choked him. He would have given almost anything for just one glimpse of the sun.

The party limped along slowly, painfully, suspiciously, preoccupied by the worries they all shared, but no one spoke aloud. Even Ripred, by far the most hardened of the group, seemed to hunch down under the weight of the situation.

This general despair was just one of the reasons they didn't detect the score of rats until they were almost on top of them. Even Ripred could not distinguish the smell of rats in a place reeking of rats. The bats couldn't sense them in the narrow tunnel as they approached the increasingly loud river. The humans could see nothing in the gloom.

Ripred led them out of the tunnel into a huge cavern divided by a deep canyon. A wide, powerful river ran through it. A swinging bridge spanned the river. It must have been made with the combined efforts of several species in better times. Thick silk woven by the spiders supported thin slats of stone cut by the humans. They must have needed the bats' flying abilities, too, to build such a bridge.

When Gregor shone his flashlight up to see how the bridge was secured, he caught sight of them. Twenty rats sitting motionless on the rocks above the opening to the tunnel. Right above their heads. Waiting.

"Run!" Ripred yelled, and literally snapped his teeth at Gregor's heels. Gregor stumbled forward onto the bridge and began to cross, his feet slipping on the worn stone slats. He could feel Ripred's hot breath on his neck. Henry and Luxa were flying ahead of him, jetting across the river.

He was halfway across when he remembered Boots wasn't on his back. She had been with him so continually on the journey, he had begun to think of them as inseparable. But now she was on Temp!

Gregor turned abruptly to go back. Ripred, as if anticipating just this move, spun Gregor forward and snagged the backpack with his teeth. Gregor felt himself lifted into the air as Ripred ran flat out for the far side of the river.

"Boots!" yelled Gregor. "Boots!"

Ripred moved like lightning. As he reached the opposite bank, he dumped Gregor on the ground and joined Luxa and Henry, who were frantically trying to hack through the silk ropes supporting the bridge.

Gregor aimed his flashlight and saw that Gox was about three quarters of the way across. Behind her, carrying his sister, Temp struggled along with Boots. Between Boots and the twenty killer rats that were now streaming across the bridge -- there was only Tick.

"Boots!" Gregor screamed, and dove back for the bridge. Ripred's tail caught him across the chest and flung him back onto the ground, knocking the wind from him. He gasped, trying to fill his lungs, then got to his knees and crawled toward the bridge. He had to help her. He had to.

Gox zipped off the bridge and began to snap threads with her jaws. "No!" coughed Gregor. "My sister!" He pulled up to his feet just in time to catch another blow from Ripred's tail.

The roaches were within ten feet of the bank when the rats caught up with them. There was no discussion between them; it was as if the bugs had worked out this whole scenario long ago. Temp put on a burst of speed for the end of the bridge, and Tick turned to face down the army of rats alone.

As they bounded at her, Tick flew directly into the face of the lead rat, causing it to startle back in surprise. Until that moment, Gregor hadn't even realized the roaches had wings. Maybe the rats didn't know, either. But it

didn't take them long to recover. The lead rat sprang forward and crushed Tick's head in its jaws.

Temp collapsed on the bank just as the bridge gave way. Twenty rats, the leader still holding Tick in its teeth, plunged into the river below. As if this sight wasn't horrific enough, the water churned as enormous piranha-like fish surfaced and fed on the screaming rats.

CHAPTER 23

"Move it, move it, move it!" instructed Ripred, herding them all from the open bank and into a tunnel. He forced them along for a few minutes until they were well out of sight and, hopefully, out of smell of the tunnel entrance. At a small chamber, he gave the order to halt. "Stop you. Sit you. Slow your hearts."

Wordlessly, the remaining members of the quest sunk to the floor of the tunnel. Gregor sat with Temp, his back to the others. He pawed up Temp's back, found Boots's hot little fingers, and entwined them with his own. He had almost lost her. Lost her for good. She would never have had the chance to meet their dad or get back to his mom's arms or play in the sprinkler with him and Lizzie or do anything ever again.

He did not want to look at the rest of the questers. Every one of them would have watched Boots and the crawlers fall into the river to stop the rats. He had nothing to say to them.

And then there was Tick. Brave little Tick, who had flown into the face of an army of rats to save his baby sister. Tick -- who never spoke much. Tick -- who shared her food. Tick -- who was after all just a roach. Just a roach who had given all the time she had left so that Boots could have more.

Gregor pressed Boots's fingers against his lips and felt scalding tears begin to slide down his cheeks. He hadn't cried, not the whole time he'd been down here, and there had been plenty of bad stuff. But somehow Tick's sacrifice had crushed whatever thin shell remained between him and sorrow. From now on, he felt an allegiance to the roaches that he knew would never fade. He would never again take a roach's life. Not here and not -- if by some miracle they made it home -- in the Overland.

He felt his shoulders began to shake. Probably the others thought he was ridiculous, crying over a roach, but he didn't care. He hated them. He hated them all.

Temp, whose antennas had drooped down over his head, reached out and touched Gregor with a feeler. "Thank you. To weep when Tick has lost time."

"Boots would weep, too, if she weren't..." Gregor couldn't go on as another wave of sobs swept over him. He was glad Boots hadn't witnessed

Tick's death. She would have been upset and she wouldn't have understood it. He didn't really understand it, either.

Gregor felt a hand on his shoulder and jerked away. He knew it was Luxa, but he didn't want to talk to her. "Gregor," she whispered sadly. "Gregor, know you we would have caught Boots and Temp if they fell. We would have caught Tick, too, had there been any reason."

He pressed his hand against his eyes to stop his tears, and nodded. Well, at least that was a little better. Of course Luxa would have dived after Boots if she'd fallen. The Underlanders didn't worry about falling the way he did, not with their bats.

"It's okay," he said. "I know." When Luxa sat beside him, he didn't move away. "I guess you think it's pretty stupid, me crying over a roach."

"You do not yet know the Underlanders if you think we lack tears," said Luxa. "We weep. We weep, and not just for ourselves."

"Not for Tick, though," said Gregor with a trace of bitterness.

"I have not wept since the death of my parents," said Luxa quietly. "But I am thought to be unnatural in this respect."

Gregor felt more tears slipping down his cheeks when he thought of how badly you had to be hurt to lose the ability to cry. He forgave Luxa everything at that moment. He even forgot why he needed to forgive her.

"Gregor," she said softly when his tears had stopped. "If you return to Regalia, and I do not... tell Vikus that I understood."

"Understood what?" asked Gregor.

"Why he left us with Ripred," said Luxa. "We had to have a gnawer. I see now he was trying to protect us."

"Okay, I'll tell him," said Gregor, wiping his nose. He was quiet for a minute, and then he asked, "So, how often do we give Boots that medicine? She still feels pretty hot."

"Let us dose her now, before we move on," said

Luxa, stroking Boots's forehead. Boots murmured in her sleep but didn't wake up. They slipped a few more drops from the bottle between her lips.

Gregor stood up and tried to shake off the pain. "Let's get going," he said, not looking at Ripred. The rat had been in tons of wars. He'd probably seen lots of creatures killed. He'd told Gox to eat Treflex. Gregor was sure Tick's death affected him as little as ... well, as swatting a roach affected people in New York.

But when Ripred spoke, his voice lacked its usual snide tone. "Take heart, Overlander. Your father is nearby."

Gregor lifted his head at the words. "How nearby?"

"An hour's walk, no more," said Ripred. "But so are his guards. We must all proceed with extreme caution. Bind your feet in webs, speak not, and stay close behind me. We had rare luck at the bridge. I do not think it follows us where now we go."

Gox, whom Gregor was beginning to appreciate more as time passed, quickly spun thick silk slippers to pad their feet. As Gregor held his flashlight for Luxa to put on her pair, the light faded. He dug in his pack and came up with the last two batteries.

"How much longer can your torchlight last?" Gregor asked Luxa. He had noticed they'd gone to one torch when they met up with Ripred, apparently to conserve fuel. Now the one torch burned low.

"A short time only," admitted Luxa. "Your light stick?"

"I don't know," said Gregor. "These are my last batteries, and I don't know how much power's left in them."

"Once we have your father, we will not need light. Ares and Aurora can get us home in the dark," said Luxa encouragingly.

"They're going to have to," said Gregor.

The questers regrouped. Ripred led with Temp and Boots behind him. The tunnel was large enough for Gregor and Gox to walk beside them. Aurora and Ares fluttered along next, making short, silent flights. Henry and Luxa brought up the rear on foot, swords drawn. Ripred gave them a nod and they started off, deep, deep into enemy territory.

They tiptoed along, scarcely daring to breathe. Gregor froze every time a pebble moved beneath his foot, thinking he had triggered another rat assault. He was very afraid, but a new emotion was rising up in him, giving him strength to keep putting one foot in front of the other. It was hope. It flowed through him, insisting that he break his rule. His father was nearby. He would see him soon. If only they could keep moving forward undetected, he would see him soon.

When they had been creeping along for about half an hour, Ripred suddenly stopped at a bend in the tunnel. The whole party pulled up behind him. Ripred's nose twitched furiously and he crouched.

A pair of rats sprang from around the bend. In an impossible move, Ripred tore out one's throat with his teeth while his back feet blinded the

second. In another flash, both rats lay dead. No one else had had time to raise a hand. Ripred's defense confirmed what Gregor had suspected the first moment he'd looked in his eyes. Even among rats, Ripred was lethal.

Ripred wiped his muzzle on one of the dead rats and spoke in a whisper. "Those were the guards to this passage. We are about to enter open space. Stay against the wall, single file, for the earth is unstable and the fall immeasurable." Everyone nodded numbly, still stunned by his ferocity. "It's all right," he added. "Remember, I'm on your side."

Around the bend of the tunnel was the opening.

Ripred made a right turn, and they peeled off in single file behind him. A narrow path led along the side of a canyon. When Gregor shone his light into it, he saw nothing but blackness. "And the fall is immeasurable," he thought.

The ground under his left foot, the one closest to the void, crumbled and sent a shower of stone and dirt into the darkness. Gregor never heard it hit the bottom. His only consolation was that Aurora and Ares were inching along somewhere behind him, ready to save anyone who fell.

After about fifty yards they reached the more solid ground that fanned out from one end of the canyon. A natural arch of stone framed a wide road, worn smooth by many rat feet. Ripred picked up speed as they crossed under the arch, and Gregor felt that any protection the terrain had given them was gone.

Ripred, Temp, Gox, and Gregor raced down the road. Luxa and Henry had instinctively taken to the air. Gregor felt as if rat eyes must be burning at them from every crevice.

The path ended abruptly at a deep circular pit with walls as smooth as ice. A faint light burned in the pit revealing a furry creature hunched over a stone slab, fiddling with something. At first Gregor raised a warning hand. He thought it was a rat.

CHAPTER 24

The man who had disappeared from Gregor's life two years, seven months, and who knew how many days ago had been the picture of health. Strong, tall, and vibrant, energy had seemed to pour right out of him. The man squinting up at them from the pit was so thin and weak, his attempt to stand failed. He fell on all fours, then lifted one hand to help tilt his own head back.

"Dad?" Gregor tried to say, but all the moisture had left his mouth. He dropped to his own knees at the side of the pit and reached out a hand futilely. They were fifty feet apart, but he reached, anyway.

Luxa and Henry flew down, helped the pitiful form onto Aurora's back, and carried him up.

Still on his knees, Gregor clutched his father's hands, once so strong and capable. As he felt the bones beneath his fingers he remembered how his dad used to crack walnuts with his hands. "Dad?" he said, and this time he could be heard. "Dad, it's me. Gregor."

His father frowned as if trying to remember something. "It's the fever. I'm seeing things again."

"No, Dad, it's me, I'm here. And Boots is here, too," said Gregor.

"Boots?" said his dad. He frowned again, and Gregor remembered he had never seen Boots. She had been born after he fell.

"Margaret," Gregor corrected himself. As soon as his mom was pregnant, his parents had planned to name Boots Margaret after his dad's grandma.

"Margaret?" said his dad, now thoroughly confused. He rubbed his eyes. "Grandma?"

The prophecy had named "one lost up ahead," but Gregor had not expected to find his dad as lost as this. He was skeletal and weak -- and what had happened to his hair and beard? They were snow white. Gregor touched his father's shoulder and realized he was wearing a cloak made of rat fur. No wonder he had looked like a rat from above.

"Just want to sleep," said his father vaguely. This was the scariest part of all. Gregor had thought he would get a parent back when he found his dad. Then he could stop having to make hard decisions. He could just be a kid. But the man before him was even needier than Boots was.

Luxa laid her hand on his dad's cheek and frowned. "He burns like your sister, and he has no strength to fight it. This is why he speaks in confusion."

"Maybe if I talk to him a minute, he'll remember. He's got to remember, Luxa," said Gregor desperately.

"We must fly now, Gregor," insisted Luxa, tipping a large swallow from the blue bottle into his dad's mouth. "We shall heal him properly in Regalia. Henry, help me secure him." She tried to tie his dad to Aurora with a length of silk that Gox was rapidly spinning. "Henry?" said Luxa again.

But Henry stood apart from them. Not helping. Not hurrying. Not even bothering to seem anxious. "No, Luxa, we have no need to hurry now."

It was a strange answer. No one understood what he was saying except Ripred. An odd look crossed the rat's face. "No, I believe Henry has taken care of everything."

"Henry had to," said Henry. He lifted his fingers to his lips and gave a long whistle.

"Are you crazy? What are you doing?" asked Gregor. He looked at Luxa, who seemed to have turned to marble. The silk rope slipped from her hands and fell to the ground.

The patter of many rat feet came at them down the road. What was going on? What had Henry done?

"Ripred?" said Gregor.

"It seems I am not the only spy among us, Overlander," said Ripred wryly. "A member of the royal family, too."

"You mean, Henry ...?" Gregor would never in a million years have believed Henry to be a spy for the rats. They had killed his parents, his people. "He can't be," blurted out Gregor. "He can't, I mean, what about Luxa?" The two were so tight.

"Sorry, cousin," said Henry urgently to Luxa. "But I had no choice. We were headed for disaster under Vikus. He would ally us to the weakest, when our only real chance of survival is to ally ourselves with those who are most powerful. We will join forces with the rats and rule together, you and I."

Luxa spoke more calmly than Gregor had ever heard her. "Not now, Henry. Not ever."

"You must, Luxa, you have no choice. You must join with us or die," said Henry coldly, but there was a tremor in his voice.

"This is as good a day as any," said Luxa. "Perhaps better." She sounded a thousand years old and a thousand miles away, but she did not sound scared.

"So they promised you a throne, did they? Really, Henry, you are not fool enough to believe they will deliver it," said Ripred, breaking into a laugh..

"They will deliver it. Together we will rid the Underland of crawlers and spinners and share their land among us," said Henry.

"But why? Why would you do that?" asked Gregor.

"I am tired of having cowards and weaklings as allies," said Henry. "The rats, at least, are not guilty of that. Together, we will protect each other. Together, we will rule. Together, we will be safe. It has been decided."

"Together, together," said Ripred in a singsong voice. "What a lot of togetherness you are planning. And what a lot of solitude awaits you. Ah, here are your friends now."

There were at least fifty of them. The rats fanned out quickly and circled the questers. Most of them were laughing, delighted at the rich catch before them.

Gregor's eyes darted around. Who would fight on his side? His dad was mumbling something about fish. Boots lay tied to Temp's back, oblivious to the world. Henry was a traitor, so he could count Ares out, too, since the pair was bonded. That left him, Luxa, Aurora, Gox, and ... suddenly he didn't know what to think of Ripred. What about Ripred? Whose side was the rat really on?

He looked at Ripred, and the rat gave him a slow wink. "Remember, Gregor, the prophecy calls for only four of the twelve to die. Think we can take them, you and I?"

Okay, he also had one amazing rat on his side.

The circle widened, leaving a gap. A huge silver rat strode into the space. Jammed over one ear was a gold crown, clearly designed for a human head. Gregor heard Luxa inhale sharply and guessed it had belonged to one of her parents.

"King Gorger," said Ripred, giving a low bow. "I did not hope we would have the honor of your presence here."

"An unfortunate crawler told us you drowned, Ripred," said the king in a low voice.

"Yes, well, that was the plan," said Ripred, nodding. "But so often plans go awry."

"We must thank you for bringing the warrior so neatly into our paws. It was Henry's job really, but no matter as long as he is here. I wanted to be sure. I wanted to see him for myself before I killed him. So this is he?" asked King Gorger, peering at Gregor. "I expected so much more."

"Oh, do not judge him too quickly," said Ripred. "I have found him most delightfully full of surprises." He made his way around the circle, occasionally lifting a front leg to scratch his nose. Each time he lifted his paw the rats near him flinched. "Clawsin ... Bloodlet... now break my heart, Razor, is that you? You have no idea how it hurts me to see you in His Majesty's company."

The rat Razor dropped his eyes away from Ripred's. Was he ashamed? Could rats even feel ashamed?

Ripred came up behind Henry and nudged him forward. "Go, go, go, go. Stand with your friends." Henry tripped and fell into place beside King Gorger, stepping on his tail. The other rats laughed, but not the king who whipped his tail out from under Henry and slashed poor Gox in half.

The rats stopped laughing. Gregor saw the spider's blue blood gushing onto the ground. It was that quick. In a split second, a third member of the quest was dead.

"Why has everyone stopped laughing?" said King Gorger. "Go on, laugh!" he ordered, and the rats let out a sound like sheep bleating. He stretched out on the ground in a pose of complete relaxation, but Gregor could see his muscles were still tense with anger.

"Who's next?" said King Gorger. "Come, do not be shy. Shall we take care of the pup? She looks soon to expire, anyway." He trained his ratty eyes on Boots.

"Not Boots," thought Gregor. "Not while I can stand." Something nagged at the back of his brain. What was it? What did it remind him of? And suddenly he knew. He knew what the next part of the prophecy meant.

The last who will die must decide where he stands. The fate of the eight is contained in his hands.

"It's me," he realized. "I'm the last to die." It was clear. It was Gregor the rats wanted. He was the warrior. He was the threat. He was the one who had to decide where he stood. And it wasn't going to be here, watching people he loved die. He was the warrior, and the warrior saved people.

Once he knew, it was easy. He judged the height, ran seven steps, and hurdled over the silver back of King Gorger.

A howl rose up behind him as he flew down the road. From some rat screams that came after that, he guessed Luxa, Aurora, and Ripred had gone into action to cover him. But he was pretty sure that every able-bodied rat was chasing after him. Good. That way, with any luck, the others could escape. Except Henry and Ares -- he didn't care what happened to them.

The flashlight in his hand dimmed to a faint glow, and he tossed it off to the side. It was slowing him down, anyway. But running in the dark was no good. He might trip, and he had to lead the rats as far away as possible from everybody. Then he remembered the light on his hat. He had meant to save it as a last resort. If there was ever a last resort, this was it. He flipped on the switch without breaking stride, and the powerful beam lit the road in front of him.

But the road! He had forgotten how short the road was! No more than a hundred yards ahead of him loomed the canyon, the one of "immeasurable depth." He didn't stand a chance trying to run around the edge of it. The rats would have him in seconds.

He didn't want to die that way. He didn't want to give the rats the satisfaction of eating him. He could hear them behind him, breathing and snapping their teeth. King Gorger snorted in fury.

In one horrible moment the last piece of the prophecy became clear. *so bid him take care, bid him look where he leaps, AS life may be death and death life again reaps.*

He had to leap, and by his death, the others would live. That was it. That was what Sandwich had been trying to say all along, and by now he believed Sandwich.

He put on a final burst of speed, just like the coach taught him in track. He gave it everything he had. In the last few steps before the canyon he felt a sharp pain in the back of his leg, and then the ground gave way under his feet.

CHAPTER 25

Gregor soared out over the canyon, throwing his body as high into the air as he could get. He could feel warm blood running down his leg. One of the rats had gotten a claw into him just as he was taking off.

"I'm falling," thought Gregor. "Just like when I came to the Underland." Only he was falling much faster now. There was no current supporting him from underneath, just the hideous void gaping below him. He had never really understood how he had landed safely the first time. Never had a moment of quiet and clarity to ask Vikus. Now he guessed he would never know.

Maybe it was all part of the same dream and he would finally wake up in his own bed and he could go and find his mom and tell her all about it. But Gregor knew it wasn't a dream anymore. He was really falling. And when he hit the bottom, he would not wake up in bed.

Something else was different from his first fall. By the sound of it, he had a lot more company.

Gregor managed to twist himself around in the air. The light from his hard hat lit up an astonishing scene. The rats who had been chasing him, and it must have been about all of them, were falling after him in an avalanche of stone. The unstable ground at the edge of the canyon had given way, bringing the whole army down after him.

With shock, Gregor saw a human was among the rats. Henry. He had been chasing Gregor, too. But that couldn't be right. They both couldn't end up dead. The prophecy only called for one more quester to die.

A flash of wing gave Gregor his answer. Of course. It was Ares, the bat who was bonded to this traitor. Ares would save Henry, and the prophecy would be fulfilled. But the rest of the questers would be safe, too.

Gregor had never seen Ares dive in earnest. He was heading for the ground at tremendous speed, dodging the rats that reached for him. Gregor began to doubt he would be able to pull out of it. "He overshot," thought Gregor as the bat rocketed past Henry.

He could hear Henry's desperate plea: "Ares!"

At that moment, Gregor slammed into something.

"I'm dead," he thought, but he didn't feel dead because his nose hurt so badly and his mouth was full of fur. Then he had the sensation of rising and

he knew he was on Ares's back. He looked down over the side of the bat's wing and saw the rats beginning to burst apart on the rocks below. Gregor had been almost at the bottom when Ares had caught him. The sight of the rats was unbearable, even if they had just been about to kill him. Just before Henry hit, Gregor buried his face in Ares's fur and covered his ears.

The next thing he knew, they were on the ground. Luxa had his father strapped on Aurora. Temp bolted onto Ares behind him.

A bloody Ripred stood with three other rats that must have joined him in the final moments. He gave Gregor a bitter smile. "Delightfully full of surprises."

"What will you do, Ripred?" asked Gregor.

"Run, boy. Run like the river. Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander!" said Ripred as he took off down the road.

"Fly you high, Ripred! Fly you high!" shouted Gregor as Ares and Aurora sped over the rat's head.

They flew out over the canyon. Somewhere beneath them lay the bodies of King Gorger, his army of rats, and Henry. The canyon ended, and the bats headed into a large tunnel that twisted and turned every which way.

Now that he was safe, Gregor began to feel the fear of falling into that black void. His whole body began to shake. He pressed his face deep in Ares's neck, although it made his nose throb even more. He heard the bat whisper, "I did not know, Overlander. I swear to you I did not know."

"I believe you," Gregor whispered back. If Ares had known about Henry's plot, Henry would be flying somewhere right now and Gregor would be ...

The last words of the prophecy came back to him again.

The last who will die must decide where he stands.

The fate of the eight is contained in his hands, so bid him take care, bid him look where he leaps, as life may be death and death life again reaps.

So, it was about Henry as well as Gregor. Henry had decided to stand with the rats. That had determined the fate of the other eight questers. He had not taken care where he'd leaped, had not looked at all because he was so caught up in helping the rats. Henry had died because of his decision. Even to the last moments he must have thought Ares would save him. But Ares had chosen to save Gregor.

"Overlander, we have troubles," whispered Ares, interrupting his train of thought.

"Why? What's wrong?" asked Gregor.

"Aurora and I, we do not know which direction leads back to Regalia," said Ares.

"You mean we're lost?" said Gregor. "I thought Luxa said you could get us home in the dark."

"Yes, we can fly in the dark, but we must know which way to fly," said Ares. "This area is uncharted by fliers."

"What does Luxa think we should do?" asked Gregor.

There was a pause. Gregor assumed Ares was communicating with Aurora. Then Ares said, "Luxa cannot speak."

"Luxa is probably in shock," thought Gregor. "After what Henry did to her."

"To complicate matters, Aurora has a torn wing that must soon be mended if we are to continue," Ares added.

Gregor suddenly realized he was in charge. "Okay, look for a safe place to land, all right?"

The twisting tunnel soon opened out over a large river. The source was a magnificent waterfall that poured out of a stone arch and fell a hundred feet to the river below. Above the arch was a natural stone ledge, about ten feet deep. Ares and Aurora coasted over to it and landed. Their riders slid onto the stone.

Gregor hurried over to Luxa, hoping to figure out some kind of game plan, but one look at her told him he was on his own. Her eyes were unfocused, and she trembled like a leaf. "Luxa? Luxa?" he asked. As Aurora had reported, she couldn't say a word. Not sure what else to do, Gregor wrapped her in a blanket.

He turned to Aurora next. Her left wing had a long rip that oozed blood. "I can try to sew that up," said Gregor, not relishing the idea. He could sew a little, buttons and small tears. The idea of taking a needle to her delicate wing worried him.

"Tend to the others first," said Aurora. She fluttered over to Luxa and wrapped her good wing around the girl.

Boots still slept on Temp's back, but her forehead was cooler. The medicine seemed to have quieted his dad down, too, but Gregor was still unnerved by how fragile he looked. Clearly the rats had half-starved him. He wondered what else they had done.

Ares sat hunched over in a position of such extreme sorrow that Gregor decided it was best to leave him alone. Henry's deception had nearly destroyed the bat.

No one seemed physically injured by their encounter with King Gorger's army except Aurora and himself. Gregor opened the first aid kit and fumbled around inside. If he was going to stitch up the bat, he'd better do it before he thought too much about it. He found a small pack of metal needles and chose one at random. Several spools of spinners' silk were in the kit as well. He started to ask Gox which kind he should use but stopped himself when he remembered the blue blood pouring out over her lifeless orange body. He picked out a thread that looked thin but strong.

He cleaned off Aurora's wound as well as he could and applied an ointment she told him would numb the area* Then, with great trepidation, he began to sew up the rip. He would have liked to move quickly, but it was slow, careful work mending the wing. Aurora tried to sit motionless, but kept reacting to the pain involuntarily.

"Sorry, I'm sorry," he kept saying.

"No, I am fine," she would reply. But he could tell it hurt a lot.

By the time he'd finished, he was dripping with sweat from concentrating so hard. But the wing was back in one piece. "Try that out," he said to Aurora, and she gingerly stretched her wing.

"It is well sewn, Overlander," she said. "It should hold to Regalia."

Gregor felt relieved and a little proud he had managed it.

"Now you must address your own wounds," Aurora said. "I cannot fly, anyway, until the numbness leaves my wing."

Gregor washed off his leg and put on some ointment from a red clay pot he remembered Solovet using for wounds. His nose was another matter. He wiped off the blood, but it was still swollen twice its normal size. It was broken, most certainly, but he didn't know what doctors did for a broken nose. You couldn't really put a cast on it. He left it alone, thinking he'd probably do more harm than good trying to fix it.

Once he'd taken care of their injuries, Gregor had no clue what he should do next. He tried to assess their situation. They were lost. They had enough food for maybe one more meal. Luxa's torch had burned out, leaving only his hard hat for light. Boots was sick, his dad was incoherent, Luxa was in shock, Aurora was wounded, and Ares was in despair. That left him and Temp.

"Temp?" said Gregor. "What do you think we should do next?"

"I know not, Overlander," said Temp. "Hear you the rats, hear you?"

"When they fell, you mean?" asked Gregor. "Yeah, that was awful."

"No. Hear you the rats, hear you?" repeated Temp.

"Now?" Gregor felt a cold sickness fill his stomach. "Where?" He crawled out to the edge of the ledge on his stomach and peered out.

Rats were gathering, hundreds of them, on the banks beside the river. Several were sitting back on their haunches, their claws scraping at the chalky stone wall that flanked the waterfall. A couple tried to climb it and slid back to the ground. They began to scrape footholds in the surface. It would take time for them to scale the wall, but Gregor knew they would do it. They would find a way.

He crawled back from the ledge and wrapped his arms tightly around his knees. What were the questers going to do? Well, they would have to fly. Aurora would just have to manage if the rats climbed the wall. But fly where? The light in his hard hat couldn't last forever. Then he'd be in pitch black with a bunch of invalids. Had they gone through this whole nightmare only to end up dying in the Dead Land?

Maybe Vikus would send help. But how would he know where they were? And who knew how things were going in Regalia, anyway? Gregor and Henry had played out the last stanza of "The Prophecy of Gray." But did that mean the humans had won the war? He had no idea.

Gregor squeezed his eyes shut and pressed his palms into them. He had never felt so desolate in his whole life. He tried to console himself with the idea that "The Prophecy of Gray" had said that eight of them would live. "Well, Ripred will probably manage, but if the seven of us sitting on this ledge are going to survive, we'll need a miracle," he thought.

And that's when the miracle happened.

"Gregor?" said a puzzled voice. He wasn't really sure he'd heard it.

"Gregor, is that you?"

Slowly, not willing to believe it, Gregor lifted his eyes toward the sound. His dad had weakly propped himself up onto one elbow. He was shaking from the exertion and his breath was shallow, but there was a look of recognition in his eyes. "Dad?" he said. "Dad?"

"What are you doing here, son?" said his dad, and Gregor knew his mind was clear.

He couldn't move. He should have run into his dad's arms, but he suddenly felt afraid of this stranger dressed in rat skins who was supposed to be his father. Was he really sane now? Or by the time Gregor crawled across the few feet of stone that separated them, would he again be mumbling about fish and abandoning Gregor to the darkness?

"Ge-go!" piped a little voice. "Ge-go, me out!" said Boots. Gregor turned and saw her struggling to free herself from the webbing that secured her to Temp's back. He hurried over to her and ripped away the webs. It was easier than dealing with his dad.

"Drink? Bekfest?" said Boots as he pulled her free. Gregor smiled. If she wanted to eat, she must be better.

"Cookie?" she said hopefully.

"Okay, okay," he said. "But look, look who's here. It's Da-da," said Gregor, pointing to his father. If they went together, maybe Gregor would have the courage to face his dad.

"Da-da?" said Boots curiously. She looked at him, and a big smile spread across her face. "Da-da!" she said. She wiggled out of Gregor's grasp and ran straight into his dad's arms, knocking him flat on his back.

"Margaret?" said his dad, struggling to sit up. "Are you Margaret?"

"No, I Boots!" said the little girl, tugging at his beard.

Well, Boots's courage might only count when she could count, but her ability to love counted all the time. Watching her, Gregor felt his distrust beginning to melt away. He had fought rats and spiders and his own worst fears to reunite with his dad. What was he doing, sitting here like he'd bought a ticket to see the event?

"Boots, huh?" said his dad. He broke into a very rusty laugh.

The laughter swept through Gregor like waves of sunshine. It was him. It really was his dad!

"Dad!" Gregor half-stumbled, half-ran to his dad and threw his arms around him.

"Oh, Gregor," said his dad with tears pouring down his face. "How's my boy? How's my little guy?"

Gregor just laughed as he felt his own tears starting.

"What are you doing here? How did you get to the Underland?" asked his dad, suddenly sounding worried.

"Same way as you, I guess," said Gregor, finding his voice. "Fell out of the laundry room with Boots. Then we came looking for you, and here you

are." He patted his dad's arm to prove it was true. "Here you are."

"Where exactly is here?" asked his dad, peering around in the darkness.

Gregor snapped back to reality. "We're above a waterfall in the Dead Land. A bunch of rats are trying to scale the wall. A lot of us are hurt and we're totally lost," he said. Then he regretted it. Maybe he shouldn't have told his dad how bad it was. Maybe he couldn't handle it yet. But he saw his dad's eyes sharpen in concentration.

"How far are the rats from us now?" he asked.

Gregor slid over to the edge and looked over. He was frightened to see the rats were halfway up the wall. "Maybe fifty feet," he said.

"How about light?" asked his dad.

"Only this," said Gregor, tapping his hat. "And I don't think the batteries will last much longer." In fact, the light seemed to be dimming as he spoke.

"We've got to get back to Regalia," said his dad.

"I know, but none of us knows where it is," said Gregor helplessly.

"It's in the north of the Underland," said his dad.

Gregor nodded, but he didn't see what good that information did them. It wasn't as if they had a sunset or the North Star or moss growing on the north side of trees to guide them. They were in a big, black space.

His dad's eyes landed on Aurora's wing. "That bat, how did you sew her up?"

"A needle and thread," said Gregor, wondering if his dad's mind was beginning to wander again.

"Metal needle?" asked his dad. "Do you still have it?"

"Yeah, here," said Gregor, pulling out the pack of needles.

His dad took a needle and pulled a small stone out of his pocket. He began to rub the stone along the needle in short, quick strokes. "Get some kind of bowl. Dump out that medicine if you have to," said his dad. "And fill it with water."

Gregor quickly followed his instructions, still unsure. "So, what are we doing?"

"This rock -- it's a lodestone, magnetic iron ore. There was a pile of them back in my pit. I kept one in my pocket just in case," said his dad.

"Just in case what?" asked Gregor.

"Just in case I ever escaped. I had some pieces of metal back there, too, but nothing the right size. This needle is perfect," said his dad.

"Perfect for what?" asked Gregor.

"If I rub the needle with the lodestone, I'll magnetize it. Basically I'll turn it into a compass needle. If we can get it to float on the water without breaking the surface tension ..." His dad gently slid the needle into the water. It floated. Then, to Gregor's amazement, the needle turned forty-five degrees to the right and held steady. "It will point north."

"It's pointing north? Just like a compass?" asked Gregor in astonishment.

"Well, it's probably off a few degrees, but it's close enough," said his dad.

Gregor grinned into the bowl of water. It was going to be okay. His dad was back.

The sound of claws digging into stone wiped the grin off his face. "Aurora," called Gregor. "Can you fly?"

"I think I must," said Aurora, clearly aware of the rats.

"Ares, if I point you toward Regalia now, can you stay on course?" asked Gregor, giving the bat a little shake.

"I can stay well enough on course if I know the direction to fly," said Ares, rousing himself.

"Mount up!" called Gregor, just as Vikus had when they'd started the quest. "Mount up, we're going home!"

Somehow everyone got loaded up. Gregor had Temp ride with Luxa, just to keep an eye on her. He slid Boots, in the backpack and helped his dad onto Ares. He checked the needle in the bowl one more time and pointed Ares in the right direction. "That's north. That's the way to Regalia," he said.

Gregor was about to retrieve the bowl when he saw the first rat claw catch the top of the ledge. He leaped onto Ares's back and the bats took off, leaving the bowl and a pack of cursing rats behind.

Ares followed the tunnel that headed north, and after about an hour he called to Gregor: "I know now where we fly."

They flew straight for Regalia now, down wide, open caverns.

Everywhere there were victims of the war. Gregor saw the bodies of rats, humans, roaches, spiders, bats, and other creatures he didn't even know lived in the Underland, like mice and butterflies. No, Ripred had mentioned butterflies, but Gregor thought he had seen them in the Overland somehow. All the bodies looked the same. Very, very still.

It was almost a relief when the light on his hard hat finally gave out. He had seen enough carnage. In the darkness he lost all track of time.

Gregor could hear the horns signaling their approach long before they reached the city. He looked down vaguely and saw people waving their arms, shouting. Neither he nor Luxa responded.

Luxa was not even looking. From the moment they had taken off, she had wrapped her arms around

Aurora's neck and closed her eyes to the world. Gregor couldn't imagine what she must be feeling. He had his dad back. Boots was safe. They would go back to the Overland and his family would be together again. But Henry was Luxa's family, and he had given her over to the rats. What was there left for Luxa to feel now?

The doors were flung open at the stadium, and the city appeared below them. There was cheering and waving of flags. The palace came into view, and Ares dove for the High Hall.

They coasted in, and the exhausted bats simply landed on their bellies and slid along the floor until they stopped. Underlanders swarmed them. Somewhere in the confusion he saw Dulcet cradling Boots and hurrying from the hall with the ever-faithful Temp behind them. A couple of people laid his dad on a stretcher and whisked him away. The bats could barely protest as they were carried away, too, more in need of rest than medical attention.

Gregor resisted all attempts to be loaded on a stretcher, although he did accept a cold cloth for his nose. Someone needed to tell the story, and he didn't think it could be Luxa right now.

There she stood, pale and lost, not even noticing the whirlwind around her. Her beautiful violet eyes were vacant, and her hands hung limply at her sides. He went to stand at her side but he didn't touch her. He just let her know he was near. "Luxa, it's going to be okay," he said. He knew the words sounded hollow.

The room cleared out, and he saw Vikus hurrying toward them. The old man stopped a few feet in front of them, deep lines of concern cut into his face.

Gregor knew he had to say what had happened, but all that came out was, "Henry was working with the rats. He made some deal for the throne."

Vikus looked at Luxa and opened his arms. She stood, still frozen, staring at him as if he were a complete stranger.

"Luxa, it's your grandpa," said Gregor. It seemed like the best and most important thing to say at the moment. "It's your grandpa."

Luxa blinked. A tiny tear formed at the corner of her eye. A battle took place on her face as she tried to stop the feelings rising up inside her.

CHAPTER 26

It was Solovet Gregor ended up telling the story to. She appeared shortly after Vikus and, having kissed Luxa's wet cheeks, embraced Gregor. If he was not concerned about his injuries, she was. She immediately led him down to the hospital section of the palace to be treated.

While doctors cleaned and stitched his leg and tried to bring down the swelling in his nose, Gregor spilled out everything that had happened since they had parted. The journey through the rancid caves, the arrival of the spiders, Henry's attempt to kill Ripred, Boots's fever, Tick's sacrifice at the bridge, finding his dad, and the strange series of events that had fulfilled Sandwich's prophecy.

When he had finished, he felt like a balloon some one had let all the air out of. He just wanted to see his dad and Boots and then go to sleep. Solovet led him first to Boots, who was in a nursery with other sick kids. She had been bathed and changed and while she was still warm to the touch, Dulcet promised him the illness was not serious.

"We cannot cure many things still, but we can cure this. It is just a case of damp fever," she said soothingly.

Gregor smoothed back Boots's curls and went on to see his dad. His father already looked better, his face relaxed in sleep. The Underlanders had not only bathed him, but they'd groomed his hair and beard. The foul rat skins had been replaced by silken garments. They'd fed him and given him a calming medicine.

"And when he wakes, will he be okay?" asked Gregor.

"No one who spends years with the rats can expect to be unchanged," said Solovet gently. "But will his mind and body heal? I believe so."

Gregor had to be satisfied with that. He himself would never be the same after what he'd witnessed in the Underland. He had to expect some changes in his dad, too.

As he left the hospital, he heard a happy voice cry out, "Overlander!" Mareth caught him up in a big bear hug. Gregor was glad to see Mareth was alive, although he had injuries from recent battles.

"Hey, Mareth," he said. "How's it going?"

"It goes darkly, as it always goes in war. But you have brought back light to us," he said firmly.

"Oh, yeah?" said Gregor. He'd pretty much forgotten that part of the prophecy.

An Overland warrior, a son of the sun, May bring us back light, he may bring us back none.

So he must have done it after all. Brought back light. He wasn't really sure how, but if Mareth said so, all the Underlanders must believe it.

"What light?" he asked. The images that filled his head were relentlessly dark.

"When news of King Gorger's death reached the rats, they fell into chaos. We have driven them far back into the Dead Land. Without a leader, they are in total disarray," said Mareth.

"Oh. Good," said Gregor. "I hope it lasts."

Mareth took him to his old room, the one he'd shared with Boots. He took a short bath, just to lose the smell of rotten eggs that clung to him from the dripping tunnel, and fell into bed.

When he awoke, he sensed he had slept a long time. For the first minute or two, he lay in drowsy security, not remembering. Then all that had happened flashed before his eyes, and he couldn't stay in bed any longer. He took a second bath and then ate the food that had appeared in his room while he was gone.

Gregor was about to go to the hospital when Luxa ran into his room. Her eyes were red from crying, but she seemed her old self.

"Gregor, you must come! Hurry!" she said, grabbing his arm and pulling him after her.

His first thought was that there'd been an attack on the palace, but that was not it.

"It's Ares! They mean to banish him!" gasped Luxa as the two of them sprinted down the corridors. "He did not know, Gregor! He did not know of Henry's plot any more than I!"

"I know he didn't!" said Gregor.

They burst into a room Gregor had not yet seen. It was like a small arena. Several hundred bats and humans sat on elevated bleachers that rose up around a central stage. In the front row sat members of the Regalia council, including Vikus and Solovet. In the middle of the stage, alone and stooped, stood Ares.

When Gregor and Luxa ran onto the stage, Aurora fluttered out of the bleachers to join them.

"Stop!" yelled Gregor, trying to catch his breath. "You can't do this!" He didn't know all the ins and outs of banishment, but he did remember Luxa saying that no one survived living in the Underland alone for long. Maybe a rat like Ripred could, but he was extraordinary under any conditions.

Everyone rose to their feet at Gregor's appearance and bowed in unison. "Welcome, Warrior, and many thanks for all you have brought us," said Vikus formally. But he also gave Gregor a sad smile that felt much more personal.

"Yeah, you're welcome," said Gregor. "What are you doing to Ares?"

"We are about to vote on his fate," said Vikus. "There has been much debate about whether he was privy to Henry's plot."

"He wasn't!" said Gregor. "Of course, he wasn't! Or I wouldn't be standing here. He saved me and let Henry fall when he realized what was happening!"

"He was bonded to Henry," said a large red bat. "It is difficult to believe in his innocence."

"What of my innocence?" asked Luxa, her voice tight. "No one was nearer to Henry than myself. Will you banish me as well?"

An uncomfortable murmur ran through the room. Everyone knew how close the cousins had been, and yet Luxa had been the target of Henry's treachery.

"Even if Ares is cleared on charges of treason, there is still the issue of his breaking of the bond," said the red bat. "That is in itself a cause for banishment."

"Even when you find out you're bonded to a really evil guy?" asked Gregor. "Seems like there ought to be a special rule for that."

Several members of the council began to dig through piles of old scrolls, as if hoping to find an answer to his question. But others were clearly after blood.

"Whether he is banished for treason or bond breakage, I care not. I just want him gone. Who among us could ever trust him again?" shouted a woman.

There was an uproar in the arena. Ares seemed to hunch down even further, as if crushed by the weight of the anger against him.

Gregor didn't know what to do. He couldn't stand by and watch them throw Ares out into the Dead Land to fend for himself. But how could he change their minds?

The red bat echoed the last words Gregor had heard clearly. "Yes, who among us could ever trust him again?"

"I could!" yelled Gregor, silencing the crowd. "I trust him with my life!" And then he knew what he needed to do.

He ran to Ares and extended his hand. The bat lifted his head in puzzlement, then understood. "Oh, no, Overlander," he whispered. "I am not worthy to accept."

Gregor reached out and grabbed the claw on Ares's left wing with his right hand. You could hear a pin drop in the room as he spoke the words.

"Ares the flier, I bond to you,"

That was all he could remember of the pledge Luxa had told him, but she was right behind him, feeding him the words in a whisper.

"Our life and death are one, we two. In dark, in flame, in war, in strife,"

And the last line came to Gregor without prompting.

"I save you as I save my life."

Some hope had come back into Ares. The warrior bonding with him was no guarantee he would escape banishment, but it was something that could not be easily ignored. Still, he hesitated.

"Say it," said Gregor softly. "Please say it back."

And Ares finally did, replacing his name with Gregor's own.

"Gregor the human, I bond to you, Our life and death are one, we two. In dark, in flame, in war, in strife, I save you as I save my life."

CHAPTER 27

There was anger and argument and a lot of talk about the law, but in the end, they couldn't banish Ares. The fact that Gregor bonded with the bat carried more weight than he had expected.

One old man still dug furiously through his scrolls until Vikus said to him, "Oh, stop rattling your skins, we clearly have no precedent for this."

Gregor turned to his new bat. "Well, I probably won't be here much longer."

"It matters not," said Ares. "While I have flight, I will be here always for you."

As soon as things settled down, Gregor made a bee-line for the hospital. He braced himself before entering his dad's room, fearing he might have relapsed, but when he went in, a happy scene awaited him. His dad was sitting up in bed laughing as Boots tried to feed him cookies.

"Hey, Dad," he said with a smile.

"Oh, Gregor ...," said his dad, beaming at him. His dad held out his arms, and Gregor rushed into them and held on tightly. He could have stayed there forever, but Boots was tugging on them.

"No, Ge-go, Da-da eat cookie," she said.

"The nurse told her to make me eat, and she takes her job very seriously," said his father with a smile.

"You feel okay?" asked Gregor, not letting go.

"Oh, a few square meals, I'll be as good as new," said his dad. They both knew it wasn't that simple. Life would never be the same again, but they would have their life back, and they would have it together.

Gregor spent the next few hours just hanging out with his dad, Boots, and Temp, who came in to check on the princess. He wouldn't have asked his dad about his ordeal, but he seemed eager to talk. "That night, the night I fell, I couldn't sleep. I went down to the laundry room to play a little saxophone. I didn't want to wake anybody."

"We fell from there, too!" said Gregor. "Through the air duct."

"Right. The metal grate just started banging up and down out of nowhere," said his dad. "When I went to check it out, I got sucked right down here. See, they have this strange phenomenon with the air currents...." And his dad went on for twenty minutes about the scientific aspects of the

current. Gregor didn't know what he was talking about, but it was great just to listen to him.

"I was in Regalia for a couple of weeks and I was just going crazy missing you all. So, one night I tried to escape with a couple of flashlights and a BB gun I found in the museum. Rats got me before I made it to the Waterway," said his dad, shaking his head.

"How come they let you live?" asked Gregor.

"It wasn't me. It was the gun. After I ran out of ammo, they closed in on me. One of them asked about the gun, so I just started talking a blue streak about it. I convinced them I could make them, so they decided to keep me alive. I spent my time making weapons that I could use, but that fell apart when the rats touched them. A crossbow, a catapult, a battering ram. Lucky thing you showed up when you did, I think they were beginning to suspect I was never going to make them anything that worked twice," said his dad.

"I don't know how you stood it," said Gregor.

"I just never stopped believing I'd get home again," said his dad. A cloud came over him, and he had a lot of trouble getting the next question out. "So, how's your mom?"

"Probably not too good right now," said Gregor. "But she'll be fine once we get you back."

His dad nodded. "And you?"

Gregor didn't talk about any of the bad stuff, just the easy stuff. He told his dad about track and school and playing his saxophone at Carnegie Hall. He never mentioned spiders or rats or what he'd been through since his dad had disappeared.

They spent the afternoon playing with Boots, trying to make each other eat and often, without any particular reason, reaching out to touch each other.

Dulcet showed up eventually and insisted Boots and his dad needed rest, so Gregor wandered off into the palace feeling happier than he had in two years, seven months, and he no longer cared how many days. He was done with the rule now. For good. Even if times got bad, he would never again deny himself the possibility that the future might be happy even if the present was painful. He would allow himself dreams.

As he was making his way back to his bed, he passed the room he'd been taken to as a prisoner the night he'd tried to escape Regalia. Vikus was

sitting at the table alone, surrounded by piles of scrolls and maps. His face lit up when he saw Gregor, and he waved him into the chamber.

"Come, come, we have not yet spoken since your arrival," he said eagerly. "How does your father?"

"Better. Much better," said Gregor, sitting across from Vikus.

"And the princess?" said Vikus with a smile.

"She's good. No more fever," said Gregor.

For a minute they just sat there, not sure where to begin.

"So, Warrior ... you leaped," said Vikus.

"Yeah, I guess I did," said Gregor, grinning. "Lucky Ares was there."

"Lucky for Ares, too," said Vikus. "Lucky for us all. Know you the rats are in retreat?"

"Mareth told me," said Gregor.

"I believe the war will soon be at an end," said

Vikus. "The rats have begun to battle one another for their throne."

"What about Ripred?" said Gregor.

"I have heard from him. He is assembling a party of rats sympathetic to his cause in the Dead Land. It will not be an easy task to take leadership of the rats. He must first convince them that peace is desirable, and that will be a long struggle. Still, he is not an easy rat to ignore," said Vikus.

"I'll say," said Gregor. "Even other rats are afraid to fight him."

"With good reason. No one can defend themselves against him," said Vikus. "Ah, that reminds me. I have something for you. Several times on the journey you made mention of your lack of a sword. The council asks me to present you with this."

Vikus reached beneath the table and brought out a long object wrapped in very thick silk. Gregor unrolled it and found a stunningly beautiful sword, studded with jewels.

"It belonged to Bartholomew of Sandwich himself. It is the wish of my people that you accept it," said Vikus.

"I can't take this," said Gregor. "I mean, it's too much, and besides, my mom won't even let me have a pocketknife." This was true. On Gregor's tenth birthday his uncle had sent him a pocketknife with about fifteen attachments, and his mom had put it away until he was twenty-one.

"I see," said Vikus. He was watching Gregor carefully. "Perhaps if your father kept it for you, she would allow it."

"Maybe. But there's another thing ... ," said Gregor. But he didn't know how to say the other thing, and it was the main reason he didn't want to touch the object in front of him. It had to do with Tick and Treflex and Gox; it had to do with all the creatures he'd seen lying motionless on his trip back. It even had to do with Henry and the rats. Maybe he just wasn't smart enough, maybe he just didn't understand. But it seemed to Gregor that there must have been some way to fix things so that everybody hadn't ended up dead.

"I pretended to be the warrior so I could get my dad. But I don't want to be a warrior," said Gregor. "I want to be like you."

"I have fought in many battles, Gregor," said Vikus cautiously.

"I know, but you don't go looking for them. You try to work things out every other way you can think of first. Even with the spiders. And Ripred," said Gregor. "Even when people think you're wrong, you keep trying."

"Well, then, Gregor, I know the gift I would wish to give you, but you can only find it yourself," said Vikus.

"What is it?" said Gregor.

"Hope," said Vikus. "There are times it will be very hard to find. Times when it will be much easier to choose hate instead. But if you want to find peace, you must first be able to hope it is possible."

"You don't think I can do that?" said Gregor.

"On the contrary, I have great hope that you can," said Vikus with a smile.

Gregor slid the sword back across the table to him. "Tell them I said thanks, but no thanks."

"You cannot imagine how happy I am to deliver that message," said Vikus. "And now you must rest. You have a journey tomorrow."

"I do? Where? Not back to the Dead Land?" said Gregor, feeling a little ill.

"No. I think it is time we send you home," said Vikus.

They put a bed in his dad's room that night so that he and Boots could sleep close by. Now that he was going home, Gregor began to let thoughts of Lizzie and his grandma and, most of all, his mom come back into his head. Would they still be okay when he got back? He remembered his talk with Vikus, and tried to hope for the best.

As soon as his dad and Boots had woken, they were taken to the dock where Gregor had made his escape the first night. A group of Underlanders

had assembled to see them off.

"Ares will take you to the portal above the Waterway," said Vikus. "It will be a short distance from there to your home."

Mareth pressed a handful of paper into his hand. He realized it was money. "I took it from the museum. Vikus said you may need it to travel in the Overland."

"Thanks," said Gregor. He wondered exactly where the Waterway gateway was in relation to his apartment. He guessed he'd find out soon enough.

"The way is safe now, but do not tarry. As you know, things can shift quickly in the Underland," said Solovet.

Gregor suddenly realized he would never see these people again. He was surprised by how much he would miss them. They'd been through a lot together. He hugged everybody good-bye. When he came to Luxa, he thought maybe he should just shake her hand, but he went ahead and hugged her, anyway. She actually gave him a hug back. It was a little stiff, but then, she was a queen.

"Well, so if you're ever in the Overland, drop by," said Gregor.

"Perhaps we shall see you here again someday," said Luxa.

"Oh, I don't know. My mom's probably going to ground me for the rest of my life just to keep me safe," said Gregor.

"What means this, 'ground you'?" asked Luxa.

"Never let me leave the apartment," said Gregor.

"That is not what it says in 'The Prophecy of Bane,'" said Luxa thoughtfully.

"What? What's that?" asked Gregor, feeling panic rise up in him.

"Did Vikus not tell you? It follows 'The Prophecy of Gray,'" said Luxa.

"But I'm not in it. Am I? I mean, I'm not, right? Vikus?" said Gregor.

"Ah, you must depart directly if you mean to catch the current," said Vikus, slipping the backpack with Boots onto his shoulders and leading him to Ares, who was already carrying his dad.

"What aren't you telling me? What's 'The Prophecy of Bane'?" insisted Gregor as he felt himself lifted onto Ares's back.

"Oh, that," said Vikus dismissively. "That is very vague. No one has been able to explain it for centuries. Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander." Vikus gave Ares a sign and he spread his wings.

"What is it, though? What does it say?" shouted Gregor as they rose into the air.

"Bye-bye, Temp! See you soon!" said Boots waving cheerfully.

"No, Boots, no! We're not coming back!" said Gregor.

The last thing Gregor saw as they left the palace was Vikus waving. He was not sure, but he thought he heard the old man say, "See you soon!"

Down the river he went again, but this time he was flying over the foaming water on Ares's strong back. They soon reached the beach where he'd encountered

Fangor and Shed. He caught a glimpse of the blackened ground where the fire had been.

Ten minutes later, the river fed into what was either a sea or the biggest lake Gregor had ever seen. Giant waves rolled across the water's surface and crashed onto rocky beaches.

A pair of guards on bats appeared and escorted them over the water. Gregor didn't see any rats around, but who knew what else might be down here looking for a meal. He caught a glimpse of a twenty-foot spiked tail as some creature flipped it out of the waves and then dove. "Not even going to ask," he thought.

The guards held their positions as Ares began to ascend into a vast stone cone. At the base, it may have been a couple of miles in diameter. A strange misty wind seemed to be blowing them upward. "Must be the currents," thought Gregor.

Ares flew in tighter and tighter circles as they ascended. He had to close his wings to squeeze through the opening at the top.

Suddenly they were zipping through tunnels that looked familiar. They were not built of stone, but of concrete, so Gregor knew they must almost be home. The bat landed on a deserted stairway and nodded his head upward.

"I cannot go farther," said Ares. "That is your way home. Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander."

"Fly you high, Ares," said Gregor. His hand wrapped tightly around Ares's claw for a moment. Then he let go. The bat vanished in the darkness.

Gregor had to help his dad up a long flight of stairs. There was a stone slab in the ceiling at the top. When Gregor pushed it aside, a wave of fresh air hit his face. He pulled himself out and his fingers found grass. "Oh, man," he said, hurrying to help his dad out. "Oh, man, look."

"Moon," said Boots happily, pointing into the sky.

"Yes, moon, little girl. Look, Dad, it's the moon!" His dad was too winded by the climb to answer. For a few minutes they just sat in the grass, staring up at the beauty of the night sky. Gregor looked around and realized by the skyline that they were in Central Park. He could hear the traffic just beyond a row of trees. He slid the stone slab back in place and helped his dad up.

"Come on, let's grab a cab. Go see Mama, Boots?" he asked.

"Ye-es!" said Boots emphatically. "Go see Mama."

It must have been very late. Hardly anyone was out on the streets, but a few restaurants were still open. It was just as well since they made a funny sight, all dressed in their Underland clothes.

Gregor flagged down a cab and they piled into the backseat. The driver either didn't notice or didn't care how they looked. He'd probably seen everything.

Gregor pressed his face against the window drinking in the buildings, the cars, and the lights! All those beautiful lights! It seemed to take no time at all to reach their apartment. He paid the driver and added a huge tip.

When they came to the front door, his dad pulled out his key chain, the one Gregor had made him, from his pocket. He fanned out the keys with trembling fingers and found the right one. For once the elevator wasn't broken, and they rode up to Gregor's hall.

They opened the apartment door softly, not wanting to wake anyone. Gregor could see Lizzie asleep on the couch. From the bedroom he could hear his grandma murmuring in her sleep, so she was okay.

A light was on in the kitchen. His mother sat at the kitchen table, as still as a statue. Her hands were clasped together, and she stared fixedly at a small stain on the tablecloth. Gregor remembered seeing her that way so many nights after his dad had disappeared. He didn't know what to say. He didn't want to scare her or shock her or ever give her any more pain.

So, he stepped into the light of the kitchen and said the one thing he knew she wanted to hear most in the world.

"Hey, Mom. We're home."

**GREGOR
AND THE PROPHECY OF BANE
BOOK TWO OF THE BESTSELLING
UNDERLAND CHRONICLES**

SUZANNE COLLINS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

PART 1

The Mission

CHAPTER 1

When Gregor opened his eyes he had the distinct impression that someone was watching him. He glanced around his tiny bedroom, trying to keep as still as possible. The ceiling was empty. Nothing on his dresser. Then he saw it sitting on the windowsill, motionless except for the delicate twitching of its antennae. A cockroach.

"You're just looking for trouble," he said softly to the cockroach. "You want my mom to see you?"

The cockroach rubbed its feelers together but made no attempt to run away. Gregor sighed. He reached for an old mayonnaise jar that held his pencils, emptied it on the bed, and in one swift move trapped the cockroach beneath it.

He didn't even have to get up to do it. His bedroom wasn't actually a bedroom. Probably it was supposed to be some kind of storage space. Gregor's single bed was wedged into it so, at night, he came in the doorway and crawled straight up to his pillow. On the wall facing the foot of the bed, there was a little alcove with just enough room for a narrow dresser, although you could only open the drawers about eight inches. He had to do his homework sitting cross-legged on his bed with a board on his knees. And there was no door. But Gregor wasn't complaining. He had a window that looked out on the street, the ceilings were nice and high, and he had more privacy than anybody else in the apartment. No one came in his room much...if you didn't count the roaches.

What was it with the roaches lately, anyway? They'd always had some in the apartment, but now it seemed like every time he turned around he'd spot one. Not running. Not trying to hide. Just sitting there...watching him. It was weird. And it was a lot of work trying to keep them alive.

This past summer when a giant roach had sacrificed herself to save his two-year-old sister Boots's life miles beneath the city of New York, he'd vowed never to kill another one of the bugs. But if his mom saw them, man, they were goners. It was up to Gregor to get them out of the apartment before her roach radar kicked in. When it was warm out, he'd just trapped them and put them out on the fire escape. But he was afraid the bugs would freeze now that it was December, so lately he'd been trying to stick them as

far down in the kitchen trash as he could manage. He thought they'd be happy there.

Gregor nudged the roach off the sill and up the side of the mayonnaise jar. He crept down the hallway past the bathroom, past the bedroom that Boots, his seven-year-old-sister, Lizzie, and his grandma shared, and into the living room. His mom was gone already. She must've taken the breakfast shift at the coffee shop where she waited tables on weekends. She worked full-time as a dentist's receptionist during the week, but lately they needed every penny.

Gregor's dad lay on the pull-out couch. Even when he was asleep he wasn't still. His fingers twitched and plucked fitfully at his blanket, and he was muttering softly. His dad. His poor dad...

After being held prisoner by huge, vicious rats far beneath New York City for over two and a half years, his dad was a wreck. During his stay in the Underland, which was what the inhabitants called it, he'd been starved, deprived of light, and physically abused in ways he would never discuss. He was tormented by nightmares and at times he had trouble separating reality from illusion even when he was awake. This was worse when he was feverish, which was often, because despite repeated trips to the doctor, he could not shake off a strange illness he'd brought back from the Underland.

Before Gregor had fallen after Boots through a grate in the laundry room and helped rescue his dad, he'd always thought that everything would be simple once his family was reunited. It was a thousand times better having his dad back, Gregor knew that. But it was not simple.

Gregor moved quietly into the kitchen and slid the roach into the trash. He set the jar on the counter and noticed it was bare. The fridge held half a carton of milk, a gallon bottle of apple juice with maybe one glassful in it, and a jar of mustard. Gregor braced himself and opened the cabinet. Half a loaf of bread, some peanut butter, and a box of oatmeal. He gave the box of oatmeal a shake and exhaled in relief. There was enough food for breakfast and lunch. And since it was Saturday, Gregor wouldn't even need to eat at home. He'd be going over to help Mrs. Cormaci.

Mrs. Cormaci. It was strange how in a few short months she had changed from being their nosy neighbor into a kind of guardian angel. Shortly after Gregor, Boots, and their dad had returned from the Underland, he'd run into her in the hallway.

"So, where've you been, Mister?" she asked him. "Besides scaring the whole building to death." Gregor had given her the story his family had agreed upon: On the day he'd disappeared from the laundry room, he'd taken Boots out to the playground to play for a few minutes. They'd run into his dad, who was on his way to see his sick uncle in Virginia and wanted to take the kids with him. Gregor thought his dad had called his mom; his dad thought Gregor had called his mom; it wasn't until they got back that they realized what a crisis they'd caused.

"Hmph," said Mrs. Cormaci, giving him a hard look. "I thought your father was living in California."

"He was," said Gregor. "But now he's back with us."

"I see," Mrs. Cormaci again. "So, that's your story?"

Gregor nodded, knowing it was pretty lame.

"Hmph," said Mrs. Cormaci again. "Well, I'd work on that if I were you." And she walked off without another word.

Gregor thought she was mad at them, but a few days later she'd knocked on the door with a coffee cake. "I brought your father a coffee cake," she said. "It's a welcome-home thing. Is he here?"

He hadn't wanted to let her in, but his dad called out in a false, cheerful voice, "Is that Mrs. Cormaci?" and she'd bustled right in with her cake. The sight of his dad — bone thin, white-haired, hunched over on the couch — pulled her up short. If she had planned to interrogate him, she let it go right there. Instead, she exchanged a few comments about the weather and left.

Then, a couple of weeks after school started, his mom came in one evening with some news. "Mrs. Cormaci wants to hire you to help her on Saturdays," she said.

"Help her?" Gregor asked warily. "Help her do what?" He didn't want to help Mrs. Cormaci. She'd ask him a bunch of questions and probably want to read his future with her deck of tarot cards and —

"I don't know. Help her around her apartment. You don't have to do it if you don't want to. But I thought it might be a nice way for you to make some pocket money," said his mom.

And Gregor knew then that he would do it and forget about pocket money, forget about money for movies and comic books and stuff. He'd use the money for his family. Because even though his dad was home, there was no way he could go back to his job as a science teacher. He had only left the apartment a few times, and that was to go to the doctor. The six of them

were living on what his mom could make. And with the medical bills, and school supplies, and clothes and food and rent and every other thing you had to have to live, it wasn't stretching far enough.

"What time does she want me there?" asked Gregor.

"She said ten would be good," said his mom.

That first Saturday, several months ago, there hadn't been much food in the apartment, either, so Gregor had just gulped down a couple of glasses of water and headed over to Mrs. Cormaci's. When she opened the door, the rich smell of something amazing hit him, filling his mouth with so much saliva that he had to swallow hard before he said hi.

"Oh, good, you came," said Mrs. Cormaci. "Follow me." Feeling awkward, Gregor followed her into her kitchen. A gigantic pot of sauce was bubbling away on the stove. Another pot contained lasagna noodles. Piles of vegetables covered the counter. "There's a fund-raiser tonight at my church and I said I'd bring lasagna. Don't ask me why." Mrs. Cormaci dumped several ladles of sauce into a bowl, stuck a big wedge of bread in it, clunked it on the table, and pushed Gregor into a chair before it. "Taste it."

Gregor looked at her, unsure.

"Taste it! I have to know if it's fit to be served," insisted Mrs. Cormaci.

He dipped the bread into the sauce and took a bite. It was so good, his eyes watered. "Boy," he said, when he had swallowed.

"You hate it. It's revolting. I should throw the whole pot out and go buy jar sauce from the grocery," said Mrs. Cormaci.

"No!" said Gregor, alarmed. "No. It's the best sauce I ever tasted!"

Mrs. Cormaci slapped a spoon down beside him. "Then eat it and wash your hands, with soap, because you've got chopping to do." After he'd inhaled the sauce and bread, she set him to work chopping piles of vegetables that she sautéed in olive oil. He mixed eggs and spices into ricotta cheese. They layered big, flat noodles and cheese and sauce and vegetables into three enormous pans. He helped her wash up, and she declared it was time for lunch.

They had tuna salad sandwiches in her dining room while Mrs. Cormaci talked about her three kids, who were all grown and lived in different states, and Mr. Cormaci, who'd passed away five years ago. Gregor vaguely remembered him as a nice man who had given him quarters and, one time, a baseball card. "Not a day goes by that I don't miss him," said Mrs. Cormaci. Then she brought out a pound cake.

After lunch, Gregor helped her clean out a closet and carried a few boxes down to her storage space. At two o'clock, she said he was done. She had not asked any questions about him except how he liked school. She sent him out the door with forty bucks, a winter coat that had belonged to her daughter when she was little, and a lasagna. When he tried to object, she just said, "I can't take three lasagnas to the fund-raiser. People take two. You walk in with three and everybody thinks you're a big show-off. And what? I'm going to eat it? With my cholesterol? Take it. Eat it. Go. I'll see you next Saturday." And she closed the door in his face.

It was too much. All of it. But he could surprise his mom and buy groceries and maybe some lightbulbs since three lamps were out in the house. Lizzie needed a coat. And the lasagna...somehow that was the best part of all. Suddenly he wanted to knock on the door and tell Mrs. Cormaci the truth about the Underland and everything that had happened and that he was sorry that he had lied to her. But he couldn't....

Gregor was jolted out of his memory when Lizzie padded into the kitchen in her pajamas. She was small for her age, but the look of concern on her face made her look older than seven. "Is there any food for today?" she asked.

"Sure, there's plenty," said Gregor, trying to sound like he hadn't been worried himself. "Look, you guys can have this oatmeal for breakfast, and peanut butter sandwiches for lunch. I'll go ahead and make the oatmeal now."

Lizzie wasn't allowed to use the stove, but she opened the cabinet with the bowls. She counted out four and then hesitated. "Are you eating breakfast or —?"

"Nah, I'm not even hungry this morning," he said, even though his stomach was growling. "Besides, I'm going over to help Mrs. Cormaci."

"Are we going sledding later?" she asked.

Gregor nodded. "Uh-huh. I'll take you and Boots over to Central Park. If dad's okay."

They had found a plastic snow saucer out by the trash. It had a big crack in it, but their dad had mended it with duct tape. Gregor had been promising to take his sisters sledding all week. But if his dad had a fever, someone needed to stay home with him and their grandma, who spent a lot of her time thinking she was on her family's farm in Virginia. And afternoons were usually when the fever hit.

"If he's not, I'll stay home. You can take Boots," said Lizzie.

He knew she was dying to go. She was only seven. Why did things have to be so hard for her?

Gregor spent the next few hours helping Mrs. Cormaci make big glass casserole dishes of scalloped potatoes, polishing her odd collection of antique clocks, and getting her Christmas decorations out of the storage space. When she asked Gregor what he was hoping to get for Christmas, he just shrugged. When he left that day, along with the money and a vat of scalloped potatoes, Mrs. Cormaci gave him something wonderful. It was a pair of her son's old work boots. They were a little worn and a little too big, but they were sturdy and waterproof and laced up above his ankles. The sneakers Gregor was wearing, which were his only pair of shoes, were starting to split at the toe and sometimes, after walking through the slushy streets, his feet would be wet all day at school.

"Are you sure he doesn't want these?" said Gregor.

"My son? Sure he wants them. He wants them to sit in my closet taking up space so he can come back once a year and say, 'Hey, there's my old boots,' and stuff them back in the closet. If I trip over those boots getting to my iron one more time, I'll disown him. Get them out of here before I throw them out the window!" Mrs. Cormaci said with a wave of contempt at the boots. "I'll see you next Saturday."

When he got home, it was clear his dad wasn't feeling well.

"You kids go on. Go sledding. I'll be fine here with Grandma," he said, but his teeth were chattering from chills. Boots was dancing around with the plastic saucer on her head. "Go sedding? We go sedding, Ge-go?"

"I'll stay," Lizzie whispered to Gregor. "But could you get some of that fever medicine before you go? We ran out yesterday;"

Gregor considered staying as well, but Boots hardly ever got out, and Lizzie was too young to take her sledding alone.

He ran down to the drugstore and bought a bottle of pills that brought down your fever. On the way home he stopped at a table where a man sold used books on the street. A few days ago, walking by, he had noticed a paperback puzzle book. It was kind of beat up, but when Gregor flipped through it he saw that only one or two of the puzzles had been done. The man gave it to him for a buck. Lastly, he picked up a couple of navel oranges, the expensive kind with the really thick skin. Lizzie loved those.

Lizzie's little face lit up when he gave her the book. "Oh! Oh, I'll get a pencil!" she said, and ran off. She was nuts about puzzles. Math puzzles, word puzzles, any kind. And even though she was seven, she could do a lot of the ones meant for adults. When she was a tiny kid you'd take her out and see a stop sign and she'd go, "Stop, pots, spot, tops..." She'd instantly rearrange all the letters into all the words she could think of. Like she couldn't help it.

When Gregor had told her about the Underland, she gave a little gasp when he'd mentioned the horrible rat king, Gorger. "Gorger! That's the same as your name, Gregor!" She didn't mean the same name, she meant you could mix around the letters in Gorger and spell Gregor. Who else would notice that?

So he felt okay when he left her. Their grandma was asleep, his dad had medicine, and Lizzie was curled up in a chair next to him sucking on an orange slice and happily cracking a cryptogram.

Boots's excitement was so contagious that Gregor felt happy, too. He'd put on an extra pair of socks and stuffed the toes of his new boots with toilet paper so his feet were warm and snug and dry. His family had enough scalloped potatoes at home for a small army. A light snow was gently spinning down around them, and they were going sledding. For the moment, things were okay.

They rode the subway to Central Park, where there was a great sledding hill. Lots of people were there, some with fancy sleds, some with beat-up old saucers. One guy was just sliding down on a big trash bag. Boots squealed in delight every time they went down the hill and as soon as they slid to a stop, she shouted, "More, Ge-go. More!" They sledded until the light began to fade. Near an exit to the street, Gregor stopped for a while to let Boots play. He leaned against a tree while she fascinated herself by making footprints in the snow.

The park felt like Christmas with all the sledding and the pine trees and the funny, lumpy snowmen that kids had built. Big, shimmery stars hung from the lampposts. People walked by with shopping bags that sported reindeer and poinsettia. Gregor should have felt cheerful, but instead, Christmas made him feel anxious.

His family didn't have any money. It didn't matter so much for him. He was eleven. But Boots and Lizzie were little, and it should be fun, it should be magical, with a Christmas tree and presents and stockings on the coat

hooks (which is where they hung theirs because they didn't have a chimney) and nice things to eat.

Gregor had been trying to save some money out of what Mrs. Cormaci gave him, but it always seemed to go for something else, like fever medicine or milk or diapers. Boots could really go through a lot of diapers. She probably needed one now, but he hadn't brought any, so they had to get going.

"Boots!" Gregor called. "Time to go!" He looked around the park and saw that the lamps that lined the paths had come on. Daylight was almost gone. "Boots! Let's go!" he said. He stepped out from the tree, turned in a circle, and felt a jolt of alarm.

In the brief time he'd been thinking, Boots had vanished.

CHAPTER 2

"Boots!" Gregor was beginning to panic. She'd been right here a minute ago. Hadn't she? Or had he been so busy thinking, he'd lost track of how much time had passed? "Boots!"

Where could she have gone? Into the trees? Out onto the street? What if someone had taken her? "Boots!"

There wasn't even anyone around to ask. The park had emptied out as dark had fallen. Struggling to stay calm, Gregor tried to follow the trail of footprints that she'd been making in the snow. But there were so many footprints! And he could barely see!

Suddenly he heard a dog barking nearby. Maybe it had found Boots, or at least its owner might have seen her. Gregor ran through the trees to a small clearing somewhat illuminated by a nearby light. A feisty little terrier was running in a circle around a stick, barking its head off. Intermittently it would grab the stick in its jaws, give it a good shake, and drop it on the ground. Then it would begin its frantic barking again.

A pretty woman, dressed in winter jogging clothes, appeared. "Petey! Petey! What are you doing?" She scooped up the dog and shook her head at Gregor as she walked off. "Sorry, he goes a little crazy sometimes."

But Gregor didn't respond. He was staring at the stick, or what he'd thought was a stick, that had been driving the dog wild. It was smooth and shiny and black. He picked it up and it bent in two. Not like a broken stick. But like a leg. An insect leg. From a giant roach...

His head whipped around the area. When they had returned from the Underland that summer, they had come up through a series of tunnels that led to Central Park. They had been near the street, just as he was now.

There, on the ground. That big slab of rock. It had been moved recently — he could tell by the marks in the snow — and then moved back into place. Something red was trapped under the edge of the rock. He pulled it out. It was Boots's mitten.

The giant roaches from the Underland had idolized Boots. They'd called her the princess and done some special ritual dance to honor her. And now they'd kidnapped her right out from under his nose.

"Boots...", he said softly. But he knew she couldn't hear him at this point.

He pulled out his cell phone. They couldn't afford a cell phone, but after three members of her family had mysteriously disappeared, his mother had insisted they get one, anyway. He dialed home. His dad answered.

"Dad? It's Gregor. Look, something happened. Something bad. I'm in Central Park, near that place where we came up this summer, and the roaches, you know, the giant ones? They were here and they took Boots. I wasn't watching her close enough, it's my fault and...I have to go back down!" Gregor knew he had to hurry.

"But...Gregor..." His dad's voice was full of confusion and fear. "You can't —"

"I have to, Dad. Or we might not ever see her again. You know how crazy the roaches are about her. Look, don't let Mom call the police this time. There's nothing they can do. If I'm not back right away, tell people we've got the flu or something, okay?"

"Listen, stay there. I'm coming with you. I'll be there as quick as I can," said his dad. Gregor could hear him panting as he tried to struggle to his feet.

"No, Dad! No, you'd never make it. You can't even walk down the block!" said Gregor.

"But I...but I can't let you..." He could hear his dad beginning to cry.

"Don't worry. I'll be okay. I mean, I've been down there before. But I got to go, Dad, or they'll get too far." Gregor puffed as he struggled to slide away the slab of rock.

"Gregor? You have any light?" asked his dad.

"No!" said Gregor. This was a real problem. "Wait, yes! Yes!" Mrs. Cormaci had given him a mini flashlight in case the lights ever went out when he was on the subway. He had clipped it to his key ring. "I've got a flashlight. Dad, I've got to go now."

"I know, son. Gregor...I love you." His dad's voice was shaking. "Be careful, okay?"

"I will be. Love you, too. I'll see you soon, okay?" said Gregor.

"See you soon," his dad whispered hoarsely.

And then Gregor lowered himself down into the hole. He stuck the phone in one pocket and pulled out his key ring from another. When he clicked on the little flashlight, he was surprised by the amount of light it produced. He slid the rock slab closed and started down a long, steep flight of steps.

As he got to the bottom he stopped and closed his eyes for a minute, trying to re-create in his head the path that had brought him here last summer. They had been flying then, on the back of a big black bat named Ares, who was his bond. In the Underland, a human and a bat could take a vow and swear always to protect each other no matter how desperate the situation. Then the two were called bonds.

Ares had flown Gregor, Boots, and his dad back from the Underland and left them at the foot of the stairs and headed off to the...right! Gregor was pretty sure it had been to the right, so he started running that way.

The tunnel was cold and dank and desolate. It had been made by people — regular people, not the violet-eyed, pale Underlanders he had met deep in the earth — but Gregor felt sure that it had been forgotten by New Yorkers long ago.

His flashlight beam caught a mouse, and it skittered away in terror. Light didn't come down here. People didn't come down here. What was *be* doing down here?

"I can't believe it," thought Gregor. "I can't believe I have to go back down - *there!* " Back into the strange dark land of giant roaches and spiders and, worst of all, rats! The thought of seeing one of those six-foot sneering, fanged creatures filled him with dread.

Boy, his mom was not going to like this.

Last summer, when they'd finally come home late one night, she'd freaked out. First her two missing kids show up with their missing dad, who can barely walk, and then they all sit down and tell her some bizarre story about a land miles under the earth.

Gregor could tell she didn't believe them at first. Well, who would? But it was Boots's chatter that she couldn't ignore.

"Beeg bugs, Mama! I like beeg bugs! We go ride!" Boots had said, happily bouncing on her mother's lap. "I ride bat. Ge-go ride bat."

"Did you see a rat, baby?" her mom said softly.

"Rat bad," Boots said with a frown. And Gregor remembered this was the exact phrase he had heard the roaches use to describe the rats. They were bad. Very bad. Well, most of them...

They'd told the story three times, under intense questioning from his mom. They'd showed her their strange Underland clothing woven by the huge spiders that lived there. Then there was his dad, white-haired, shaking, emaciated.

At dawn, she'd decided to believe them. At one minute after dawn, she was down in the laundry room nailing, screwing, gluing, doing everything she could to seal shut the grate they'd all fallen through. She and Gregor shoved a dryer closer to it. Not enough so it would draw a lot of attention. But enough so that no one could get back there and open it up.

Then she put the laundry room off-limits. No one was allowed down there, ever. So, once a week Gregor helped her haul the laundry three blocks to use a Laundromat.

But his mom hadn't thought about this entrance in Central Park. And neither had he. Until now.

The tunnel came to a fork. He hesitated a minute, and then headed off to the left, hoping it was the right direction. As he jogged along, the tunnel began to change. The bricks left off, and natural stone walls took over.

Gregor went down one last flight of steps. This one was carved out of natural stone. It looked really old. He guessed it must have been made by the Underlanders hundreds of years earlier, when they'd begun their descent to make a new world deep in the earth.

The tunnels began to twist and turn, and soon Gregor lost his bearings. What if he was just getting totally lost in some maze of tunnels while the roaches carried Boots off in a completely different direction? What if he'd taken a wrong turn back at the stairs...what if...no, there! His flashlight landed on a spot of red on the ground, and Gregor picked up Boots's second mitten. She could never hold on to them. Luckily.

As Gregor sprinted off, he began to notice a crunching sound under his feet. Shining the flashlight onto the floor, he realized it was covered with a variety of small insects scurrying down the tunnel as fast as they could.

As he stopped to investigate the situation, something skittered over his boot. A mouse. There were dozens running past him. And there by the wall — hadn't he just seen some kind of molelike animal go by? The whole floor was alive with creatures headed in Gregor's direction in a big, creepy stampede. They weren't trying to eat one another. They weren't fighting. They were just running, the way he had seen animals on the news one time running from a forest fire. They were afraid of something. But of what?

Gregor shot the beam of his flashlight behind him and there was his answer. About fifty yards away, galloping toward him, were two rats. The Underland kind.

CHAPTER 3

Gregor turned on his heel and ran. "Oh, geez!" he gasped. "What are they doing here?" Cockroaches had taken Boots. He'd seen one of their legs. But what were Underland rats doing so close to the surface of the earth?

Well, that was something to figure out later, because he had bigger issues at the moment. The rats were gaining on him, and gaining on him fast. He tried to think of a plan, but nothing came to mind. He couldn't outrun them; he couldn't outclimb them; and he sure couldn't outfight them with their six-inch teeth and razor-sharp claws and —

"Ugh!" He ran smack into the side of something hard. It caught him stomach high, knocking the wind out of him. He dropped the flashlight, but as it fell into empty space, Gregor recognized the circular stone opening that Ares had squeezed through to bring them home. Somewhere far, far below lay a massive Underland ocean. The Waterway.

Without thinking, Gregor swung his leg over the side of the circle and lowered himself down inside. His fingers clung to the edge as his legs swung free. "Maybe the rats won't see me inside here," he thought, and immediately the stupidity of what he'd done hit him. The rats didn't need to *see* anything. The rats navigated by their incredible sense of smell. So what might have been a really decent hiding place if you were being chased by people was utterly worthless if you were trying to lose rats.

Yep, and here they were. He could hear their claws screeching to a halt on the stone, then their panting, and then their confusion.

"What's he doing?" growled one.

"No idea," said the second.

For a few moments, Gregor could hear nothing but the pounding of his own heart. Then the second voice sputtered, "Oh, oh, you don't suppose he's hiding, do you?" And that's when they started laughing. It was a nasty, raspy laugh.

"Come out, come out, wherever you are!" said the first voice, and the rats cracked up again. Gregor couldn't see them, but he felt pretty sure they were rolling around on the ground.

He had two choices. Climb back out and face the rats in pitch blackness, or drop into the darkness below and hope against hope that some

Underlander scout found him before he drowned or became something's dinner.

He was trying to weigh the odds of surviving. Either way they were very low. Either way the likelihood of finding Boots and bringing her home was —

"Drop, Overlander," purred a voice. For a second he thought it was the rats, but it couldn't be because they were still laughing and, anyway, it didn't sound like them. It sounded like —

"Drop, Overlander," said the voice again, and this time the rats heard it, too. He could sense them springing to their feet.

"Kill him!" snarled the first, and as its hot, ratty breath hit his fingers, Gregor stopped weighing his odds and let go. He could hear the scrape of claws on the stone ledge he had been clinging to moments before, along with a volley of strange rat curses.

Then the sickening sense of free-falling through space consumed him. He had fallen like this twice before, once when he'd gone down the grate in his laundry room after Boots, and once when he'd leaped into a huge void when he was trying to save his dad and sister and friends. "This," he thought, "is something I'm never going to get used to."

Where was Ares? That was Ares's voice he'd heard, wasn't it? For a second Gregor thought he'd imagined hearing the bat, but then he remembered the rats had reacted to the sound, too.

"Ares!" he called out. The darkness absorbed his voice like a towel. "Ares!"

"Ooph!" Gregor said, more in surprise than anything, because suddenly the bat was under him and he was riding, not falling, through the darkness.

"Man, am I glad you showed up!" said Gregor, his hands clinging to the thick fur on Ares's neck.

"I am glad you are here also, Overlander," said Ares. "I am sorry you had to fall this far. I know this causes you discomfort, but I was retrieving your light stick."

"My light stick?" said Gregor.

"Behind you," said Ares.

Gregor turned around and saw a faint glow behind him. He picked up his mini flashlight that had been shining into the fur on Ares's back.

"Thanks!" The light calmed him down a little.

"Man, you'll never guess what happened! Those cockroaches came up in the park and took Boots! They just stole her right out from under my nose!" And suddenly Gregor was really mad at the roaches. "I mean, what were they thinking? Did they think I wouldn't notice?"

Ares veered off to the right and began to fly over a ridge along one side of the Waterway. "No, Overlander, they —"

"Well, did they think I wouldn't care? Like it would be okay just to grab her and run and I'd be, like, 'Oh, well, guess I won't be seeing Boots around.'"

"They did not think that," said Ares.

"Did they think I wouldn't come get her? And they'd just be able to keep her and do their little dances around her and sing 'Patty Cake' and —" said Gregor.

"The crawlers knew you would follow," Ares slipped in, before Gregor lost it.

"Of course, I followed! And man, when I get hold of those bugs, they'd better have some really good explanation for this whole thing. How far are we from their place?" said Gregor.

"Several hours. But I am taking you to Regalia," said Ares.

"Regalia? I don't want to go to Regalia!" said Gregor. "You take me to the roaches, and you take me there now!" ordered Gregor.

Thwack!

Gregor landed flat on his back. Ares had flipped him over onto the stone ridge. Before he could speak, the bat was on his chest, his claws digging deep into his down jacket.

Ares's face was just inches from Gregor's. The bat's gums were pulled back over his teeth in a snarl. "I do not take orders from you, Overlander. Let us be clear on this from the start. I do not take orders from you!"

"Whoa!" said Gregor, startled by Ares's intensity. "What's your problem?"

"My problem is that at this moment, you are reminding me a great deal of Henry," said Ares.

This was really the first time Gregor had ever gotten a good look at Ares's face. The light in the Underland was usually dim. And Ares was particularly hard to see because of his uniform blackness, black eyes, black nose, black mouth set in his black fur. But in the direct beam of the flashlight, he could see the bat was furious.

Ares had saved his life. Gregor had kept Ares from banishment, which would have meant certain death. They were bonded together and had sworn to fight to the death for each other. But they had never exchanged more than a handful of words. As Ares glared down at him, Gregor realized he knew next to nothing about the bat.

"Henry?" said Gregor, because he couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Yes, Henry. My old bond. You remember, I let him smash to his death on the rocks so that I could give you more time," Ares said almost sarcastically. "And right now I am wondering if I should not have let you both fall because, like Henry, you are under the impression that I am your servant."

"No, I'm not!" objected Gregor. "Look, we don't even have servants where I come from. I just wanted to go get my sister!"

"And I am trying to unite you with your sister as quickly as I can. But, like Henry, you do not listen to me," said Ares.

Gregor had to admit this was true. He'd kept talking right over Ares every time the bat had tried to speak. But he didn't like being compared with Henry. He was nothing like that traitor. Still, maybe he *bad* been out of line.

"Okay, I'm sorry. I was mad and I should have listened to you. Now get off my chest," said Gregor.

"Get off my chest, what?" said Ares.

"Get off my chest now!" said Gregor, getting angry again.

"Try again," said Ares. "Because to me this sounds very much like an order."

Gregor gritted his teeth and suppressed an impulse to push the bat off. "Get — off — my — chest *please*.""

Ares considered the request for a moment, decided it was satisfactory, and fluttered off to the side.

Gregor sat up and rubbed his chest. He was unharmed, but there were several deep holes in his jacket where Ares's claws had pierced the fabric.

"Hey! Can you watch those claws? Look what you did to my jacket!" said Gregor.

"It is of no matter. They will burn it, anyway," Ares said indifferently.

It was at that moment that Gregor decided he was bonded to a big jerk. And he felt pretty sure that Ares had come to the same conclusion.

"Okay," Gregor said coldly. "So, we have to go to Regalia. Why?"

"That is where the crawlers are taking your sister," said Ares, matching Gregor's tone.

"And why would the crawlers want to take my sister to Regalia?" asked Gregor.

"Because," said Ares, "the rats have sworn to kill her."

CHAPTER 4

"Kill her? But why?" asked Gregor, stunned.

"It is foretold by 'The Prophecy of Bane,'" said Ares.

"The Prophecy of Bane." Gregor remembered it now. When he had left the Underland the first time, he had told Luxa he would never come back, and she had said, "That is not what it says in 'The Prophecy of Bane.'" And then he'd tried to ask Vikus about it, but the old man had been evasive and hustled him onto his bat and given the command to leave. So, Gregor didn't know what it meant, but the first prophecy in which he'd been mentioned had resulted in the deaths of four members of a twelve-party quest and had triggered a war that had killed countless others. A feeling of dread swept over him. "What does it say, Ares?"

"Ask Vikus," Ares said shortly. "I am tired of being interrupted."

He climbed on Ares's back, and they flew back to Regalia without exchanging another word. Gregor was angry with Ares but even angrier with himself for placing his family in jeopardy again. Yes, Luxa had mentioned "The Prophecy of Bane." It was just that once he and his mom had blocked that grate in the laundry room, Gregor had put the idea of returning to the Underland out of his mind. "Avoid the laundry room, avoid the Underland," he'd reasoned. But how could he have taken Boots to Central Park? He knew about the entrance there! He knew there was a second prophecy! It had been foolish to think it would be safe.

When they reached the beautiful stone city, it was so quiet that Gregor thought it must be nighttime here. Well, nighttime was relative, since the Underland had no sun or moon, no day or night, like the Overland. But Gregor figured it must be the time when most of the city was asleep.

Ares headed for the palace and made a smooth landing in the High Hall, the big, ceiling-less room that could accommodate the arrival of many bats.

Standing patiently, all alone, was Vikus. The old man looked exactly as Gregor remembered him, his silver hair and beard trimmed very short, his violet eyes in a web of wrinkles that was mostly noticeable when he smiled. He was smiling now, as Gregor dismounted.

"Hey, Vikus," said Gregor.

"Ah, Gregor the Overlander! Ares has found you. I thought it would be best to seek you in the passage from your laundry room, but he insisted on

scouting the Waterway. I ascertain that, as bonds, you already think alike," said Vikus.

Neither Ares nor Gregor responded. Since they weren't actually speaking to each other, it seemed stupid to act like they had some special mental link.

Vikus glanced from one to the other and then continued. "So...welcome! You look well. And your family?"

"Fine, thanks. Where's Boots?" said Gregor. He liked Vikus, but this whole situation with the roaches kidnapping Boots and the threat from the prophecy killed his mood for small talk.

"Ah, the crawlers should arrive with her shortly. Mareth led a party to meet them, and I could not dissuade Luxa from joining. By now, Ares has, of course, explained our predicament to you," said Vikus.

"Not really," said Gregor.

Vikus looked at each of them again, but neither Gregor nor Ares elaborated.

"Well, then. To begin with, we should examine together 'The Prophecy of Bane.' Perhaps you remember, when you were departing the Underland, I made some small mention of it," said Vikus.

"Very small," Gregor muttered. What he remembered was that Vikus had rushed him off and told him absolutely nothing.

"Let us proceed to Sandwich's room now. Ares, you will attend as well, please," Vikus said, and headed off into the palace.

Gregor followed him with Ares fluttering along behind.

Vikus did not resume the conversation until they'd reached a solid wooden door. He pulled a key from his cloak and turned it in the lock. The door swung open. "You will find it on your right," he said, and motioned for Gregor to enter ahead of him. Gregor pulled a torch from a holder by the door and walked in to the room. It was entirely covered in tiny words carved into the stone walls in the 1600s by the founder of Regalia, Bartholomew of Sandwich. The words formed prophecies, visions of Sandwich's, that the Underlanders lived and died by. The first time Gregor had been in the room, the wall facing the door had been illuminated with a small oil lamp. That was where Sandwich had carved "The Prophecy of Gray." Now that area was in shadow. The lamp had been moved to the wall on his right. Above it was what looked like a poem. This must be it. "The Prophecy of Bane."

Gregor lifted his torch to get a clearer view and began to read:

*If Under fell, if Over leaped,
If life was death, if death life reaped,
Something rises from the gloom
To make the Underland a tomb.
Hear it scratching down below,
Rat of long-forgotten snow,
Evil cloaked in coat of white
Will the warrior drain your light?
What could turn the warrior weak?
What do burning gnawers seek?
Just a barely speaking pup
Who holds the land of Under up.
Die the baby, die his heart,
Die his most essential part.
Die the peace that rules the hour.
Gnawers have their key to power.*

Gregor didn't know what it meant any more than he had understood "The Prophecy of Gray." But his mind snagged on one phrase that chilled him to the bone: Die the baby...Die the baby...Die the baby...Boots...

"Okay, I want to go through this whole thing. Right here, right now," said Gregor.

Vikus nodded. "Yes, I think it wise we dissect the prophecy immediately. It is not as cryptic as the first, but there are things you must know. Shall we begin at the beginning?" He moved to the prophecy and brushed his fingers over the first two lines. "You have fresh eyes, whereas I have read this thousands of times. Tell me, Gregor, what make you of this?" Gregor looked at the lines more closely this time...

If Under fell, if Over leaped, If life was death, if death life reaped, ... and realized he did know what they meant. "It's about me and Henry. I'm the Over, I leaped. Henry's the Under, he fell. I lived, and he died."

"Yes, and King Gorgor and his rats also died, reaping much life in the Underland," said Vikus.

"Hey, how come you didn't tell me about this before? Then maybe I would have known what was coming!" said Gregor.

"No, Gregor, it is clear only in hindsight. 'lnder' could have referred not only to Henry, but to any other Underland creature, or the Underland itself. 'Over' could have been your father. Your leap may not have been a literal leap but a mental or spiritual leap. Henry's fall might have alluded to any variety of physical deaths, not to mention a fall from power or honor. In truth, a human Underlander literally falling to his death was not a popular interpretation. Henry never would have suspected he would die in such a way," said Vikus.

"Why not?" asked Gregor.

Vikus glanced at Ares and hesitated.

"Because he would have expected me to catch him," Ares said bluntly.

"Yes," said Vikus. "So, you see that the first prophecy was indeed gray to us, although now, of course, it seems as clear as water. Shall we go on?"

Gregor read the next bit to himself.

Something rises from the gloom

TO MAKE THE UNDERLAND A TOMB.

"So, something bad is coming. Something deadly," said Gregor.

"Not just coming. It is here, and has been here for some time. Only the rats have concealed it, even from their own. You will find more about it in the next stanza," Vikus said, gesturing to the next four lines.

Hear it scratching down below,

Rat of long-forgotten snow,

Evil cloaked in coat of white

Will the warrior drain your light? Gregor studied the lines for a minute.

"It's a rat. A white rat?"

"The color of long-forgotten snow, for we do not get snow in the Underland. Although I imagine it to be very beautiful," Vikus said a bit wistfully.

"It is," said Gregor. "There's snow everywhere right now. It makes everything look better." It did, too, when it had just fallen. It covered up the dirt and the trash, and for a while the city looked clean and fresh. And then it turned to slush. "So, this white rat...?"

"It is the stuff of legends. Even when he lived in the Overland, Sandwich knew tales of the white rat. Historically, one will appear every few centuries, gather other rats about it, and create a reign of terror. It is remarkable in cunning, strength, and size," said Vikus.

"Size?" said Gregor. "You mean it's even bigger than the other rats down here?"

"Considerably so," said Vikus. "As legend has it. And at this point in time, the only thing that stands between this creature and the Underland is you. The warrior. You are a threat to it. That is why the white rat has been so carefully concealed. The rats do not want you to find it. But you also have a vulnerability." Vikus tapped the third stanza, and Gregor read on.

What could turn the warrior weak? What do burning gnawers seek?

Just a barely speaking pup

Who holds the land of Under up.

"Do you know what is meant by 'pup'?" asked Vikus.

"Ripred called Luxa and Henry pups once, when they wouldn't obey him," said Gregor. And suddenly he wondered how much the large, scarred rat who had helped save his father knew about all this.

"He undoubtedly said it sarcastically, and to remind them he was in charge. For, to rats, a 'pup' is a baby. The only baby we know of who is close to you is Boots," said Vikus.

Gregor felt his eyes pulled to the last stanza of the prophecy.

Die the baby, die his heart,

Die his most essential part.

Die the peace that rules the hour.

Gnawers have their key to power.

"So, they think that if they" — Gregor could hardly say it — "kill Boots, something will happen to me."

"It will break you somehow," said Vikus. "And if that happens, the rats will overtake the rest of us."

"No pressure or anything," Gregor said, but he felt very scared. "You're sure it's Boots?"

"As sure as we may dare be. Your closeness to her is well known. That you sacrificed yourself, that you leaped rather than let King Gorger kill her — this made a great impression on everyone. Can you think of another baby it could be, Gregor?" Vikus asked solemnly.

Gregor shook his head. It was Boots. And they were right about one thing: If they killed her, something in him would break. "So, why did you bring her down here? Why didn't you just leave her in the Overland, where she was safe?"

"Because she was not safe. And neither were you. The crawlers watch you night and day, to protect you," said Vikus.

The roach he had trapped in the mayonnaise jar that morning flashed before his eyes. "You mean the little ones?"

"Yes, they are in communication with the larger ones below. But the rats watch you as well. They have been tracking your family's movements since shortly after you left the Underland, waiting for a chance to take your sister's life," said Vikus. "It was not possible in your home. But today you ventured out with her very near one of the gateways."

"We went sledding in Central Park," said Gregor.

Then Ares spoke up. "The Overlander was chased in the tunnels by gnawers. He had to drop into the Waterway to escape them."

"Then the crawlers must have rescued Boots just in time. She was the rats' target today, Gregor," said Vikus.

"Why not just kill me?" Gregor asked numbly.

"They would be happy to. But they have seen you leap and live to tell of it, so they are less confident in such a goal," answered Vikus. "And at the moment they are more concerned with the prophecy. It is by killing Boots that they mean to destroy you."

"I still think we would be safer in the Overland. We just won't go to Central Park. We'll keep Boots inside...." But Gregor wasn't really sure it would be safer.

"I will send you back directly, if that is what you wish. But they will find her, Gregor, now that they are set on it. In their minds, it is a race. They must kill Boots before the white rat is killed. Only one may survive. Believe it or not, we brought her to the Underland to protect her," said Vikus.

"And to protect yourselves," Gregor said flatly.

"Yes. And to protect ourselves," said Vikus. "But as our destinies are intertwined, it seemed one and the same thing. So, what will it be? Shall we take you home, or will you play out your hand with us?"

Gregor thought about the scraping sounds he sometimes heard in the walls of their apartment. They made his mom nervous even though his dad said it was probably just mice. But what if it was rats? And what if they were just a few inches of plaster away, watching Boots? Watching and waiting and reporting to the giant rats below.

There was a skittering sound at the door. Gregor looked over to see Boots riding in the door on the back of a giant roach with a bent antenna.

"Ge-go!" She giggled. "I ride! Temp take Boots ride!"

She was so happy...and tiny...and powerless... he couldn't watch her twenty-four hours a day...he had to go to school...there was no one else to protect her...even he had been worthless today...if it happened again, the rats could kill her in a New York minute. Not even.

"We're staying," said Gregor. "We're staying until this thing is over."

CHAPTER 5

"Go, Ge-go!" Boots told Temp, tapping her heels on the roach's shell, and he obediently carried her over to Gregor. She slid off and ran over and hugged his leg.

"Hey, Boots," he said, ruffling her curls. "Where've you been?"

"I go ride! Fast! Fast ride!" she said.

"Do you remember Vikus?" Gregor asked, gesturing to him.

"Hi! Hi, you!" Boots said happily.

"Welcome, Boots," said Vikus. "We have missed you."

"Hi, bat!" Boots said, waving to Ares, although Gregor had been ignoring him.

"Hey, Temp," Gregor said to the cockroach. "Next time, do you think you could tell me before you run off with Boots? You freaked me out."

"Hates us, the Overlander, hates us?" asked Temp.

Oh, great, now he'd hurt the roach's feelings. They were so thin-skinned. Well, thin-shelled. "No, I don't hate you, come on. It just scared me when you took Boots. I didn't know where she was," said Gregor.

"With us, she was, with us," said Temp, confused now.

"Yeah, I know that. Now. But I didn't know in the park," said Gregor. "I was worried."

"Hates us, the Overlander, hates us?" repeated Temp.

"No! I just need you to tell me if you're going to take her somewhere," said Gregor. Temp's antennas drooped noticeably. This was going nowhere fast. He shifted gears. "But, Temp? Thanks a lot for getting Boots away from the rats. You did a great job."

Temp perked up. "Rat bad," he said with conviction.

"Yeah," Gregor agreed. "Rat very bad."

At that moment, Luxa appeared in the doorway. Her silvery blond hair had grown out a little, she was a bit taller, but it was the lilac circles under those violet eyes that caught Gregor's attention. He wasn't the only one who'd been having a rough time lately.

"Welcome, Gregor the Overlander," said Luxa, approaching him but not touching him.

"Hey, Luxa, how you doing?" asked Gregor.

Her hand reached up distractedly and gave a quick nudge to the gold band around her head. Almost like she wanted to shove it off. "Fine, I am fine."

She wasn't fine. Clearly the girl hadn't been sleeping well. She did not look happy. But she still had that arrogant tilt to her head, that half smile. She still stood like a queen. "So, you have come back after all."

"Didn't have much choice," said Gregor.

"No," said Luxa stonily. "You and I never seem to have much choice. Are you hungry?"

"I hungry. I hungry!" said Boots.

"We missed dinner," Gregor said, although his stomach was too knotted up to feel hungry.

"You need to bathe and dine and then sleep. Solovet says you must begin training on the morrow," said Luxa.

"Says she so?" Vikus asked, sounding a bit surprised.

"Yes. Did she not tell you?" said Luxa, giving Vikus a mocking look to which he did not respond. They had a funny relationship. Vikus was her grandfather but, since her parents had been killed by rats, he was also the closest thing she had to a father. And he was supervising and training Luxa to take on the full responsibilities of being the queen of Regalia when she reached sixteen. Gregor thought it must be complicated for them, being so many things to each other.

"I will see you on the field, Gregor, Ares," Luxa said, and left.

Gregor and Boots were taken to the bathrooms by a couple of Underlanders he'd never met. The young woman took Boots into the locker room for girls, while a guy escorted Gregor to his side.

He caused a scene by running out of the bathroom, dripping wet, with just a towel around him, to ask the guy not to burn their clothes. Ares was right, turning their clothes to ashes was standard, but Gregor knew it would cost a lot to replace them. And he really didn't want to lose his boots.

"But...your clothes carry much scent. The gnawers will know you are here," the guy said uncertainly.

"Oh, that's okay. I mean, they already know I'm here. Two of them chased me to the Waterway," said Gregor. "So, could you just...I don't know, maybe you could put them in the museum or something. That's all Overlander stuff, right?"

Relieved at the suggestion, the guy went off to ask Vikus.

They were fed a big meal: beef stew, bread, mushrooms, those things that reminded Gregor of sweet potatoes but weren't, and some kind of cake. Boots ate with gusto, which reminded him she'd had little more than a bowl of oatmeal and a peanut butter sandwich that day. At least the rest of his family would have the scalloped potatoes for dinner. If anyone could eat.

Oh, this whole thing was his fault! If only he'd kept an eye on Boots, the roaches never would have run off with her. But then, the rats could have reached her first. He guessed he ought to feel grateful to everybody here for rescuing her, and he did, on one level. But on another, he resented them for dragging him back into their troubled world. What was it Vikus had said? "...as our destinies are intertwined, blah, blah, blah, blah." He wanted no part of it, but here he was. Again.

Boots conked out the minute her head hit the pillow, but Gregor felt restless and anxious. He couldn't sleep thinking about his family, the threat to Boots, and the looming presence of some giant white rat out there somewhere, waiting for him. He finally gave up and decided to take a walk around the palace. It should be fine; he wasn't trying to escape or anything this time.

The doorways he passed seemed to lead to people's living quarters. The common rooms, like the High Hall or the dining rooms, were open. But on Gregor's floor, curtains blocked most of the rooms from view. Stone doors must not have been practical, and the only wooden door he'd ever seen in the Underland led to the room filled with Sandwich's prophecies.

Gregor had been walking about ten minutes when he heard voices coming from one of the rooms. They were somewhat muffled by the curtain, but still audible because the people were arguing. It was Vikus....

"You should have told me about the training. I should have had a say in it!"

And who was he talking to?

"Yes, yes, we could have gone round and round while you tried to think of some way to protect him, but it is not possible. No matter what you want."

It sounded like Solovet. She was Vikus's wife, Luxa's grandmother, and the head of Regalia's military. Usually she spoke in a gentle, stately voice. But Gregor had heard her barking orders in combat. Solovet's ability to swing between gracious lady and soldier unnerved him because he never knew which one to expect. She sounded more like the soldier now.

Gregor didn't want to eavesdrop, so he turned to slip away. But then he heard his name and couldn't help listening.

"And what of what Gregor wants? Does he have no say in this? He pushed away the sword, Solovet. He does not wish to fight," Said Vikus.

"None of us wish to fight, Vikus," said Solovet.

Vikus made a sound like "Hm," which suggested he thought maybe somebody in the room enjoyed fighting.

"None of us wish to fight," Solovet repeated in a steely voice, "but we all do. And the prophecy calls Gregor 'the warrior,' after all. Not 'the peacemaker.'"

"Oh, the prophecies are often misleading. He is called a warrior, but perhaps his weapons are not the ones we are familiar with. He did very well last time with no common weapon," said Vikus. "I am telling you he pushed away Sandwich's sword!"

"Yes, when he was safe and he thought everything was over. But I remember he asked for a sword on the quest," shot back Solovet.

"But he had no need of it. He was better off without it, I think," said Vikus.

"And I think that if you send him out unarmed this time, you guarantee his death," said Solovet.

Then there was silence.

Gregor retreated from the doorway as quickly as possible and somehow made it back to his room.

The little sleep he had that night was filled with disturbing dreams.

CHAPTER 6

The next morning Gregor was exhausted and in a bad mood. Another Underlander he'd never met served him breakfast. He left Boots under the care of the woman who'd bathed her the night before, and headed out. Today, he was supposed to start his training. Whatever that was.

After walking down a few halls, Gregor realized he had no idea where to go. Luxa had mentioned something about a field. Did she mean that sports arena? It was the first thing he had seen in Regalia, the large stone oval where the Underlanders played some kind of ball game on bats. It was a twenty-minute hike from the palace.

Gregor eventually made his way to an exit flanked by two guards. Outside the doorway was a platform attached by ropes. When he asked the guards if they would lower him to the ground, they reacted with surprise. "Did not your flier arrange to meet you in the High Hall to carry you to training?" said one.

Ares and Gregor had parted ways the previous night without exchanging a single word. "No, Ares must have forgotten," he said.

"Ah, yes, Ares," the guard said, and gave his partner a significant look.

Although Gregor was angry with Ares, he didn't like what it implied. "I forgot, too," he said. "I should have reminded him."

The guards nodded and made way for him to step onto the platform, which they then lowered the two hundred feet to the ground. Although the passage was smooth and uneventful, Gregor clutched the ropes tensely. The Underland provided endless opportunities to renew his fear of heights.

The city was bustling with pale-skinned, violet-eyed inhabitants going about their business. A lot of people stared at him, but if he caught their eye they gave him a respectful nod. A few even bowed. They knew him, or at least of him. He was the warrior who had saved their city from destruction. He actually enjoyed the attention for a while, and then he realized that they were probably thinking about how he had to go after that giant white rat. He wondered how many soldiers they would send with him to kill it. Something that big, that vicious...it might take a whole army!

When he arrived at the arena, it was clear that he was late. Groups of Underlanders of all ages were spread around the moss-covered ground doing various kinds of stretches and calisthenics. It didn't seem all that

different from how they warmed up in track practice. As he looked around for Luxa, a voice caught his attention:

"Overlander! You are back!" And before he knew it, Mareth had him in a rib-crushing hug. The soldier was one of his favorite Underlanders.

"Hey, Mareth," he said. "How's it going?"

"Very well, now that you are here. Come, you are to do general training with me," Mareth said, pointing Gregor toward a bunch of kids his own age.

As they jogged across the field, they passed a group of children drilling with swords. None of them looked more than six years old. Apparently it was never too soon to start training for war in the Underland.

Gregor spotted Luxa and took a place near her. They only had time for a nod before the class was back in session.

Mareth led them through a series of stretches. Gregor wasn't naturally limber. But Luxa could twist herself around like a pretzel.

Then there were some strengthening exercises, pretty standard push-ups, sit-ups, leg lifts. Finally, they ran laps around the arena. Gregor loved to run both sprints and distance. He felt satisfaction that he was the only one in his group able to keep pace with Mareth, who congratulated him at the end.

The glow from Mareth's praise quickly evaporated as they moved on to tumbling. They had gymnastics every year in gym class, and it was just something Gregor lived through until basketball started. He was too tall and lanky for it and seemed to end most moves by falling flat on his back. Which is what he did now.

Luxa stood over him, trying not to laugh. "When you roll, you cannot unbend your knees until your feet are on the ground," she said, offering him a hand up.

"Yeah, yeah, yeah," he said, letting her pull him up. Gymnasts were always giving you helpful tips like you could actually win the battle with gravity if you just concentrated hard enough. Mareth called for her to demonstrate a trick, and off she went into some amazing run of twisty flippy things, landing on her feet as easily as Gregor would hop off a curb. The other Underlanders broke into spontaneous applause, and Luxa gave them one of her rare smiles. Then she came back and tried the hopeless task of teaching Gregor a cartwheel.

While she was explaining the mechanics for about the eighteenth time, "Hand, hand, foot, foot, not two hands then both feet," something caught

her eye, and her face fell.

Gregor followed her gaze to the entrance of the arena, where a group of five kids was standing. He hadn't seen them before. "Who's that?"

"My cousins. They must have just arrived in Regalia," Luxa said stiffly.

Gregor looked at the group in surprise. "I thought your only cousins were Henry and, what's her name, the nervous girl?"

"Nerissa," said Luxa. "Yes, Nerissa and...Henry." The name cost her some effort to say. "They are the only royal cousins I have ever had. Our fathers were brothers, sons of a king, and of the royal family."

The cousins at the entrance spotted Luxa and began to head over. She nodded at them with obvious dislike. "These five I am related to on my mother's side. They are not of royal blood, although they greatly desire to be so."

"Not crazy about them, huh?" said Gregor.

"They make fun of Nerissa. Of her gift and her frailty," said Luxa. "No, we do not...that is, I do not like them."

Gregor could tell that she and Henry had been "we" for so long that even months after his death she had trouble thinking of herself apart from him. This was, of course, complicated by the fact that he had utterly betrayed her to the rats in order to gain power himself. If you thought about it, it was no wonder Luxa had those lilac circles under her eyes.

"They are only here on a visit from the Fount. Hopefully it will be a short one," said Luxa.

Luxa and her cousins exchanged brief, formal greetings, and then she introduced Gregor to them. The oldest, Howard, was probably about sixteen and looked like he worked out a lot. There was a girl named Stellovet, maybe thirteen or so, who had flowing, silvery blond curls and was strikingly pretty. Next in line was a pair of younger twins, a girl named Hero and a boy called Kent. Lastly, there was a little girl, maybe five or so, clinging to Stellovet's hand. Her name sounded like the word "chimney," but he didn't think he'd gotten that right.

They had trouble taking their eyes off Gregor. He was probably the first Overlander they'd ever seen.

"Greetings, Gregor the Overlander. We have heard much of your deeds and are grateful for your return," Howard said, civilly enough.

"No problem," Gregor said, although his return was very problematic.

"Oh," said Stellovet, her voice dripping with honey, "we were so glad you were there to defend Luxa on the quest."

"Uh-huh. Well, I'd have been rat meat about three times if it wasn't for Luxa, so I guess it evens out," said Gregor.

Stellovet's eyes narrowed, but she gave him a sweet smile. "Yes, Luxa is something of an expert on rats. No matter how many legs they have."

It was a horrible thing to say. It was clear she meant Henry. Gregor knew kids like that, kids who would take something really awful in your life and use it against you. And there was nothing you could say about it because the thing was true. He felt a deep and instant dislike of Stellovet.

To his credit, Howard seemed embarrassed. Stellovet and the twins were smirking. The little girl, Chimney or whatever her name was, was wide-eyed and confused. Gregor didn't have to look at Luxa to know the pain that must be registering on her face.

Gregor stared at Stellovet for a moment and then said casually, "So, where are you guys from?"

"We live at the Fount. Our father is in charge there," Stellovet said with pride.

"You get a lot of rats at the Fount?" asked Gregor.

"Not many," said Stellovet. Now she was watching Gregor more closely. "They are no doubt afraid of our fighting abilities."

"They have little reason to come," Howard said, giving his sister a disapproving look. "They would have to swim their way up treacherous river rapids, and we have no crops or Overlanders worth destroying."

"Oh, so have you ever even seen a rat?" Gregor said pointedly to Stellovet.

She blushed, turning bright pink from head to toe. "Yes! I have seen a rat! On the riverbank! As close as I am to you!"

"But, Stellovet," said little Chimney, tugging on her hand, "that rat was dead."

Stellovet blushed an even deeper shade of pink. "Hush!" she said to Chimney angrily.

"That's about what I thought," said Gregor. "Hey, Luxa, weren't you going to show me that flip thing again?"

"If you will excuse us, cousins," Luxa said.

Luxa and Gregor turned and walked away. He caught her eye. The hurt was still evident on her face, but she gave him a smile. "Thank you,

Gregor," she said softly.

"They're idiots," he answered with a shrug. "Go ahead, Luxa, do one of those flip things. Do the fanciest, wildest one you can think of."

Luxa paused for a moment, focused on a spot halfway across the field, and took off. She launched into a beautiful sequence of flips, ending with a move where she turned two full times in the air completely stretched out and landed on her feet. People applauded, but she just jogged back to Gregor as if she didn't notice. "Now you try," she said.

"Just give me some space," Gregor said, swinging his arms as if to loosen up, and she laughed. Then Mareth called them all together to begin sword training. Howard and Stellovet had joined their group. Everyone chose a sword from a large cart that had been wheeled out onto the field. Gregor examined the weapons, unsure of what to do.

"Here, Overlander, try this one," said Mareth. He picked up a sword, resting the bottom of the blade against the back of his wrist, and offered Gregor the hilt.

Gregor's fingers closed around the handle, and he felt the weight of the sword in his hand, heavy at the hilt, light at the tip. He waved it a couple of times in the air, and it made a swishing sound.

"How does it feel?" asked Mareth.

"All right, I guess," said Gregor. It didn't feel like much of anything, really. He was sort of relieved. All that warrior stuff made him nervous. He didn't like fighting, and he was glad he didn't feel any different while holding the sword.

Mareth divided up the rest of the group into pairs to practice drills. Then he took Gregor aside for his first sword-fighting lesson. The soldier showed him different attacks you could make with the blade, and different ways to defend those attacks. Gregor didn't really see the point in this, since it seemed unlikely he'd be fighting a human, but he guessed this was just basic stuff that everybody had to learn.

After a while they broke to rest for a few minutes, and then Mareth announced it was time for cannon practice.

"Cannon practice? We're going to shoot off cannons?" Gregor asked Luxa.

"Oh, no, these are small cannons for sword practice. To help with speed and accuracy," said Luxa. "You will see."

Three small cannons were wheeled onto the field. Off to the side, Mareth set a barrel that was filled with waxy things about the size of a golf ball. "These are blood balls," Luxa said, holding one out on her palm.

When Gregor took it, he could feel some sort of liquid sloshing around inside it. "It's filled with blood?" he asked, kind of grossed out.

"No, only a red liquid to suggest blood. It makes it easier to see if one has made a hit or not," said Luxa.

The three cannons were positioned in an arc and loaded up with five blood balls each. The Underlanders gathered in a circle outside the cannons.

"So, who is brave enough to go first?" Mareth asked with a smile. "Why not you, Howard? I remember you did quite well the last time you visited."

Howard took his position between the cannons. One faced him, one was on his right, the last on his left. Each was about twenty feet away. On Mareth's command, three Underlanders started to crank handles on the sides of the cannons. Blood balls began to rocket out of the barrels straight at Howard. He swung his sword back and forth, trying to cover his front and sides. Seven blood balls burst as his blade made contact with them. But another eight lay unharmed on the ground around him. The whole thing only took about ten seconds.

"Well done, Howard! Well done," said Mareth, and Howard looked pleased with himself.

"Was that good?" Gregor asked Luxa.

She shrugged. "It was not bad" was as much praise as she could muster.

One by one, each of the students took their turn in the line of fire. Some hit only one or two balls. Luxa matched Howard's seven, and Stellovet hit a respectable five. When all the Underlanders had gone, Mareth called for the cannons to be moved to another part of the field.

"Does not the Overlander take a turn?" Stellovet asked in an innocent voice.

"This is his first day of sword practice," said Mareth.

"I suppose it is too daunting," said Stellovet, "even for one so accomplished."

"I greatly doubt Gregor is daunted," Mareth said with respect. "But our weapons are unfamiliar to him. Would you like to try it, Gregor? Only as an exercise. Almost no one gets many on their first try."

"Sure, why not?" said Gregor. It was funny; he *did* sort of want to. He had a feeling it was like those county fairs he'd been to in Virginia, though.

They had these games like tossing a softball into an old milk jug, or getting a quarter to land on a glass plate. They looked simple, but when you tried them, they were next to impossible. Still, you had to try.

Gregor took his place between the cannons. He held his sword out in front of him like he'd seen the Underlanders do. He felt that slightly anxious, slightly excited feeling he had when it was his turn to bat in baseball. He heard Mareth give the order to fire.

And then a strange thing happened. As the first ball left the cannon in front of him, the arena, the Underlanders, almost everything around him seemed to mute and grow indistinct. He was aware only of the blood balls flying toward him from all directions. His arm was moving. He could hear his blade making a whistling sound. Something splattered against his face. And then it was over.

His surroundings came back into focus: first the walls of the arena, then the shocked faces of the Underlanders. He could feel liquid dripping off his face and hands. The pounding of his heart was audible. He looked down at the ground.

At his feet lay the oozing shells of fifteen balls.

CHAPTER 7

Gregor opened his fingers, and the sword fell to the ground. It was shiny with the red liquid, which, if it wasn't actually blood, sure looked like it. He ran his sword hand across the front of his shirt, leaving a big red stain. Suddenly he felt sick.

He turned on his heel and walked away from the sword, from the blood balls, from the Underlanders who were now beginning to talk in excited voices. Word of what he'd just done must have been spreading around the arena, because people were rushing toward the cannon area. He could feel them beginning to press in on him, and someone, Mareth maybe, called his name. It was becoming hard to breathe.

Suddenly Ares was there before him. "I know a place" was all he said. Gregor automatically climbed on his back, and they took off. He could hear several people calling for him as they flew out of the stadium, but Ares didn't stop. They headed not in the direction of Regalia, but into the tunnels opposite the entrance to the city.

"You will want light," Ares said, angling in toward a row of torches on the tunnel wall, and Gregor reached out and snagged one. In the torchlight, his hand glistened wet and red. He looked away.

Ares dove off into a side tunnel that forked repeatedly. Eventually they arrived at a small underground lake flanked by dozens of caves. The bat dove into one with a narrow entrance. Inside, the cave opened up into a wide space. Large crystal formations grew down from the high ceiling. Gregor slid off Ares's back and onto the stone floor.

He pressed his forehead into his knees and let his breathing return to normal. What had happened back there? How had he hit all fifteen blood balls? He'd been running sword drills with Mareth and nothing unusual had happened, but when those blood balls had started flying at him...

"Did you see? Did you see what I did?" he asked Ares. He had seen some bats flying around the arena that morning, but he hadn't noticed Ares.

The bat sat motionless for a moment, then answered. "You broke all the blood balls."

"I hit them all," Gregor said, still trying to remember it. "But I don't even know how to use a sword."

"Apparently you learn quickly," said Ares, and somehow that made Gregor laugh a little. He looked around the cave. There were food supplies, blankets, spare torches.

"What's this place? Like, your hideout?" Gregor asked.

"Yes, my hideout," said Ares. "At one time it was also Henry's. We came here when we did not want to be around others. Now it is less my hideout than my home."

The implication of what the bat was saying began to dawn on Gregor. "So, you don't live with the other bats anymore? I thought when I bonded with you it made things okay again — about Henry and all."

"It spared me from official banishment. But no one save Aurora and Luxa will speak to me," said Ares.

"Not even Vikus?" Gregor asked, forgetting his own problems for a minute.

"Well, yes, Vikus. But he will speak to anyone," Ares said without much enthusiasm.

He had had no idea things were so bad for the bat. If he hadn't been banished physically, he had been banished socially from his world. And then when Gregor had shown up again, all he'd done was order him around. "Look, I really am sorry about yesterday," he said. "I was mad and scared about Boots, and I took it out on you."

"I was angry, too, about many things that have little to do with you," said Ares.

So, it was better between them. But Gregor still felt like Ares was a stranger.

"How'd you hook up with Henry, anyway?" he blurted out. Maybe it wasn't polite to ask, but it was the main thing Gregor wanted to know.

"Henry chose me because I was wild and known to disobey many of the rules of my land. I chose Henry because I was flattered and he was royal and under his protection I knew I could be absolved of many things," said Ares. "It was not all bad. We flew well together and shared many of the same tastes. In most ways, we were suited to each other. In one, we were not."

So among bats Ares had been some bad-boy rebel type. Of course, that was the kind of bat Henry would pick. Gregor had picked Ares, too, because the bat had risked everything to save his life — but would he have

chosen him if the circumstances hadn't been so extraordinary? He didn't know.

There was a rustling of wings at the cave entrance, and Aurora flew in with Luxa.

"We knew you would be here!" cried Luxa. She bounced off Aurora and almost danced across the floor, clapping her hands together. "Was it not wonderful? Did you see it? Did you see the look on Stellovet's face?"

"As if she had a mouth full of vinegar," Aurora purred, apparently also in a good mood.

"Why?" said Gregor.

"Why? Because of you and the blood balls!" Luxa said, as if he were dense. "She thought to make you look like a fool, and instead you hit the total! Almost no one has ever done this, Gregor! It was brilliant!"

For the first time, Gregor felt a tinge of pride in his accomplishment. Maybe he had overreacted, because of the fake blood and all. Maybe he'd actually just done a really cool thing, like running the table in pool, or pitching a no-hitter in baseball. "Yeah?" he said.

"Of course! And I have not seen Stellovet so put out since the picnic!" said Luxa, giggling at the memory.

The bats both began to make a "huh, huh, huh" sound, and it took a moment for Gregor to realize they were laughing.

"Oh, Gregor, you should have seen it. Vikus forced us all to go on this picnic with my Fount cousins because he thought it would help us get along better. And Stellovet kept pretending she heard rats, and making Nerissa terrified. So Henry tricked her into eating moth cocoons. She spent the whole afternoon picking silk out of her teeth and saying, 'Ah will noth forgeth thiseth!'" Luxa said, doing a pretty great imitation of someone with their mouth full of silk.

"How'd he get her to eat cocoons?" Gregor asked, both amused and grossed out.

"He told her they were a delicacy reserved only for royalty and he could not offer her any. So of course she stole a handful and stuffed it in her mouth," said Luxa.

"Henry could trick her into anything," Ares said, followed by a few more "huh, huh, huhs." And then suddenly his laughter faded. "He could trick all of us."

A cloud seemed to fall on the bats and Luxa. Henry had treated them far worse than he had treated Stellovet.

"Whatever Henry was wrong about, he was right about my Fount cousins," Luxa said grimly. "Especially Stellovet. She dreams of Nerissa and me dying because she thinks Vikus would be made king then and she, as his granddaughter, would be a princess."

They were all quiet for a time, then Aurora piped up on a more positive note. "Gregor's feat will be good for you, Ares."

"We shall see," said Ares.

"It will. It will do you no harm to have a bond who can hit the total," said Luxa. "No one will dare ignore you now."

Gregor hoped this was true. It didn't seem like Ares had much of a life.

Suddenly Ares's and Aurora's heads shot up. Luxa listened a second and then leaped onto Aurora's back. They were gone in a flash.

Gregor could hear some kind of horn blowing in the distance. It had a high, wailing pitch. "What is it?"

"It is a warning, Overlander. You had best mount up," said Ares. Gregor grabbed a torch and threw his leg over Ares's neck. They were immediately airborne.

"Warning? What kind of a warning?" he asked as they swerved out over the lake.

Ares spoke calmly, but his muscles were tense. "It means that rats have entered Regalia."

CHAPTER 8

Gregor gripped Ares's fur and immediately assumed the worst. If rats were in Regalia, they must have come for one thing: Boots!

"Hurry, Ares! Please!" said Gregor.

"Yes, Overlander, I will hurry," said Ares. His powerful wings were beating up and down in a blur. "And Luxa and Aurora will go straight to your sister."

It was only a few minutes, but it seemed to take forever to get back to the arena. Gregor had visions of an army of rats ripping their way across Regalia with one target in mind. Maybe the giant white rat itself had come to kill her!

As they sped into the stadium, a guard shouted at them and waved at the massive stone doors that separated the playing field from the city. "There are just the two! There, by the doors! Stay back!"

Ares put on the brakes, but they were close enough to get a good view of the battle on the ground. In front of the doors were two rats fighting for their lives against a dozen humans on bats. The smaller rat seemed to be able to leap amazingly high off the ground. It was not getting a lot of action, though, because a much larger rat was shielding it from the brunt of the attack.

The big rat was moving so quickly that Gregor couldn't tell much about it. It was spinning in a circle, springing from its front feet to its back feet, lashing out at anything that came within reach of its claws and teeth. He could see bats and humans getting wounded, but not a single blow was landing on the rat. It was like watching one of those martial arts movies where no one can touch the main sensei or master or whatever, it was like watching —

"Oh, no!" Gregor exclaimed. "It's him. It's got to be —"

"Ripred!" Ares cut him off.

"Stop them!" said Gregor.

Ares was already diving. He swooped in from the side, knocking two riders off the front line. He did a figure eight that disoriented a few more, and did some strange hovering motion in the air over Ripred's head.

"Stop!" yelled Gregor. "Stop, he's a friend!"

The Underlanders pulled back to avoid hitting him, and began to shout angrily at Ares to move.

"No, you don't understand! He's on our side! It's Ripred!" Gregor hollered over the din. They heard the name Ripred, and the Underlanders pulled back in silence.

The big rat stopped spinning and fell almost lazily on its back. Its scarred face broke into a big, fanged grin, and it started to laugh. "Oh, look at them, Overlander. Are they not priceless?"

Gregor wanted to laugh, too, because some of the Underlanders' mouths were literally hanging open, but he stifled the impulse. "Stop it," he said to Ripred. "It's not funny."

Ripred just guffawed even louder. "You know it is! You know you want to laugh, too!"

It was such a silly thing to say in the midst of all the tension that it caught Gregor off guard, and he did kind of laugh. He stopped himself quickly, but it was too late. Everyone had heard him. "Just shut up, okay?" he said to Ripred, who ignored him completely as he chortled in glee.

"Can somebody get, like, Vikus, or Solovet, or somebody?" Gregor asked. None of the Underlanders answered him or flew off. He noticed the smaller rat hunkered back against the doors, wide-eyed and panting. He figured it was a friend of Ripred's. "Hey, sorry about this. I'm Gregor. Nice to meet you."

The rat pulled its gums back from its teeth and hissed viciously at him, causing both Gregor and Ares to flinch.

Ripred was beating his tail on the ground in a spasm of hilarity. "Oh! Oh! You needn't try to sweet-talk her," he gasped. "Twitchtip hates everybody!"

The smaller rat, Twitchtip, snarled at Ripred. Then she tore a hole in the moss with one slash of her paw and buried her nose in it.

Okay, well, she was weird.

"Ground formation," commanded a voice, and Gregor turned to see Solovet on a bat coming in for a landing. The Underlanders brought their bats down in a tight diamond pattern. Ignoring Ripred, Solovet walked through the soldiers and bats, sending the wounded off to get medical attention. Then she dismissed the rest.

By this time, Ripred had pulled himself together and was stretched out comfortably on his side. Twitchtip still had her nose buried in the hole in

the moss. She was breathing through her mouth in short, distressed puffs.

Solovet crossed to the rats, signaling Ares to land as she went. She surveyed the invaders stonily. "I have just sent eleven of my ranks to the hospital."

"Oh, I barely scratched them. I was just giving them a little live rat practice, and I think we both have to admit they need it," Ripred said with a significant nod.

"You were supposed to meet an escort guard at Queenshead tomorrow," said Solovet.

"Was that tomorrow? I felt certain it was today. And we waited and waited and poor Twitchtip was so eager for her first glimpse of Regalia that I didn't have the heart to disappoint her another minute. Right, Twitchtip?" Ripred said, poking the rat with the tip of his tail.

Twitchtip yanked her nose from the moss, snapped at Ripred's tail, which he whipped out of reach just in time, and shoved her nose back in the earth.

"Isn't she a charmer? Isn't she just irresistible?" said Ripred. "And I've had her all to myself on a journey from the Dead Land. Imagine the fun."

Twitchtip glowered at him but didn't attack again.

"And for what reason do we have the pleasure of her company?" Solovet asked, eyeing Twitchtip.

"Why, I brought her as a gift. For you, for your people, and for Gregor here. Yes, especially for Gregor," said Ripred.

Gregor looked at the seething rat with alarm. "For me? She's a gift for me?"

"Well, not literally. It's not as if I own her. But I made a bargain with her. She's agreed to help you find the Bane, and I've agreed to let her live with my merry little band of rats in the Dead Land if she succeeds," said Ripred. "You see, she was driven out of the gnawers' land years ago and has been surviving on her own."

"Because she is mad," Solovet said, as if that were obvious.

"Oh, no, not mad. Twitchtip is gifted. Show the people what you can do, Twitchtip," said Ripred. Twitchtip just glared at him. "Go on, show them, or it's back to living with me, myself, and I for you."

Twitchtip reluctantly lifted up her head and brushed the moss and dirt from her nose. She tilted back her chin, took a deep sniff, and grimaced.

"The boy's sister is located on the third level of a large circular structure in a

room with eight other pups and two grown ones. She's just eaten cake and milk. She's cutting a new tooth. Her catch cloth is wet, and her shirt is pink," Twitchtip spat out. Then she crammed her nose back in the moss.

Solovet's eyebrows shot up. "She is a scent seer?"

"Yes, her sense of smell is so unnaturally heightened she can even detect color. She is one in a million. An anomaly. A fluke. A pariah because her own species finds her gift so disquieting. But very, very useful, I think, to you, my dear Solovet," said Ripred.

"She is not a bad fighter, either. If she has survived alone in the Dead Land." For the first time, Solovet smiled. "Can you stay to dine, Ripred?"

"I can be persuaded," said Ripred. "Have them make the thing with the shrimp, won't you? And no skimping on the cream."

"No skimping on the cream," agreed Solovet.

"And give Twitchtip plenty of food, but make it bland. Handle it as little as possible. Your scent is repulsive to her," said Ripred. Solovet gave orders for Twitchtip to be taken to a remote cave outside Regalia, where the city's smells wouldn't be so torturous to her.

Before they left, Solovet turned to Gregor. "I have not had time to welcome you properly, Gregor. I hear you made quite a stir at training today."

"I guess," said Gregor.

"He hit the total," Solovet said to Ripred.

"Did he?" Ripred said, surveying him with interest. Suddenly Ripred's tail came up out of nowhere and sliced at Gregor. To Gregor's surprise, he found the rat's tail clenched in his hand. He had reflexively blocked it inches from his face.

"Well, you can't teach that," Ripred said, slipping his tail out of Gregor's grasp.

Ripred went off to the palace with Solovet through some secret passage to avoid causing a panic in the city.

Ares flew Gregor back to the palace. Guards greeted him at the High Hall and, after a moment of discomfort, they greeted Ares as well. Maybe Aurora was right. Maybe things would be better for the bat now that he was bonded to someone who could hit a lot of blood balls.

In the bath, he scrubbed and scrubbed at the fake blood, but it still left a stain on his skin. He finally gave up, hoping it would wear off before he went back to school — after the white rat was dead or whatever.

He went to get Boots from the nursery and was happy to see Dulcet, the really nice nanny who had cared for the toddler the first trip down. "How's she been doing?"

"Oh, Boots has had a very good day. I think it has been somewhat trying for Temp, though," said Dulcet, nodding toward a corner.

For the first time, Gregor spotted the giant cockroach. He was being decked out in dress-up clothes by a group of little kids. Each of his insect legs wore a different kind of shoe. His head poked out of a long purple gown that bunched up around his neck. Pink ribbons festooned his drooping antennas. Boots plunked a fuzzy hat on his head, and the kids all jumped up and down, squealing in delight.

"Temp have hat! Temp have hat!" she beamed at Gregor as he came to get her.

"Ohhh," Temp said mournfully. "Ohhh."

"He sure does," said Gregor. "He looks real good, too. But now it's time for dinner, Boots." He knelt down and whispered to Temp, "Don't worry, buddy. I'll get you out of here." Trying not to laugh, he began to untangle the poor insect from the clothes. He'd been the object of Boots's dress-up games often enough to feel sympathetic. This had probably been going on for hours.

Unhappily, dinner turned out to be a reunion of sorts for those who had gone on "The Prophecy of Gray" quest — those who had survived it, anyway. Of the eight who had lived to tell the tale, only Gregor's dad was absent. Gregor, Boots, Luxa, Aurora, Ares, Temp, and Ripred were all there, with Solovet and Vikus presiding over the table. Maybe Vikus had thought this would give them some kind of comfort, but if the memories it brought up of the dead — the two spiders, Gox and Treflex, the cockroach, Tick, and Luxa's cousin, Henry — were painful for Gregor, they had to be excruciating for some of the other survivors.

It didn't help that this was the first time Boots seemed to notice that Tick was gone. Boots had been asleep with a high fever when Tick had given her life to protect her. When they'd gotten back home, Boots had talked about Tick as if she were fine. Gregor let her because he didn't know how to explain to a two-year-old that her friend was dead and, besides, he'd never planned on coming back here, anyway. Now her little voice going, "Where Tick? Where Tick?" sent jolts of sadness through him.

After several minutes of "Where Tick?" almost everyone had given up eating. Without even excusing himself, Ares just up and flew out of the room, and Temp hid under the table, making odd clicking noises that Gregor thought might be some kind of cockroach crying.

Even Ripred seemed to raise an eyebrow at the guest list. "Really, Vikus, did you think we were going to swap war stories?"

"I thought it might be healing," said Vikus. "That it might help some accept their losses."

At that, Luxa sprang up, kicking her chair back onto the floor behind her. She and Aurora were gone in seconds.

"And it's working beautifully," said Ripred. "Ah, well, more for me." The rat hooked his paw around a huge serving dish of shrimp in cream sauce and pulled it in front of him. He stuck his entire face in the dish and sucked it down. At least this distracted Boots, who was so fascinated by his eating methods that she dipped her own face in her plate to imitate him.

"Mm," Ripred said dreamily as he pulled his dripping muzzle from the dish.

"Mm," Boots echoed. She giggled, dropped her face back in her dish, and slurped.

Ripred's long tongue swept around his jaws, cleaning off the cream. "Nothing like that in the Dead Land. Nothing much of anything these days, of course. Since the humans have cut the gnawers off from their main fishing grounds."

"Perhaps a little hunger will help them reflect on their poor judgment in attacking us," Solovet said, helping herself to a large serving of mushrooms.

"Surely the gnawers are not really starving?" asked Vikus.

"Aren't they?" said Ripred. "You have driven them back to the border of the ants. The rivers left open to them are dangerous to fish and are downstream from the crawlers, so the catch is small. What, in your mind, are they feeding on?"

There was silence.

Gregor tried to imagine being a rat and being hungry. In his experience, being hungry didn't make you think about anything but getting food — or maybe, in the rats' case, getting even.

"It's not helping the grand plan. I have enough to overcome as it is. And you reap what you sow, Solovet," said Ripred.

"Is this what you came to tell me, Ripred?" Solovet said, unmoved.

"No. You know what you're doing. Or at least you flatter yourself you do. I came to deliver Twitchtip and to teach Gregor another trick he can't learn from you." Ripred stuck an entire loaf of bread in his mouth and pushed back from the table. "Ready, boy?"

"For what?" Gregor asked, watching the crumbs fly out of Ripred's mouth.

"Your first lesson," Ripred said with a big gulp. "It starts now."

CHAPTER 9

"Echolocation?" Gregor said blankly. "You're going to teach me echolocation?" He was standing in a circular cave somewhere deep beneath Regalia with nothing but his mini flashlight.

Ripred slouched against a wall. Even for a rat, he had terrible posture. When he fought, everything in his body seemed to align and crackle with energy and power. The rest of the time, he wasn't much to look at. He reminded Gregor of one of those big baseball pitchers who kind of lumber around with their stomachs almost popping off their uniform buttons. You wouldn't bet they could make it around the bases without having to stop and catch their breath. But put them on the pitcher's mound and they'd fire off a hundred-mile-an-hour fastball that left the batter cross-eyed.

As if even slouching had been too much of an effort for him, Ripred slid down and lounged along the wall of the cave. "Yes, echolocation. Tell me what you know about it."

"I know bats use it. And dolphins, maybe. It's like radar. They make a sound and it bounces off of something and they can tell where it is without seeing it," said Gregor. "But people can't do that. I can't do that."

"Anybody can do it, to some extent. In the Overland, some blind people use it with excellent results," said Ripred. "The Underland humans don't give it much attention, but in this, they are fools. All the rest of us down here use it to some degree."

"You mean, the roaches and the spiders and —" started Gregor.

"All of us. Generations in the dark have helped the skill evolve. But if you could master even the most rudimentary elements of it, echolocation would be invaluable to you," said Ripred. "Say, for instance, if you lost your light in a cave with a rat." Gregor saw Ripred's tail coming, and his hand lifted to block it, but the rat was ahead of him this time. It was actually his hind foot that smacked the flashlight out of Gregor's hand and sent it spinning into the cave wall twenty feet away. The beam pointed into the stone, leaving them virtually in the dark.

Ripred's voice startled him. "And now I'm back here," the rat said from behind him. Gregor whipped around and, from somewhere off to his left, Ripred whispered, "Over here now."

The flashlight came spinning back across the floor and bumped into Gregor's feet. He picked it up and saw the rat was again slouching against the wall, on the far side of the cave from where the flashlight had been.

"So teach me," Gregor said, unnerved.

Ripred began by having him close his eyes and make a clicking sound, bouncing his tongue off the roof of his mouth. Then he had to listen very carefully to how it sounded. It was supposed to sound differently when he directed it toward a cave wall than when he directed it at Ripred. Then Ripred had him turn off his flashlight and click and listen and point it wherever it sounded like the rat might be. He really did try, but he'd only had about three hours of sleep in the last two days, plus all the craziness of being back in the Underland and the prophecy and the training and —

"Focus, Overlander! This could save your life!" Ripred snarled as Gregor miscalculated his position for the tenth time in a row.

"This is stupid, Ripred — it all sounds the same to me!" Gregor snapped back. "I can't do it, okay?"

"No, not okay. You will practice. Every time you get a chance down here and when you go home, if you get home, whenever you can," ordered Ripred. "You may not master it, but clearly you can only improve!"

"Okay. Fine. I'll practice. Are we done?" Gregor asked with some attitude. He'd about had it with the rat.

Suddenly Ripred's nose was inches from his own. The rat's eyes were narrowed in anger.

"Listen, Warrior," he hissed. "One day you will find that it matters not if you can hit three thousand blood balls if you cannot locate one in the dark. Understand?"

"Yeah," Gregor managed to get out. Ripred didn't move. "So, I'll practice. I will," said Gregor. "For real."

"Good. Now let's go get some sleep. We're both done in," said Ripred.

As they silently made their way back toward the city, Gregor wondered if Ripred would think twice about killing him. When they had been on the quest to get his dad, Ripred had kept him alive because they had mutual need: Gregor needed Ripred to find his dad. Ripred needed Gregor to help defeat King Gorger so that he could be the leader of the rats someday. Ripred must still need Gregor for "The Prophecy of Bane." But when Gregor had stopped being of use to the rat, would he be expendable?

Gregor's feet dragged as he climbed up the flights of stairs toward where he thought his bedroom was. It was very late here — probably about the time he'd come into the city the previous night — and everyone was asleep. He got lost and couldn't find anyone to give him directions. As he was wandering around, looking for a guard, he came upon the wooden door that shut off the room filled with Sandwich's prophecies.

The door was cracked open. This was strange; he thought they kept it locked all the time. Someone must be inside. He pushed the door open wider and stepped in. "Hello? Anybody in here?"

At first he thought the room was empty. The lamp was still lit under "The Prophecy of Bane," but no one appeared to be reading it. Then he heard a faint rustling sound in the far corner, and she stepped into the light.

"Oh!" Gregor jumped, not just because he was startled but because the sight of her was spooky. He had only seen Nerissa Once. She had been saying good-bye to her brother, Henry, as they left on the quest. He remembered she was very thin and seemed nervous. She had given him a copy of "The Prophecy of Gray" to take on his journey. Luxa had told him she could see the future or something.

If she had been thin before, she was now emaciated. Her eyes shone huge and hollow in the torchlight. Where Luxa had lilac circles under her eyes, Nerissa's were underscored with dark purple crescents. Her hair, which fell down far below her waist, was loose and tangled. Even though she was wrapped in a thick cloak, she acted like she was freezing.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Didn't mean to — I'm just — I was just looking for sleeping — I mean, looking for where I sleep. My bedroom. Sorry." Gregor started to back out of the room.

"No, wait, Overlander," Nerissa said in a tremulous voice. "Stay a moment."

"Oh, okay, sure," Gregor said, wishing very badly he could get out of there. "So, how've you been, Nerissa?" he said, and then cringed. How did he think she'd been?

"I have been unwell," Nerissa said tiredly. But it was not self-pitying, which somehow made it sadder.

"Look, I'm sorry about your brother, about Henry," said Gregor.

"I think it is best he is dead," said Nerissa.

"You do?" Gregor said, taken aback by her bluntness.

"When one considers the alternatives," said Nerissa. "Had he been successful in banding with the gnawers, we would all be dead. You, your sister, your father. All of my people. Henry, too. But, of course, I miss him greatly."

Well, she might be a wreck, but Nerissa was not afraid to look things in the eye. "Do you know why he did it?" Gregor ventured to ask.

"He was afraid. I know that. And I think somehow in his mind he felt that joining with the rats would give him the security he longed for," said Nerissa.

"He was wrong," said Gregor.

"Was he?" Nerissa said, and she smiled. Which was extra spooky.

"I thought so. Didn't you just say...if he'd got his way, we'd all be dead?" said Gregor. Maybe she was kind of crazy, after all.

"Oh, yes. His methods were undoubtedly flawed." Nerissa lost interest in their conversation and wandered over to "The Prophecy of Bane." Her bony fingers reached up and ran slowly across the letters, as if she were reading Braille. "And what of you, Warrior? Are you ready to face the Bane?"

The Bane. Ripred had said something about the Bane. "You mean...the prophecy?" Gregor asked, confused.

"Vikus did not tell you? We call the white rat 'the Bane,'" said Nerissa. "Do you know what that means?"

"Not exactly," Gregor admitted. - "It means a scourge," said Nerissa.

Wow, that was helpful. A scourge. "Still not clear," said Gregor.

"A calamity, an affliction." Nerissa searched his face for signs of understanding. "A very bad thing," she said finally.

"Oh, I got you," said Gregor. "Well, yeah, the rat. Vikus says I'm a threat to it or something. I'm supposed to help you guys kill it."

Nerissa looked bewildered. "Help us? Oh, no, Gregor, you must drain its light. See, it is written here." Her fingers rapidly passed over a line on the wall.

Will the warrior drain your light?

When Vikus had gone over the prophecy the night before, Gregor had been so consumed with the rats wanting to kill Boots, he hadn't focused much on this line. And Vikus hadn't elaborated. For the Underlanders, the word "light" was interchangeable with the word "life." So, when they talked about draining something's light, they meant killing it. The mission was to

kill the Bane. He knew that. But Gregor had assumed the Underlanders would send a lot of soldiers with him. Trained soldiers.

The line pounded into his brain.

Will the warrior drain your light?

Gregor began to get a very bad feeling. "Oh, man," he said. "You mean, there's this giant white rat...and you guys expect me to...by myself...you mean, I'm supposed to..."

PART 2

The Hunt

CHAPTER 10

Maybe you didn't actually have to have sleep. Maybe it was something people got used to having, and thought they needed, but could really get by without. Gregor hoped so, because despite his complete state of exhaustion, he'd just spent the night without a wink of it.

Mostly he'd been trying to imagine the big white rat he was supposed to kill by himself. A rat much larger and, presumably, stronger than Ripred. So Gregor figured the Bane was at least twice as tall as he was and probably weighed, oh, nine or ten times as much. Who cared if Gregor could hit a bunch of blood balls? This thing would squash him like a fly.

Of course, Vikus hadn't gone into any detail about it. The same way he had never really spent much time dwelling on the fact that four of the twelve questers would be dead when "The Prophecy of Gray" was fulfilled. He had a way of sidestepping issues he thought Gregor couldn't handle. How long would Vikus have put off telling him he had to kill the Bane alone? As long as possible. Gregor pictured himself gaping in terror at the salivating white giant while Vikus tapped him on the shoulder and said in an upbeat voice, "Oh, yes, and by the way, according to Sandwich, you have to kill him single-handedly. Off you go, then!"

Gregor remembered when he was standing in Central Park, barely over a day ago, and how his biggest worry had been how they were going to afford Christmas presents. Nothing like one of Sandwich's prophecies to put your whole world in perspective.

He shifted his chin to his other hand and tried to focus on the babble of voices around the stone table. Vikus had called a council meeting to discuss his journey to find and kill the Bane. The council was a group of older Underlanders who would govern Regalia by committee until Luxa turned sixteen and was of age to rule.

The only thing the members agreed on was that Gregor needed to get moving as soon as possible. Since the rats knew that Gregor and Boots were in the Underland again, they would surely take extra measures to conceal the Bane and hunt down his sister.

Apparently Regalian spies also had brand-new information and had just locked in on an area where they thought the white rat was hiding. Although none of them had personally seen the creature, their sources indicated it was

in a place called the Labyrinth. The word meant nothing to Gregor, but Ares whispered to him that a labyrinth was a maze. Lizzie and her puzzle book flashed before his eyes. She would be so much better than he would at finding her way around a maze. Thinking of Lizzie made him think of the rest of his family waiting and wondering above, and the thought was unbearable.

"Yeah, let's get going. The sooner the better!" Gregor said, and everyone looked at him in surprise since it was the first thing he'd said all morning and the council was currently talking about which way to travel to the Labyrinth.

Although they examined several options, every route that went through the web of Underland tunnels was judged too dangerous. While the humans controlled a much wider range of the Underland than they had before the war, the Labyrinth was situated in a remote corner of the rats' land. So remote, in fact, that most rats never even went there. But if they had the Bane there, it was sure to be guarded.

"That leaves the Waterway," Vikus said with a frown. "It is not ideal, but it is the least treacherous."

"What of the serpents? Their mating season is nigh," said Howard. Gregor didn't know why Luxa's cousin had been allowed in the meeting. He was just supposed to be on a family visit.

"A good point," agreed Vikus. "And yet another reason to begin the journey at once. Perhaps the party can slip by before the serpents awaken."

"Yippee, serpents," Gregor thought, and he remembered a twenty-foot spiked tail he'd seen flipping out of the Waterway when Ares was flying them home. He wondered what was attached to the tail.

"Now, Gregor, there is something we need to address," said Vikus. "It is the opinion of the council that Boots should remain under guard in Regalia while you pursue the Bane."

Gregor had anticipated this coming up. It would be terribly dangerous taking Boots on another Underland trip. But how could he leave her here when he had seen Ripred and Twitchtip get into the arena so easily? Sure, Ripred was extra smart, but none of the rats seemed dumb. He and Boots would stay together, like his mom always told them to do.

"She's coming with me or I don't go. End of discussion," said Gregor. He knew this sounded uppity, but at this point he was too tired to care.

There was a pause in which everyone glanced around, acknowledging that this had been out of line. But what were they going to do?

Vikus sent him off to prepare for the journey. He went to the museum to look for some light sources. The museum was full of stuff that had fallen from Gregor's world. There were a lot of cool, really old things, like a wheel from a horse-drawn carriage, an actual quiver still filled with arrows, a silver mug, a cuckoo clock, a top hat. More recent items, like wallets, jewelry, and watches, were neatly laid out in rows. There were lots of good flashlights, probably because anyone who had been in the tunnels below New York City would have needed one. Gregor selected four and dug out a lot of batteries.

A couple of life jackets caught his eye, and he took these, too. The last time, they had been traveling through stone tunnels. This time, he guessed they would be flying over the Waterway. Boots was too little to know how to swim. He added to his supplies a roll of duct tape and a couple of candy bars that didn't seem too stale.

As he was leaving, he saw their regular clothes folded in two neat stacks by the door. Vikus must've said it was okay to keep them. Gregor didn't care what they smelled like; he was wearing his boots.

When he went by the nursery to collect Boots, he was told that Dulcet had already taken her down to the river. That was to be their departure point.

Gregor thought that made sense, since flying down the river had to be the quickest way to get to the Waterway. But when he reached the docks, he saw a team of Underlanders loading up two boats that were suspended by ropes at dock level above the river. They were long, narrow vessels that reminded him of boats he'd seen in the museum back home, boats Native Americans had used hundreds of years ago. But secured to the bottom of each was a large gray triangular fin — a real fish fin— that must've come off a whopper of a swordfish or something. Strapped along the sides of the boats were more fins that could be extended and retracted horizontally as needed. A curved bone was attached to the back of each boat as a rudder.

"What's with the boats?" he asked Vikus, who was overseeing the loading. "Aren't we taking the bats?"

"Ah, yes, but the Waterway is vast and provides few hospitable places to rest. No bat would have the stamina to cross it, so much of your trip must be by sea," said Vikus.

Gregor didn't know much about boating except that, compared to flying, it was slow. It was going to take forever to get to the Bane by water.

Just then, Twitchtip slunk out onto the dock. "Oh, great," thought Gregor. "I bet I end up riding with the crazy rat."

Dulcet helped him secure the life jacket on Boots. It was too big, really, but they belted it on as best they could. Gregor wasn't sure what to do with the second jacket — he could swim pretty well — until he saw Temp shivering at the edge of the dock, looking at the churning river below.

"Hey, Temp, are you going with us?" he asked.

"Vikus says I may, he says," said Temp. So Gregor put the extra jacket on Temp. The bug allowed it because the princess was wearing one, too, and because Gregor got through to him that it would help him float.

As he stood up from strapping Temp in, he saw Luxa, Solovet, Mareth, and Howard come out of the palace. Luxa and Solovet were wearing gowns, not the long pants they had traveled in before.

"Wait a minute — you're going with us, right?" Gregor said to Luxa.

"No, Gregor, I cannot. I was only allowed to join you on the first quest because 'The Prophecy of Gray' dictated it. This has been deemed too unnecessarily dangerous for a queen," Luxa said, glancing at Vikus.

Gregor thought she at least could have put up an argument. Maybe even Luxa wasn't keen on chasing down the Bane. It made him kind of mad, though.

"So, who's going, then?" asked Gregor.

"Well, first you should know that we had no lack of volunteers," Vikus said, as if to reassure Gregor that this was going to be a guaranteed good time. "But the openings were very limited. Besides yourself, Ares, Boots, Temp, and Twitchtip, we will be sending Mareth and Howard and their fliers."

"Howard?" said Gregor. He liked Mareth a lot, but he didn't want Luxa's cousin going along. Howard was part of that Fount crowd, and who knew if he'd ever seen a rat — besides that dead one on the beach?

"Apart from being a most excellent fighter, he is well versed in the ways of water travel," said Solovet. "We are most fortunate his visit coincided with yours."

"Uh-huh," said Gregor. "So Ripred's not coming, either?" Nobody made him feel safer than Ripred...when he wasn't wondering if the big rat would kill him.

"He left this morning for the Dead Land," said Vikus. "Oh, I see the boats are loaded! We had best get you on your way!"

Ares landed beside them. "The river is too hazardous. We will fly to the Waterway and then board the boats."

"Glad you're coming, anyway," Gregor muttered, shooting a resentful look at Luxa and, while he was at it, Vikus. He climbed on Ares's back.

Dulcet handed Boots up to him with a slight sound of exertion. "Oh! Boots, you have been growing well!"

"I big girl! I ride bat! I ride bat!" Boots squealed in delight, bouncing in front of Gregor. On the first trip, Gregor had carried her in a backpack, but she was getting too big for that, especially with the life jacket.

"Temp ride, too!" said Boots. The cockroach scurried up behind them, his movements somewhat restricted by his bulky flotation device.

Twitchtip slid into one of the big boats and flattened herself in the middle. Her nose poked over the side, trying to catch the breeze that blew up the river. Gregor felt a twinge of sympathy for the rat. She might be the only one more miserable about this journey than he was.

Teams of bats lifted the two loaded boats by rope loops and started down the river. As Ares took off after them, Gregor wrapped his arms tightly around Boots. He was becoming familiar with the journey now, the fading lights of Regalia, the glimmer as they passed the crystal-walled beach where he had had his first encounter with rats, and finally the wide-open expanse of the Waterway.

They flew a few miles out over the Waterway before the teams of bats lowered the boats into the water and took off. Howard's bat landed in the boat with Twitchtip. Ares settled in the second boat, as did Mareth's bat.

"This is Andromeda. She is my bond," Mareth said, touching his hand to the wing of his gold-and-black-speckled bat. Gregor remembered Mareth had been riding her during the rat fight back on the crystal beach. She'd been so badly injured that she had not come on "The Prophecy of Gray" trip. Gregor still felt kind of responsible for that fight because it had happened when he'd tried to escape.

"Hey, nice to meet you," he said. Did she still blame him for that night?

"I am honored to meet you also, Overlander," she said. Maybe, like Mareth, she had forgiven him.

Mareth also introduced him to Howard's bond, Pandora, a graceful bat with beautiful rusty red fur. All she said to him was "Greetings."

Vikus had flown out after them to bid them good-bye. "Gregor, I forgot to deliver you this," he called. His large gray bat swooped over Gregor's boat, and something fell to the floor. Gregor picked up a scroll and found a copy of "The Prophecy of Bane" written in Nerissa's elegant hand.

"Fly you high!" Vikus headed back toward Regalia, giving them an encouraging wave. Gregor managed a nod back.

Boots was wriggling madly to get out of Gregor's arms. Letting her loose in the boat made him nervous, but he couldn't hold her for days at a time. He set her down on the floor with strict instructions to "Stay in the boat!"

Fortunately the vessel was so deep that she couldn't get out, anyway. When Gregor stood in the middle, the sides rose up to his shoulders. It was about twenty feet long and made of some kind of animal hide stretched over a bone frame. A two-foot-wide strip of floor ran down the center of the boat. About a third of the way from the front of the boat, Mareth hoisted a wooden mast into the air and secured it at the hinged base. It was only the second wooden object Gregor had seen used in the Underland, the first being the door to Sandwich's room. There were a few seats fashioned from leather, and a lot of supplies. Especially food.

"Are we really going to eat all this?" asked Gregor.

"Not by ourselves. But the shiners will require a great deal of food," said Mareth.

"The shiners?" said Gregor.

"Vikus did not tell you?" began Mareth.

Gregor wondered how many times he was going to hear that in the next few days.

"On long voyages, we cannot carry enough fuel to provide light. So we hire shiners to aid us," said Mareth. "They should be here directly — yes, see...here they come now."

Gregor looked out into the dark and spotted two points of light. They went out, and then turned on again, closer this time. As the flickering light continued to approach, he could make out the forms of flying insects. By the time the two giant bugs had landed on the bows of the boats, he had identified them.

"Oh, they're fireflies!" he said. Back at his dad's family's farm in Virginia, they flew at the edge of the woods at night. Their little twinkling lights made the whole place look magical. The three-foot-tall versions

perched on the boat weren't nearly so enchanting. But he had to admit that when their butts lit up, they put out some light.

"Greetings, Shiners," said Mareth with a bow.

"Greetings, all," one of the fireflies said in a high and impossibly whiny voice. "I am he called Photos Glow-Glow and she is Zap."

"It was my turn to make the introduction," wailed Zap. "Photos Glow-Glow made it last time."

"But we both know that, as a male, I am more visually pleasing to humans," Photos Glow-Glow said, his rear end blinking in a variety of colors. "Zap can only make one color, and it is yellow."

"I hate you!" shrieked Zap.

And Gregor knew this was going to be the longest trip of his life.

CHAPTER 11

Gregor had never bitten his nails before, but he started doing it about five minutes after the fireflies arrived. They were unbelievable! They argued about where they would sit, they argued about who should take the first shift, they even argued about whose servant Temp should be since he was obviously just a no-account crawler, until the roach spoke up with uncharacteristic force, "Only the princess, Temp serves, only the princess."

Mareth tried to feed them to distract them, but they just bickered about each other's table manners.

"Must you talk with your mouth full, Zap?" Photos Glow-Glow said. "It kills my appetite."

"This from someone who just sat in his milk!" Zap said, and apparently she had him there, because his rear end went bright red in anger, and he chomped on a mushroom in silence for at least thirty seconds.

"Are they always like this?" Gregor whispered to Mareth.

"In truth, these two are not as bad as some others I have traveled with," whispered back Mareth. "I once saw a pair try to fight to the death over a piece of cake."

"Try to?" said Gregor.

"They are not very capable fighters, and they tire quickly. So they ended up accusing each other of cheating, and giving up. Then they sulked for several days," said Mareth.

"Do we really need them?" asked Gregor.

"Unfortunately, yes," said Mareth.

Even Boots, who had stationed herself on the floor of the boat to roll a ball around with Temp, seemed aggravated by the newcomers.

"Fo-Fo, too loud!" she said, tugging on one of his wings. "Shh, Fo-Fo!"

"Fo-Fo? Fo-Fo? I am he called Photos Glow-Glow and will answer to no other name!" said Photos Glow-Glow.

"She's just a little kid. She can't say Photos Glow-Glow," said Gregor.

"Well, then, I cannot understand her!" said the firefly.

"Allow me to translate," Twitchtip said, not even bothering to move. "She said if you don't stop your incessant babble, that big rat sitting in the boat next to you will rip your head off."

The silence that followed was blissful. Gregor felt positively friendly toward Twitchtip, and decided he wouldn't mind riding in her boat at all.

They were far out into the Waterway now. The torches had been extinguished when the shiners arrived, and the fireflies' glow only illuminated the immediate area. Gregor snapped on his best flashlight for a minute and shone it around. All signs of land had vanished.

There were waves, too, now. And even a decent breeze. Mareth and Howard ran silken sails up the masts and were preoccupied with steering the two vessels. Their bats settled comfortably together and dozed off. Gregor noticed that Ares didn't join them. On the first quest, all the bats had gathered in a clump to sleep together after flights. But maybe Ares wasn't welcome now.

"Hey, Ares, do you know how long it will take us to get to the Labyrinth in this boat?" asked Gregor.

"At least five days," said Ares. "If we flew, we could make it in less time, but it is believed that very few bats could make the journey. No one has ever tried it."

"I bet you could make it," said Gregor. He meant it, too. Henry hadn't chosen Ares just because he was a troublemaker; the bat was also impressively strong and swift.

"I have thought that I might try it someday, to see if I could accomplish it," admitted Ares.

"Like Lindbergh. He's the first guy who flew across the Atlantic Ocean by himself," said Gregor.

"He had wings?" asked Ares.

"Well, mechanical ones. He was a person. He had a plane. That's a machine that flies. Now people fly across the ocean all the time in great big planes, but not when Lindbergh was flying," said Gregor.

"He is famous, in the Overland?" asked Ares.

"Yeah, I mean, he was. He's dead now, but he was real famous. People were mad at him, too. Because of something about a war," Gregor said, unsure about that part. There was a sad thing, too, about a baby. But he couldn't remember that exactly, either.

Gregor picked up the scroll with "The Prophecy of Bane" and opened it.
DIE the baby, die his heart,
Die his most essential part.

He let the scroll snap shut. He looked at Boots, who was quietly singing "Row Row Row Your Boat" while she drummed on Temp's shell. She was so perfect, somehow, in that way little kids are perfect. So innocent. How did anyone think they were going to solve anything by killing her? And yet at this moment, Gregor knew squads of rats were scouring the Underland to do just that.

"Can rats swim?" Gregor asked, peering out into the water.

"Yes, but not as far out as we are. The rats cannot reach her here," Ares said, following his thoughts.

But eventually they would have to land. And there would be the Bane.

"Have you ever killed a rat?" asked Gregor.

"Not alone. Together with Henry, yes. I flew while he held the sword," said Ares.

Then Gregor remembered he had seen the rat Fangor die on Henry's sword, back on that crystal beach. But it was sort of a blur.

"How do you do it? I mean, where exactly is it best to...where do you stab it?" The words felt strange in his mouth.

"The neck is vulnerable. The heart, but one must get past the ribs. Through the eyes to the brain. Under the foreleg is a vein that bleeds greatly. If you strike at the belly, you may not kill instantly, but the rat will likely die within days from infection," said Ares.

"I see," said Gregor. But he didn't. That is, he couldn't really see himself doing it. Killing the giant white rat. The whole thing was surreal.

"Is it okay if I'm riding you? Or do I have to be on the ground?" asked Gregor.

"I will be there, if it is at all possible," said Ares.

"Thanks," said Gregor. "Sorry I got you into this mess."

"You also freed me from one," said Ares. And they left it at that.

Mareth called a dinner break and passed around food. The fireflies ate with gusto, even though they had just been fed.

After everyone had eaten, Mareth lowered the sails in his boat and hooked the front of his craft to the back of Howard's with a towrope.

"Howard and I will take turns sailing the lead boat while the rest sleep. But we need someone on guard and one shiner on duty at all times."

"Zap will take the first shift," said Photos Glow-Glow. "My light requires more energy."

"It is a lie!" howled Zap. "I can only make one color, but the effort is the same. He only says this so that he will be given more food and less work!"

"Photos Glow-Glow will take the first shift," said Twitchtip. "Or I'll shred his wings into ribbons." So that settled that. "Who wants to watch with him?"

"We are many and can switch guards every two hours or so," said Mareth.

Gregor was wiped out, but he hated the idea of being woken up after an hour or two of sleep and then having to be on guard, so he volunteered to go first.

In the lead boat, Howard took his place by the rudder to steer. His bat folded its wings to sleep. Twitchtip, who had barely moved since they left Regalia, closed her eyes. Zap's soft yellow light faded out, and she began to snore.

Gregor took off Boots's life jacket, wrapped her snugly in a blanket, and settled her down next to Temp in the stern of their boat. Ares perched next to them. Mareth stretched out on the floor, with Andromeda nearby. Photos Glow-Glow turned his bulb to a steady orange light and lit on the bow, a few feet in front of Mareth, illuminating the space between the boats.

Gregor sat on a pile of supplies and laid his forearm across the side of the boat. It was quiet except for the lapping of the waves, soft breathing, and firefly snores. The rocking of the boat had a hypnotic effect. His eyelids felt leaden.

He had barely slept in days...the rats were after Boots...maybe he could just rest his head on his shoulder...he had to kill Ripred...no, the Bane...he had to kill the Bane...how many nights had he been down here?...he had to kill somebody....

Boots's cold little hand was wrapping around his wrist. "What, Boots?" he murmured. She was squeezing him now. Squeezing him hard. "What? You need a blanket?"

He tried to pull his arm away. Her fingers dug in deeper, creeping up his arm, causing real pain. Gregor's eyes flew open. Boots was sleeping peacefully next to Temp, yards away from him. He twisted his head to the side.

Curled around his forearm was a slimy red tentacle.

CHAPTER 12

"Aah!" Gregor had just enough time to let out a yell before the tentacle gave a terrific yank. He flew over the side of the boat and would have gone straight into the water if one of his boots hadn't caught on the edge. "Ares!" A second yank pulled him headfirst, under the water up to his waist. He managed to get a good breath of air before he submerged. His legs were sliding under, too, now. He could feel the cold water climbing over his thighs, his knees, his ankles — oh! Someone had him by the feet and was pulling back!

A tug-of-war ensued, with Gregor as the rope. For a dreadful minute it was touch-and-go, with the creature dragging him deeper and Ares dragging him back out. Gregor beat at the tentacle with his free hand, but it didn't seem to have much effect. Finally he got his mouth up to his arm and sank his teeth into the tentacle as deeply as he could. He didn't know if he did any real damage, but he surprised the animal enough for it to loosen its grip a bit. Just then Ares gave a big heave-ho and Gregor flew out of the water, coughing and gasping for air. He dangled upside down a moment, his boots locked in Ares's claws, before the bat dropped him on the floor of the boat. Gregor retched, and a gush of water rushed out of his mouth. He vaguely noticed it was salty, like the ocean.

"Overlander!" he heard Mareth cry. "Can you fight?"

Fight? Gregor struggled onto his hands and knees and got his first good look at their situation.

Tentacles were shooting up over the sides of the boat right and left, their suckers latching on to anything they came in contact with. The crew was fighting back with whatever they had — swords, teeth, claws, pincers — trying to sever the appendages from the ghastly creatures looming in the dark water beneath them.

"Catch!" he heard Mareth yell, and he saw a sword flying at him. He grabbed it out of the air by the handle just in time to slice through a tentacle that had encircled his ankle. Photos Glow-Glow and Zap were blazing. But even without their help, Gregor could have seen by the light of the water, which shone an unearthly phosphorescent green. "Squid! It's some kind of squid!" he shouted.

The three bats were in flight, diving down and ripping with their claws. Mareth and Howard were slashing away with swords. Twitchtip was a whirlwind of gnashing teeth.

"Overlander, your sister!" he heard Ares warn.

Gregor turned to see Temp, standing over the still-sleeping Boots. The roach's mandibles were snapping away at the* intruders. He was disabling many tentacles, but they kept coming. Three grabbed on to the cockroach's life jacket and pulled him into the water, leaving Boots completely unprotected. As Ares dove in to battle for Temp, a particularly large tentacle whipped over the stern.

When Gregor saw the suckers latch on to Boots's blanket, it happened again: the strange phenomenon that had occurred with the blood balls. The greater world receded, and it was as if nothing but he and the tentacles existed. Around him, somewhere, there were voices, and thuds, and glowing green water being beaten into frothy foam. But all he was really aware of was the attackers. His sword began to move — not in a premeditative way, but with some instinctive precision and force utterly beyond his control. He hacked away at tentacle after tentacle after tentacle and —

"Overlander!" He heard Mareth's voice reach out for him. "Overlander, enough!" He didn't stop.

"Ge-go, no hitting! No hitting!" he heard. Boots was crying.

The world zoomed back into perspective. Gregor was standing in the middle of the boat. Severed tentacles flopped on the floor around him. His breath was coming in short, rasping gasps.

Mareth grabbed his shoulders and gave him a sharp shake. "They are going. It is over."

Gregor's arm, the one the squid had caught, not the one holding the sword, throbbed. Four angry red circles, sucker marks, swelled on his forearm. He was drenched with sweat and seawater and squid slime.

"Ge-go, no hitting! Go home! Boots go home!" came from behind him.

He turned out of Mareth's grasp and saw her sitting, still half-tangled in her blanket, sobbing, but unharmed. Muck from the squid had splattered her as well. Temp sat next to her. He was missing two legs. Gregor tossed away the sword, reached out for Boots, and held her tightly. "Hey, you're okay. You're okay, baby. Don't cry."

"Ge-go, Boots, go home. See Mama," she sobbed. "Ma-ma! Ma-ma!"

That was her ultimate cry of distress. When she was upset and none of the rest of them could fix it. "Mamaa!"

Gregor sunk down on a seat and rocked her back and forth, patting her back, and trying to soothe her with words. How much had she seen? And what had she seen him do?

While he held her on his lap, Howard appeared with a pail of water and cleaned her off. Somehow he distracted her with some silly rhyme about washing her toes.

*"two tiny rows,
Of five tiny toes,
Give Boots ten good reasons to wiggle her nose."*

At this point, Howard would press her foot against his nose, sniff her toes, and go, "Whew!" as if the smell about knocked him out.

*"Wiggle your nose,
At eight, nine, ten toes,
Then give them a bath so each tiny toe glows. "*

Boots began to laugh between sobs, especially whenever Howard said "Whew!" and soon she was completely caught up in trying to say the rhyme with him. Gregor had spent a lot of time amusing his little sisters. He recognized a good toddler bit when he saw it.

"You make that up?" he asked Howard.

"Yes. For Chim. It was always hard to get her to take baths," said Howard, avoiding his gaze. It crossed Gregor's mind that he had not been particularly nice to Howard. He had lumped him in with Stellovet and the other cousins, but Howard hadn't liked what his sister had said to Luxa about Henry. And he had not bragged about their dad being in charge at the Fount.

They got Boots dressed in fresh clothes and gave her a cookie. She trotted off to teach the rhyme to Temp, who lacked not only toes, but legs.

"Temp, do you need some bandages, or medicine?" asked Gregor.

"No. More legs, I will grow, more legs," said Temp. He didn't seem too upset about the loss.

Photos Glow-Glow and Zap were uninjured and very pleased with the bounty of squid parts that littered the boat. Apparently, squid was a real delicacy for fireflies, and the two had no time to squabble as they embarked in a heated race to see who could wolf down the most.

Andromeda and Twitchtip had a couple of sucker marks, but Gregor's were the worst, as the squid had held on to him the longest and he had no fur to protect his skin. As they all cleaned the slime off their bodies, he saw the swollen red circles were beginning to ooze pus. His whole body felt hot and shaky.

"I think maybe it poisoned me or something," Gregor said, and suddenly his knees gave way and he was lying in the boat. Everything was swimming around. Someone pressed something against his lips and ordered him to swallow. He managed to obey just before he blacked out.

A fevered dream followed. He was submerged in bubbly fluorescent green water, wrestling with writhing tentacles, while hideous fish dug their fangs into his arm again and again. His whole family watched over the side of the boat, reaching for him, trying to pull him to safety. He screamed to Boots to get back, but she kept singing the rhyme about her toes. Temp appeared in the water beside him, bobbing around in his life jacket. He pulled off his legs, offering them to Gregor. At some point, thankfully, he sank into nothingness.

When he came to, he could tell that a lot of time had passed. His arm was bandaged and pulsating with pain. It hurt to open his eyes.

And when he did, he had a moment of confusion.

For there, sitting in the bow of the boat and smiling down at him, was Luxa.

CHAPTER 13

"I let you go off for one day, and look at the trouble you get into," Luxa said.

"I bet I know somebody else who's in trouble," Gregor croaked with a smile.

"Much trouble," he heard Mareth say behind him. Gregor didn't have to turn his head to see the soldier's expression. He was angry.

"I cannot go back," Luxa said with satisfaction. "It is too far now, and Aurora and I would most surely perish in the deep."

"Yes, you timed that nicely," said Mareth.

"I know," said Luxa.

"I know you know. Everyone will know you knew if you ever arrive home in one piece to tell the tale," said Mareth. Gregor had never thought much about Mareth's relationship with Luxa. She was his queen, or would be when she turned sixteen, but there was another side to it he recognized after the day of training. Mareth was her coach, and he wasn't afraid to chew her out.

"Oh, Mareth, how long are you to stay angry with me?" said Luxa. "It has been at least a day already. No one will blame you for my disobedience."

"That is much beside the point, Luxa!" barked Mareth. "This venture is extremely dangerous, and what if you die? You leave Regalia with Nerissa as a leader, and she is of age. Can you imagine what will happen then? To Regalia? To Nerissa?"

"She will have to abdicate," Howard said from somewhere in the other boat.

"She will do no such thing. She will rule if I die and not Vikus, and never you and your wretched sister!" said Luxa.

There was a shocked silence. Then Howard spoke. "Is this what you think? That I want to be king? I believe you have me confused with another cousin."

Ouch. It was another allusion to Henry. But this time, Gregor thought Luxa might have had it coming.

"And do not judge me by Stellovet. She is wretched. I admit it. But I can no more control her than you could control Henry!" Howard spat out.

"If you think I will believe you innocent, I will not. I have seen you torment Nerissa," said Luxa.

"When? When did I do this? I have barely spent five minutes with her altogether!" said Howard.

"At the festival. When you set that lizard at her!" said Luxa.

"Set it? I did not set it! That was a rare color changer, and I thought it would amuse her to see it!" said Howard.

"But Henry said he saw you — !" began Luxa.

"Henry said? *Henry* said? I cannot believe that even now you do not question things that Henry said, Luxa! Is he the one who told you I was after your crown?" Howard's voice rose in frustration. "Henry said!"

"Shh. Too loud. You like Fo-Fo," he heard Boots say.

"It is Photos Glow-Glow!" said an offended voice in the next boat.

"Oh, be quiet, Fo-Fo," said Twitchtip, and Gregor had to pretend to cough to conceal he was laughing.

Boots's feet pattered up by Gregor's head. She leaned over, looking upside down at him. "Hi, you!"

"Hi, you," said Gregor. "What's going on, Boots?"

"I do toes. Whew! I do bekfast. Two times," Boots said, holding up four fingers. She squatted down and pressed her nose into his forehead so their eyes were blinking at each other upside down. "I see you," she said.

"I see you, too," said Gregor.

"Bye," Boots said, and trotted off to the other end of the boat.

Gregor struggled to a sitting position. His whole body ached like he had the flu. He leaned against the side of the boat and looked at his bandaged arm. "So, what's it look like under the bandage?"

"It is not for the faint of heart," said Mareth. "You may thank Howard for saving your arm."

"Saving it? You were going to cut it off?" Gregor asked, instinctively pulling it closer.

"We would have had no choice if the venom spread further, but Howard was able to suck it from the wounds," said Mareth.

"Ugh. Thanks, Howard," Gregor said, gingerly flexing his fingers. Luxa scowled at him. "What? He sucked venom from my arm! I can't say thank you?"

"I am trained in water aid. I have sworn to save anyone in peril related to the water," said Howard.

"If my cousin had been paying attention that night, there would be no need to be so grateful," said Luxa.

Gregor remembered waking, seeing the tentacle...."No, it was my fault. I was supposed to be on guard and I...I fell asleep." He felt ashamed to admit it, but it wasn't fair to let Howard take the blame.

Everyone was quiet for a minute, then Mareth spoke up. "We probably would still have been attacked. But it is crucial to stay awake on guard. Not only our own survival, but that of many hangs on this journey."

It was even worse than Gregor thought, then. "Sorry. I was tired, but I thought I could stay awake."

"It is something you learn, how to stand guard. There are tricks to keeping your mind alert. You will find them," said Howard. But Luxa and Mareth said nothing, and Gregor knew that, for them, what he had done was inexcusable. Howard came from the Fount; it was not so dangerous there. Luxa and Mareth had fought too many rats to let him off the hook.

Mareth called a break for dinner. Gregor was famished. He stuffed way too much in his mouth, choked, and had to take a piece of bread back out. "Excuse me. I guess I haven't eaten since dinner last night."

"That was two nights ago," said Howard. "You have been out for almost two full days."

"Two days!" exclaimed Gregor. He had never been out that long before. Two days, plus the one he had traveled. They must be at least halfway to the Bane, and he felt no more prepared to face it than when he had left Regalia. He should be doing something! He thought about asking Mareth to give him a few more sword lessons, but he was so wiped out from the squid venom, he doubted he could lift the sword.

Besides, hitting things with a sword didn't seem to be his problem. In fact, if anything, he couldn't stop hitting things. It was like something took over his whole being, something beyond his control.

In a weak attempt to better his chances with the Bane, he lay on his back for a while, practicing echolocation. Click! But his mind kept going back to the squid and how he hadn't been able to stop hacking away at it. He couldn't really even remember fighting it, the same way he couldn't really remember hitting all the blood balls. Click! Sometimes that happened to people who were crazy....They had blank spots and couldn't remember how they'd gotten somewhere or what they'd been doing. Click! Oh, and there was that guy in that werewolf movie, same thing happened to him. He'd just

wake up all bloody, wondering what had happened to his clothes. Click! Gregor knew there weren't really werewolves. Click! Then again, how did he know that? If you'd asked him six months ago, he'd have said there weren't giant, talking rats!

Click! Click! Click!

He was getting nowhere with this echolocation stuff. Maybe Ripred was right, he had to focus. But who could focus when they were in the middle of an underground sea, full of squid venom, on their way to killing a monstrous white rat? Not him.

Gregor sat up and saw Luxa sitting nearby, sharpening her sword on some kind of stone.

"How do you feel?" she asked.

"Better since I ate," said Gregor.

Luxa tested the edge of her blade by splitting a strand of rope. She frowned in dissatisfaction and continued to work on it.

"That looks pretty sharp to me," said Gregor.

"Not sharp enough for what lies ahead of us," said Luxa. "It is doubtful many of us will survive."

"So why did you come?" asked Gregor.

"I thought you might need my help. You have depended on it before," said Luxa. "And Aurora and I, we have Ares to think of as well."

While all of that might be true, Gregor had a feeling there was more going on inside Luxa. "Is that all?"

"Is that not enough?" Luxa asked, avoiding his gaze.

"Sure, I just thought, well, maybe it had something to do with..." Gregor stopped himself.

"With what?" said Luxa.

"With nothing," said Gregor. "Forget it."

"I can hardly forget it now," said Luxa. "Why else would I come?"

"Because of Henry. I mean, if I were you, I might come to show people I wasn't like him. I might come to make Stellovet shut up," said Gregor.

Luxa didn't admit that what he said was right, but she didn't deny it, either.

"So, what's the deal with who gets to be king and queen here?" Gregor asked after a while.

"My father's family has been on the throne for some time. As his only child, I am to rule next. If I have children, the oldest will follow me," said

Luxa.

"Even if it's a girl and she has brothers?" Gregor thought that girls only got to rule if there were no boys in the family.

"Oh, yes. Girls have equal claim to the throne," said Luxa. "If I have no children, the crown will go to Nerissa. But she is the last in our line. So if she dies, or abdicates without children, Regalia will have to choose a new royal family."

"And Stellovet thinks it will be her family," said Gregor.

"She is probably right. Vikus and Solovet will be the most likely choice. Their oldest child, my aunt Susannah, would follow. And then her children, my Fount cousins. Howard is the eldest," said Luxa.

"Sounds like Stellovet's a long way from being queen, anyway," said Gregor.

"Not as long as you might think. Not in the Underland," said Luxa.

The bats, who had been out flying around, came in for bedtime. Mareth put Howard's red bat, Pandora, and Ares on guard. Gregor had a feeling he wasn't going to be assigned that duty for a while.

Twitchtip was restless. "Something's not right," she said. She lifted her nose into the air, and her head made an involuntary jerk to the side.

"Is it more squid?" Gregor asked, looking into the deep.

"No, it's not animal. But something's not right," she repeated.

"In what way?" asked Ares.

"With the water," she said.

"Is it tainted? Frigid? Filled with debris?" asked Howard.

"No," said Twitchtip. "I'd recognize those things. It's something I don't have a word for." But she could not explain further, so there was nothing to do but settle down to an uneasy sleep.

A few hours later, Gregor awoke to the sound of rushing water and Howard's frantic voice screaming the word that Twitchtip didn't have:

"Whirlpool!"

CHAPTER 14

Whirlpool? The only thing Gregor could think of was that game. His cousins had an old, round, aboveground pool. All the kids would try to run around in a circle and make the water swirl around so there was a sort of funnel effect in the middle. He knew there were real whirlpools in the ocean, but he'd never even seen a picture of one.

Gregor jumped to his feet and tried to make sense of the situation. Everyone was up, but they were confused, too. The Underlanders usually faced an emergency with precision, as if they'd drilled for the crisis a million times. Gregor had a feeling that none of them had ever dealt with a whirlpool, either...and that they had no emergency response at the ready.

Photos Glow-Glow and Zap were burning at full brightness, but there still wasn't enough light to see far out into the water. Gregor pulled out the biggest flashlight he had, one with a wide sweeping beam, and clicked it on. What he saw took his breath away.

The boats were on the outer edge of a huge vortex. The whirlpool must have been at least a hundred yards wide. The water was rushing at a dizzying speed, grasping at anything in its reach, carrying it around and around until it was sucked down into a black gaping hole in the center.

Howard and Mareth were shouting at each other across the rope that tethered the two boats together.

"I am cutting loose!" Howard yelled as he began to hack away at the rope between them.

"No!" Mareth cried. "The fliers will carry us out!"

"They can only take one boat! Do it, Mareth! Pandora can come back for me!" Howard shouted, and the rope severed under his sword. It was just in the nick of time. The lead boat containing Howard, Pandora, Twitchtip, and Zap was snagged by the outer ring of the whirlpool and carried off into the maelstrom.

It was only a matter of seconds before the second boat would meet the same fate. Gregor lunged for the stern for Boots, who was half-asleep, so he could get her back in her life jacket. He'd taken it off so she could sleep comfortably. Obviously that had been a bad decision. He fumbled with the jacket's tangled straps.

The boat suddenly yanked to the side. "It's got us!" Gregor cried out. But then there was an upward jerk. Gregor sprawled forward, barely avoiding crushing Boots, and found they were rising out of the water. The bats! The bats were lifting them using the rope loops on the sides of the boats. Aurora and Andromeda were in the front, Ares and Pandora in the back.

"Go, Pandora. Ares can take it! Go!" Gregor heard Mareth order.

Ares spread his feet, holding his own loop in one claw and grasping Pandora's in his other. The boat dipped down a bit, but the big black bat soon had it under control. "Man, he's strong!" thought Gregor.

Pandora hovered for one moment, to make sure Ares had things covered, then dove. Gregor leaned over the side of the boat to see what was going on.

They were fifty feet above the water now, safe from the clutches of the raging whirlpool, but below them it was another matter. The lead boat, with Howard and Twitchtip clinging to the mast, was spinning helplessly around in the whirlpool, smashing into debris, buckling under the pressure of the current. Except for the light from Gregor's flashlight, the boat was in complete darkness.

"This is certainly an inconvenience," said a whiny voice by his ear. Gregor turned to see Zap sitting on a coil of rope. "It was my time to sleep, too. I hope Photos Glow-Glow does not think this means I will cover his next shift."

"Zap! What are you doing? Get down there so they can see!" said Gregor.

"Oh, no. We never agree to go into dangerous situations. We are not fed enough for that," said Photos Glow-Glow. And then he actually yawned.

Gregor spun back around to the whirlpool in time to see Howard launch himself out over the water, arms straight out to his sides. Pandora caught him by the arms and carried him straight up to safety. She set Howard in a soggy pile on the floor and took her rope handle back from Ares.

Down in the water, Twitchtip still clung desperately to the mast. The boat was quickly approaching the inner rings of the whirlpool and the black hole in the center.

"Wait a minute!" Gregor cried. "Aren't you going back in for Twitchtip?"

There was no answer. He looked to Mareth, to Luxa, to Howard dripping and panting on the floor. Something in their faces made a chill go through him. "She's going to drown, you know! We've got to get in there!"

"It is not possible, Overlander," said Mareth. "We cannot reach her by boat. A single flier could not get hold of her. It is not possible."

"Luxa?" said Gregor. She was a queen; she could probably make them if she wanted to.

"I think Mareth is right. We will risk more loss in the effort, and the likelihood of success is almost nonexistent," said Luxa.

"But we need her! We need her to navigate in the Labyrinth!" said Gregor. Why were they just standing there?

"The bats will be sufficient," said Mareth. "And they can be trusted."

So, that was it. Now he understood. "It's because she's a rat," he said. "You're just going to sit here and watch her drown because she's a rat, right? If it were Howard or Andromeda or even Temp, you'd be down there, all right, but not for a rat! You'd probably have killed her already if you could have!"

Below him, Twitchtip's boat snapped in two. She clung to the wreckage for a few seconds, and then it was swept out of her grasp. She clawed her way through the water, fighting to keep from going under, but she wouldn't last long.

The life jacket was on the floor next to Boots. He shoved his arms through the straps and buckled it with shaking hands. The small flashlight, the one Mrs. Cormaci had given him, was in his pocket. He flicked it on. Maybe he could hold it between his teeth.

Hands grabbed him as he climbed up the side of the boat. "Do not be a madman, Overlander," said Howard. "You cannot help her!"

"You make me the sickest of all!" said Gregor. "You were just down there a minute ago. You got rescued! And what about what you swore? About saving anyone in water trouble! In peril! What you said! What about that?"

Howard's face flushed. Gregor had touched a nerve.

"Gregor!" Luxa had his hand. "I forbid you to go, Gregor! You will not survive."

"Not with you guys as backup!" said Gregor. He was so furious, he could have thrown her over the side of the boat. See how she liked it down there. "Ripred brought her for me. He brought her to help me, so I could

help you guys and your whole stupid kingdom!" he said. "That's why we're doing this, right?"

He stood on one of the seats and shone his light down in the water. Man! Was he really going to jump down into that? They were right, it was insane. Even if he'd been the best Olympic swimmer in the world, he'd never swim his way out of that, especially pulling some big old rat. But he knew something else, too. He knew that the Underlanders needed to keep him alive at all costs. If he went in, they'd come after him. And if he could get to Twitchtip, they'd have to save them both.

Howard started lashing something around his body.

"Untie me!" Gregor said, taking a swing at him.

"It is a lifeline!" Howard said, ducking the blow. "We will hold on to you from this end!"

"You will?" said Gregor.

"Do not fight the current. It will have no effect. Ride it as best you can!" said Howard.

Gregor balanced on the edge of the boat for one second, stuck his flashlight between his teeth, braced himself, tried to forget about how much he hated high dives, and jumped.

The shock of the cold water occupied him for about a millisecond before all his attention was on the current. He was nothing — a twig, a gum wrapper, an ant being carried along by the immense force of the whirlpool. He felt himself yanked back up by the rope. They had him from above.

He was being lifted, swung out over the dark, sucking hole at the center of the whirlpool. For a moment, he had the crazy idea that they were going to drop him into it, and then he understood. Twitchtip was on the inner rings of the vortex. Maybe one, maybe two times more around, and then she was gone.

As they swung him in to meet her, Gregor tried to think of how he could get hold of the rat. There was no time to work out a strategy. As he came in, he did the one thing that came naturally: He opened his arms. They smacked into each other, chest to chest. His arms encircled her neck, his legs wrapped around her body. Twitchtip dug her claws into the front of the life jacket. They spun around the whirlpool again. The current locked on them, pulling them down, not wanting to let them go.

"They can't do it!" thought Gregor. "We're going under!" He squeezed his eyes shut tightly, waiting to be engulfed. Instead, there was a rib-

crushing tug and suddenly they were swinging free. Twitchtip's full weight hit him. If the rat hadn't gotten one claw embedded in the rope, he would have lost her.

"Don't — let — go!" she choked out.

Gregor couldn't free his teeth from the flashlight, he had bitten down so hard. He managed to open his mouth enough to say, "No."

They were carried over the water for a while, until they were out of the whirlpool's reach. Then they were in the waves, half-treading water, half-using the life jacket to stay afloat, as the Underlanders reeled them in. Hands pulled them into the boat. When he felt the floor beneath him, he released the rat.

They lay side by side, gasping, coughing up water. This was extra tricky for Gregor, since his teeth were still stuck in his flashlight. His ribs hurt from the final tug that had freed them. He hoped they were just bruised, not broken. If they ached, the pain was minimal compared to his arm. The bandage had been torn away by the current, and Gregor could see it in all its glory. The whole forearm was badly swollen. The sucker wounds, which had turned a revolting shade of purple, oozed fluorescent green pus. They burned as if they were on fire.

Howard was at his side. He helped Gregor free his teeth from the flashlight and laid it on the floor. Gregor had a funny memory. When Mrs. Cormaci had given him the flashlight, she had made a point of telling him it was waterproof. It even had a little sticker on the bottom that said so. He'd thought at the time that was silly, why would he need a waterproof flashlight? Now he knew.

Gregor gritted his teeth as Howard flushed out the wounds on his arm, poured a cooling solution over the skin, and bandaged it in fresh fabric.

"I know this comes a bit late," said Howard. "But try to keep it dry." There was something in his eyes that reminded Gregor of Howard's grandfather, Vikus. An odd twinkle, even while the rest of his face remained serious.

Gregor couldn't help laughing. "Yeah. I'll do that."

Howard towed off Twitchtip and wrapped her in blankets. She was too exhausted to object when he poured a bottle of medicine down her throat. She went to sleep almost immediately.

"Is she all right?" Gregor asked him.

"Yes. We must keep her warm. The cold water has been a shock. But she is a fighter," Howard said with respect.

Boots came up and stuck a cookie in Gregor's mouth. "You wet."

"Yeah," he said, spraying crumbs as he talked.

"Boots go swim? We go swim?" she said hopefully. Gregor was glad she hadn't been able to see over the side of the boat.

"Nah. It's too cold," said Gregor. "I tried it, and it's too cold, Boots."

Boots took a bite of a second cookie and poked the rest in Gregor's mouth. "Yesterday? We go yesterday?" She got time all mixed up. Yesterday, today, tomorrow, later, before — all pretty much meant anytime that wasn't right now.

"Maybe when we get home. And it gets warm again. I'll take you to the pool, okay?" said Gregor.

"Ye-es!" said Boots. She patted his chest. "You wet." Gregor got on some dry clothes and wrapped himself up in a blanket. He had to take his boots off for a while. They were waterproof, but not in a whirlpool.

The boat was packed now, with all thirteen of them in it. Somehow everyone had found a place, but it was tight.

Luxa sat next to Gregor and handed him something. "Here. I made you a sandwich."

He looked down at the clunky version of a roast beef sandwich. He had taught her to make her first sandwich on their last trip. "Thanks." He didn't eat it.

"Do not be angry with us, Gregor. Mareth and I have lost more than you know to the rats. It is hard for us to risk anything to save one. Even if it is of use," said Luxa.

"*She*. Twitchtip is a *she*. And she's had a bad time, too. The rats chased her out because she's a scent seer and she's been living all alone in the Dead Land," said Gregor.

"Has she?" asked Luxa. "I did not know this about her."

"Well, no, because no one talks to her!" Gregor said, and then had a pang of guilt. He hadn't been talking to her, either. He hadn't wanted to ride in her boat. At least he'd gone in to save her. "But she's incredible. You should see her in action. I mean, maybe she didn't know what a whirlpool was. But she could tell all the way from the arena to the palace what color shirt Boots was wearing. And once we're in that Labyrinth thing, I think she's the only way we'll find the Bane!" His words were tumbling out now;

he couldn't stop them, but he couldn't organize them quite right, either. "And...and...Ripred brought her. Vikus told me once he had wisdom...wisdom unique...well, more wisdom than, like...practically anyone, okay? So, if he brought her, we must need her. And, anyway, besides that...besides that...it's no good, Luxa!" He paused to get it right. "It's no good to sit up in the boat and watch her drown."

Gregor took a bite of the sandwich — more to stop talking than anything. It was all so confusing, the whole thing with the rats and the humans. They had killed Luxa's parents, and he didn't know how many others she loved. Another thought struck him. "Helping a rat doesn't make you like Henry, you know."

"You see it that way. Others might not," she said.

They sat in silence while he ate his sandwich. He couldn't argue with her there.

CHAPTER 15

Gregor found a spot on the floor at the front of the boat and made a bed out of blankets. Ares landed on a nearby seat.

"Hey, Ares," he said. "What's up?"

"I am unsettled. About your rescuing the rat," said Ares.

"Oh, great," thought Gregor. "Here we go again." But he had it all wrong.

"I could not let go of the boat. I would have dived for you, but I could not let go of the boat without everyone falling," Ares said, his wings fluttering in distress.

"Well, I know that," said Gregor. "Of course, you couldn't. I didn't expect you to."

"I did not want you to think, as your bond, that I would not come after you," said Ares. "The way I did not go after Henry."

"I didn't. I mean, I don't. You've already come after me way more than I've come after you," said Gregor. "You did the only thing you could do."

Gregor sat on his makeshift bed. Boots climbed onto his lap and gave a big yawn. "I seepy."

"Yeah, me, too. Let's get some shut-eye, okay?" He lay down with Boots in the crook of his good arm and pulled a blanket over them.

"We shut eyes," Boots said, and snuggled off to sleep.

Gregor had neglected to put the life jacket back on her again. He really didn't think she could sleep in it, anyway. But what if they ran into another squid or whirlpool or something?

"Hey, Ares," he said. "If something bad happens again? I need you to promise me something."

"What is this promise?" said the bat.

"Save Boots. I mean, save her before me. I know we're bonds and all, but get her first," said Gregor.

Ares thought about it for a minute. "I will save both of you."

"But if you have to choose one of us, choose Boots, okay?" said Gregor. There was no answer. "Please, Ares."

The bat sighed. "I will save her over you, if I must choose, if this is what you wish."

"This is what I wish," Gregor said, letting go and relaxing into sleep. He felt better knowing Ares was there, watching out for Boots, too. Maybe between him and Ares and, of course, Temp, they could keep her safe.

Hours later, when Gregor awoke, he felt a warm body pressed up against his leg. He wriggled his arm, which had gone numb, out from under Boots's head and sat up. In the light of Photos Glow-Glow's bulb, he could see Twitchtip lying against him. He gave a little start of surprise, and she opened her eyes.

Twitchtip looked embarrassed and scooted away about six inches, which was as much as the close confines of the boat would allow. It was this reaction that gave Gregor the idea that she hadn't just rolled over against him in her sleep. She had, at some point, intentionally curled up against his leg. And it led him to another thought. How hungry for contact must Twitchtip be to lean up against him? A human? A human whose scent made her ill? She must be starved. All those years of living alone in the Dead Land had left her desperate to touch any warm being. Even him.

He immediately covered for her. "Hey, sorry. I must've rolled into you when I was sleeping."

"It's hard not to," said Twitchtip. "There's so little room in the boat."

"Yeah," said Gregor. He looked around. Mareth was in the back, steering. Andromeda stood guard next to him. Photos Glow-Glow was perched on the bow, occasionally shifting the color of his rear end. Everyone else was fast asleep.

Gregor considered going back to sleep, but he felt too alert. Besides, this might be a good time to talk to the rat. He tried to think of a way to start the conversation, but Twitchtip began it herself.

"I know you made them save me," said Twitchtip.

"Well, I kind of spearheaded the whole thing," said Gregor, not wanting her to know how readily the others would have let her die.

But she knew, anyway. "Ripred was right about you. He said I couldn't judge you like I would other humans."

"That's interesting. Because I think Vikus said something similar to me about Ripred," said Gregor. The subject made him uncomfortable. "So how long have you been living on your own?"

"Three or four years," said Twitchtip.

"Why'd they drive you out? The other rats. I mean, they're so into smell, seems like you'd be famous," said Gregor.

"I was, in a way, for some time. Then they realized I could smell their secrets, and no one wanted me around," said Twitchtip. "I can smell yours, too."

"My secrets? Like what?" asked Gregor. He tried to think about what his secrets might be. His father's disappearance used to be a kind of secret, or at least it was something he never discussed much. But that was over. Of course now, the Underland was a secret. But only in the Overland. So what was she talking about?

Twitchtip spoke so softly that Gregor could barely hear her. "I know what happens when you fight."

Gregor was taken aback. But she was right, that was a secret. He hadn't told anybody about how he couldn't really remember what happened once he started swinging a sword. But he didn't let on. "What happens when I fight?" he asked coolly.

"You can't stop. You put out a scent. I have only smelled it once or twice before. We rats have a name for someone like you. You're a rager," said Twitchtip.

"A rager? What's a rager?" asked Gregor. It sounded like somebody who lost their temper a lot.

"It's a special kind of fighter. They're born with great ability. While others may train for years to master combat, a rager is a natural-born killer," said Twitchtip.

It was absolutely the worst thing he could imagine anybody saying about him. "I'm not a natural-born killer!" he gasped. He thought about Sandwich's prophecies, how they called him a warrior, how he was supposed to kill the Bane. "Is that what everybody thinks? I'm some kind of killing machine?"

"No one even knows about it yet, or it would've been the first thing I heard about you. Being a rager — it's not a moral judgment. You can't help being one any more than I can help being a scent seer. It doesn't mean you want to kill, it means you can. Better than anyone. But once you begin to fight, it's very hard for you to rein yourself in," said Twitchtip.

Gregor's heart was pounding. What if she was right? No, she couldn't be right. He didn't even like fighting! He didn't even like people arguing! But what about how he'd acted with the blood balls and the tentacles? He couldn't control what he did. He couldn't even remember it.... "I think you've got me mixed up with somebody else" was all he said.

"No, I don't. Ignore me if you want to, but eventually you'll know I'm right. If you get a chance, though, I'd talk to Ripred about it," said Twitchtip.

"Ripred? Why Ripred?" Gregor said, thinking the main person he might need to see was a shrink.

"Because he's a rager, too," said Twitchtip. "But, unlike you, he's learned to control his actions."

Ripred. Well, no question, if anyone was a killing machine, it was that rat. Gregor thought of Ripred whipping his tail at him to check his reflexes and saying, "Well, you can't teach that." Did he already suspect Gregor was a rager? Did Solovet?

"I'm going back to sleep now," Gregor said, and lay down. He pulled Boots close for comfort and stared into the dark. He found himself biting his lip so he wouldn't cry. Yeah. If he got back from this alive, he'd better talk to Ripred.

Hours passed, and slowly, one by one, everyone awoke, and what approximated a "day" in the Underland began. Gregor had utterly lost track of how long he'd been down here. He thought about asking Luxa, but did he really want to know? Every day down here was a day his family had been suffering at home. His head started to fill with images of that suffering — his dad's illness worsening, his mother's sleepless nights, his sweet grandma's confusion, and Lizzie's fear. What was happening? Did his mom still work every day? Was Lizzie trying to take care of his dad and his grandma and go to school and pretend to Mrs. Cormaci that he and Boots had the flu? Was it almost Christmas? Everything bad was worse at the holidays, he knew that from the years of his dad's absence. All around you were people in an extra-happy mood, and it just made your own hurt bigger. Now that his dad was back, Gregor had thought his family might have one of those merry Christmases again, even if there wasn't a ton of money for presents. And here he was, miles below his home, going to kill a giant white rat and trying to keep his baby sister alive while his family watched the hands crawl around the clock and waited. Ho ho ho.

Besides that, everyone on board was driving one another crazy. It had been an effort for all the different species — human, bat, rat, roach, and firefly — to be cohabiting in two boats. In one boat, it was getting nasty. Arguments were breaking out right and left, especially over food. A lot of the supplies had been stored in the second boat, so they were lost in the

whirlpool. Mareth took stock of the remaining food and put everyone on strict rations. But Photos Glow-Glow and Zap insisted they receive their same gluttonous amounts. When they were told that wasn't going to happen, they whined incessantly until Twitchtip remarked that she could always eat fireflies. Then they simply sulked and only put out light when they felt like it.

"Why do the girl and her flier get our food?" Gregor heard Zap mutter to Photos Glow-Glow. "They are no more than stowaways!"

And of course, Gregor couldn't deny Boots food. When lunch was passed around, she gobbled up her bread and cheese in record time and then pointed at Gregor's. "I hungry!" There was nothing he could do but give her half his food. But after eating that and half of Temp's ration, she was still not full.

"Oh, here, give her this," Twitchtip said, and scooted a chunk of cheese over to Boots, who gnawed on it happily. Everyone gawked at Twitchtip, who snarled. "It reeks of humans, I can barely choke it down, anyway!" And everyone looked away. But Gregor was pretty sure he had witnessed a first — a rat giving a human her food.

Howard was the least concerned about the food issue. "We are surrounded by food, we need only reach in and get it," he said. He lowered nets into the water and sent the bats out to dive for fish. He was right. It didn't take long to assemble a good-sized pile of seafood. Unfortunately, there was no way to cook it. This wasn't a problem for anyone but the humans; most of the others preferred their catch that way. But, raw fish! Gregor stared at the cold, white flesh with distaste. He knew they couldn't waste fuel to cook it. It crossed his mind that he might try warming it up on Photos Glow-Glow's butt, but he didn't like the bug enough to ask.

"You should try it. It is not as bad as you think," Howard said, popping a big piece into his mouth and chewing it up. "Sometimes we serve it this way at the Fount, although it is not done in Regalia."

Gregor nibbled the edge of a chunk and decided it was edible. Then he remembered that a lot of people ate sushi; that was raw fish. He'd walked by Japanese restaurants with beautiful displays of fish and rice and seaweed assembled in bite-sized pieces. It was expensive, too. He'd never had it, but his friend Larry had and he'd said it was okay, if you put a bunch of soy sauce on it. Gregor closed his eyes, pretended he was at a fancy restaurant, and stuck a whole piece in his mouth. He wished he had some soy sauce.

Luxa was trying to get it down, too. Gregor could see she didn't like it much better than he did, but since she wasn't supposed to be here, she couldn't really complain. Besides, she wouldn't want to look like she couldn't handle eating something her cousins could eat.

Boots took a bite and unceremoniously spit it out, then wiped her hand repeatedly over her tongue. "No like! No like!" They were still working on getting her to eat breaded fish sticks with ketchup at home, so that wasn't surprising.

Twitchtip, who had put down about half a dozen fish in a snap, suddenly lifted her head and began to scrunch her nose around. "Land. We're coming to land."

Mareth pulled out a map and scrutinized it. "We should not be, not for several days. I hope the whirlpool has not thrown us off course."

Howard consulted a compass. "No, we are going in the right direction. Can you tell the nature of the land?"

"Perhaps one mile around," Twitchtip said, wriggling her nose.

"Around? Oh, then it is an island?" asked Howard. He pointed to a spot on the map. "I place us here. But there is no island recorded in this area. Although it has been many years since these waters were charted."

"I believe it's recently formed," said Twitchtip. "It has the smell of fresh lava."

"Is there life on it?" asked Mareth.

Twitchtip closed her eyes and concentrated. "Yes, a great deal. No warm-bloods, though. It's all insect. But I don't have a name for their scent."

Gregor started fastening Boots up in her life jacket. The last time Twitchtip didn't have a name for something, they had almost drowned. An island of unfamiliar insects. That just didn't sound good.

After about another half an hour of sailing, the bats began to raise their heads. Now they were picking up the island on their radar, too.

"How big are the bugs? Can you tell?" asked Gregor. Everything was so oversized here.

"Not large," said Ares. "Tiny, in fact."

That made Gregor feel a little better.

Until Aurora added, "But there are millions of them."

"Can you recognize them, Pandora?" Howard asked. The bat shook her head. "No, they are most like the mites we encountered on the Island of Shell. But these have a different voice."

"What were the mites like?" asked Gregor.

"Oh, they were harmless. As small as the head of a pin, and while they did bite, it was not lasting," said Howard.

"And they were very tasty," added Pandora. "Not unlike bluebits."

This comment seemed to arouse the interest of all the bats. Whatever bluebits were, Gregor had a feeling that, for bats, they beat out raw fish by a mile.

"Perhaps I should do a flyover. We could get very full, if they are like bluebits," said Pandora.

Mareth was reluctant to let her go, but Howard thought it would be okay. "If they are mites, what harm can they do?"

"Go, I would not, go," Temp said, but no one much ever listened to him.

"Why not, Temp?" asked Gregor. "Do you know what kind of bugs they are?"

Temp didn't. Or he couldn't articulate it if he did. "Bug bad" was all he could say.

"There it is!" Luxa said suddenly, and the place emerged from the darkness. It was visible in the light of a small volcano that slowly bubbled out lava at the center of the island. In a couple of places, the lava spilled over and ran into the water, entering it with a hiss. A junglelike growth of twisted plants covered areas that were not in the lava's path. Gregor guessed they must depend on the light of the lava, since there was no other. Or maybe they only needed its heat. His dad had told him something about that — how they had discovered some things could grow without light if there was heat. Well, whatever they used, these plants were doing fine.

Then there was that hum. The whole place vibrated with life that they couldn't see. Gregor didn't like it. He knew Temp didn't, either. But the other Underlanders seemed curious about the new island.

"It seems a shame to pass it by without any examination," said Howard. "We may gather knowledge that will help future voyagers."

And there was no holding Pandora back. "Yes, it is our duty to at least ascertain if it would make a hospitable place for resting. Some of our stronger fliers could make the crossing, if they knew they might land here."

It was agreed that Pandora could make a quick reconnaissance flight to get a closer look at the place. She flew off swiftly and was soon over the island. It didn't take her long to circle it and report back to the bats in pitches the others couldn't even hear.

"She says it is safe," said Ares. "And the mites are even more delicious than bluebits."

"Well, you may as well fill your bellies," said Mareth. "But only in pairs. I do not like alt of you away from the boat at once. You may join her, Ares. Then Aurora and Andromeda may go."

Gregor picked up Boots so she could look, too. It wasn't every day you got to see a volcanic island in an underground ocean. "May as well check it out, if it's safe and all," thought Gregor.

But it wasn't.

Ares was almost to the island when it happened. A black cloud exploded out of the jungle and engulfed Pandora. She had no time to react. One moment she was darting around eating mites, the next moment they were eating her. In less than ten seconds they had stripped the writhing bat down to the bone. Her white skeleton hung for an instant in the air, then crashed into the jungle below.

Then a puzzled little voice next to Gregor's ear asked, "Where bat?"

CHAPTER 16

"Pandora!" Howard cried in horror. "Pan!" He scrambled up over the side of the boat and was about to dive into the water when Mareth yanked him back down.

"Release me, Mareth! We are bonds!" said Howard. He thrashed about wildly in Mareth's grip.

"She is gone, Howard! You cannot help her!" said Mareth.

But Howard was unable to accept this. He twisted out of Mareth's hold and made for the side of the boat again. Mareth grabbed him by the arm, spun him around, and with one punch knocked him unconscious. Luxa caught Howard as he flew backward. She staggered back under his weight, but was able to break his fall as he landed. In the meantime, Ares, whose first impulse had been to go in to help Pandora, did an abrupt 180-degree turn and began to fly toward open sea for all he was worth. The cloud of mites, which was only a couple of feet from him, rose up into the air and began to chase him. As fast as he flew, the cloud stayed on his tail.

Gregor felt himself hit by the same panic Howard had experienced a few moments before. "Ares!" he cried. "Hurry! They're right behind you!" He felt so helpless. He couldn't jump into the water to save his bat. It would be pointless, and, anyway, Mareth would just knock him out, too. And even if he could get to Ares, how would he stop a cloud of flesh-eating mites? "Think, Gregor!" he said to himself. "What can you do?" The cloud was gaining on Ares now. The black edge was almost touching his tail. They were going to eat him! He was going to be devoured by insects, and his skeleton would fall into the water and — and — wait a minute! That was it!

"Dive, Ares!" Gregor screamed. "Dive into the water!" At first, Gregor wasn't sure the bat had heard him. "Dive!" he shrieked.

And as the mites began to merge over the line of Ares's tail, the bat dove into the water. Gregor wasn't sure exactly what he thought would happen, but it seemed like people sometimes got into water to escape from bugs. Bees and things, anyway. If Ares was in the water, they couldn't get him; that was as far as his plan went. It was somewhat limited in effectiveness since, of course, Ares would soon have to come up for air. But it turned out that Gregor had thought of the right thing, after all, because just then the fish — all the wonderful fish! — surfaced and began to feast

on the mites. The cloud halted and began to counterattack the fish. When Ares came up for air, the mites had forgotten him and were busy battling a new enemy and a potential meal.

"Fliers! The ropes!" Mareth ordered, and Aurora and Andromeda grabbed the front loops on the boat and began to drag the vessel through the water. Ares caught up and with him carrying the back end, they soon left the island far behind. Mareth had them fly for several miles before he allowed them to put the boat back in the water and land to rest.

Ares set his end in the water, but did not join them immediately. He dove into the waves again and again, and finally, after about twenty minutes, came in dripping, exhausted and trembling. "The mites," he explained.

"Some of them latched on and were eating me. I believe I have drowned them all now, though."

"Are you okay?" Gregor asked, giving him an awkward pat.

"Yes, I am fine," said Ares. "I have only some small wounds. Not like —" and the bat stopped himself. They all knew who he meant.

Gregor towed Ares off. Luxa helped him go through the black fur, inch by inch, and apply medicine to wherever the mites had bitten off pieces of his flesh. While they found many wounds, Ares was right. He had left all the bugs in the water.

"It was good, Overlander. Your idea to dive," said Ares.

"Yes, it was very clever to know the fish would come after the mites," said Luxa.

"Well, I hadn't really thought it all the way through to the fish part," admitted Gregor. "Sure glad they were there, though."

When they had finished treating him, Aurora and Andromeda snuggled up against Ares, and the three bats went off to sleep. Gregor was glad Andromeda was no longer shunning his bat. Maybe she'd realized that Aurora would choose Ares over her, and she'd end up alone. Whatever the reason, Gregor thought Ares really needed the company now.

Mareth had his hands full steering the boat, so Gregor and Luxa did their best to tend to Howard as well. He was still out. They made him a bed, covered him up, and took turns holding cold cloths to his swollen jaw.

"Do you think we should try to wake him up?" asked Gregor.

Luxa shook her head. "He has the rest of his life to mourn her."

They were all very quiet that day. The bats slept fitfully, Twitchtip stared out at the water, Mareth steered, Boots and Temp played little games, the fireflies whispered together on the bow and did not complain.

Gregor and Luxa sat side by side, watching Boots and Temp. For a long time, they were silent. Gregor kept reliving Pandora's horrific death in his head and he suspected Luxa was doing the same.

Finally, as if she couldn't stand it anymore, Luxa spoke up. "Tell me about the Overland, Gregor," she said.

"Okay," he said, badly in need of a distraction himself. "What do you want to know?"

"Oh, anything. Tell me...what one day is like, from rising to sleep," she said.

"Well, it's really different, depending on who you are," said Gregor.

"Then tell me about one of your days," said Luxa.

So, he did. He told her about the last day he'd been up there, since it was freshest in his mind. He told her about how it was Saturday, so there was no school, and how he'd helped Mrs. Cormaci make scalloped potatoes and bought Lizzie the puzzle book and then had taken Boots sledding. He didn't dwell on the lack of food or his dad's illness, since talking about those things made him feel more anxious and there was enough bad stuff going on around them, anyway. He concentrated on the nicer parts of the day.

Luxa would ask a question here or there, usually if he used an unfamiliar word, but mostly she just listened. When he finished, she sat thoughtfully for a few minutes. Then she said, "I wish I could see the snow."

"You should come on up sometime," Gregor said, and she laughed. "No, really, you should come up for a day. Or a few hours, at least. It's pretty cool, where I live. I mean, it's not a palace or anything. But New York City is something else."

"You do not think Overlanders would find me strange?" asked Luxa.

It was a problem. That translucent skin, those violet eyes . . . "We'll put you in long sleeves and a hat and sunglasses," Gregor said. "You won't look any stranger than about half the people who live there." Suddenly he felt almost enthusiastic about the idea. "And we could go out when it's kind of dark, so the sun won't blind you. I mean, even if we just went down the block and got a slice of pizza, that'd be like nothing you've ever seen!"

They were both happy for a minute. Thinking of being in New York. Thinking of being somewhere else.

Then Luxa sighed and did that thing where she pushed at her crown. "Of course, the council would never permit me to go."

"Oh, yeah, and that's the kind of thing that would stop you," said Gregor.

She gave him a grin and was about to answer when Howard let out a moan.

"Pandora?" he said. Howard sat up so quickly, he had to grab hold of Temp to steady himself. His eyes darted around and landed on the three bats huddled together. He looked upward as if maybe he had dreamt the whole thing and Pandora was flying just overhead. But of course, she wasn't.

"Pandora?" he said. His hand touched his bruised jaw, and he turned to Mareth.

"You could not save her, Howard. None of us could," Mareth said gently.

Gregor could almost see it, the whole weight of Pandora's death coming down on Howard, crushing him. The Underlander dropped his face into his hands and began to sob. It was heartbreaking to watch.

Boots went over and patted him on the back of the neck. "Okay. You okay. You okay, baby," she said soothingly. This was what they said to her when she was upset. Her sweetness only seemed to make Howard cry harder. Boots looked over at her brother. "Ge-go, he cry."

Gregor knew she wanted him to help. To make it better. But he didn't have a clue what to do. Then something unexpected happened.

Luxa stood up, her face paler than usual. She went to her cousin, sat beside him, and put her arms around him. Pressing her forehead into his shoulder, she said, "She will fly with you always. You know this. She will fly with you always."

Howard buried his face in her lap. She leaned her cheek against the top of his head. And it was a long time before either of them stopped crying.

CHAPTER 17

Gregor's supper consisted entirely of raw fish as he gave his small ration of bread and meat to Boots. Temp, Howard, and Ares did the same, and she seemed satisfied. Giving a big yawn, she said, "We shut eyes?"

"Yeah, we shut eyes, Boots," Gregor said, and she snuggled up next to him on the floor.

Howard, ghost-white except for the purplish bruise that stained his jaw, insisted on steering so that Mareth could get some rest. Temp went on watch with Zap for light.

Before the rest went to sleep, Twitchtip spoke up. "We're getting close now. I can smell rats ahead."

"What of the serpents?" asked Mareth. "Do they still sleep?"

"Yes, but it won't be long before they surface. And they are deadly," said Twitchtip.

It really wasn't the last conversation Gregor wanted to hear before he went to bed. Rats...serpents...deadly...especially when he was already preoccupied by words like rager...killing...Bane. He could not get his mind to settle down. He went in and out of a sort of doze, never really losing consciousness, so he was the first one to rouse when Temp sounded the alarm.

"Going, the shiners are, gone!" he croaked.

Gregor sat up and opened his eyes and saw...nothing. It was pitch-black. He could hear Howard fumbling around behind him, muttering, "Conniving, vile creatures!"

He flipped on the flashlight he always kept right next to his bed. Everyone was stirring now.

"What is it? What has happened?" Mareth asked, springing to his feet.

"The shiners have deserted!" Howard said, getting a torch lit.

"Deserted? They were bound for the entire journey!" said Mareth.

"By what? Their honor? They have none. Their word? Equally worthless! The shiners are bound only by their stomachs, and as we cannot satisfy those, they have broken with us!" said Howard.

"But where could they go?" asked Gregor. It was days and days back to where they'd first hooked up with the bugs.

"They'll go to the rats," Twitchtip said flatly. "They'll receive food and safe passage home in exchange for information on our whereabouts." She looked around at their dismayed faces. "On the good side, we won't have to listen to them whine anymore."

For an instant, everyone else was too startled to speak. Twitchtip had made a joke! Then, everybody — humans, bats, roach, rat — laughed. If there was one thing they all could agree on, it was how annoying the fireflies had been.

"Yes," agreed Luxa. "That will be a blessing." She and Twitchtip eyed each other. "It is a shame you did not get to eat them, though."

"Oh, shiners taste nasty," said Twitchtip. "I only threatened them to shut them up."

"Well, no one shall miss them, but they have left us with more trouble," said Mareth. "How holds the fuel, Howard?" Howard shook his head. "Not well. Much of it was in the other boat. We will get to the Labyrinth, but we will not have many more hours of light after that."

Light...life...the words were interchangeable to the humans down here.

"I have life — I mean, light! I have light, too!" said Gregor.

"You have the greatest task ahead of you, Overlander," said Howard. "You must keep your light."

"Well, I will, some of it. But I could spread it around. Wait a minute!" Gregor dumped out his bag. There were four flashlights, counting the one he slept with, plus his mini one from Mrs. Cormaci, and a lot of good batteries. He'd used the flashlights very sparingly on the trip since the fireflies were on. There was also that roll of duct tape.

"Hey, Luxa, give me your arm! Not the sword one!" he said. Luxa held out her arm curiously. Gregor placed a flashlight on her forearm so it would shine out over the top of her hand. Then he wrapped duct tape around and around, securing the flashlight to her sleeve, but leaving the on/off switch clear. "There! That way you won't have to hold it, and you won't lose it, either." Luxa flipped the flashlight on and shone it about. "Oh, yes, Gregor. This will work well."

Gregor fixed up Howard and Mareth with flashlights, too, then attached one to his own arm. He had to use his sword arm, though, since the other was so wrecked from the squid.

There was a rustling, and a little hand reached up and patted his stomach. "Me, too, Ge-go. Boots have light, too!"

"Sorry, Boots, I'm out of flashlights. Oh, hang on," he said. He took the mini flashlight and taped it onto her sleeve.

Very pleased, Boots hurried over to the cockroach. "Boots have light, too, Temp!"

"Okay, but you've got to turn it off. Save the light, right?" Gregor said, flipping off her switch. He said it to Boots, but the others, who had also been flashing around their beams, guiltily turned them off. Gregor smiled. He could tell they all thought the flashlights were pretty cool.

He only had about six spare batteries. The Underlanders insisted that he keep them, and he didn't put up much of an argument. Howard was right about Gregor being the guy who had to take down the Bane, and that sure wasn't going to happen in the dark, with him relying on echolocation.

As Gregor was about to turn off his own flashlight, something caught his eye. For days they had been in a huge void, with no land in sight except for that deadly island. Now he could see towering rock walls flanking them on either side. They must be in some kind of channel.

Twitchtip's nose was going like crazy. "We will be there in minutes. And Photos Glow-Glow and Zap have done their work. The rats are waiting for us."

"Can you tell how many?" asked Luxa.

"Forty-seven," Twitchtip said without a pause. "They are waiting in the tunnels above the Tankard."

"What's the Tankard?" asked Gregor.

"It's a round, large shaft, very deep, half-filled with water. The serpents sleep on its floor," said Twitchtip.

"So, the serpents are some kind of fish?" said Gregor.

"No, they breathe air. But they can sleep underwater for long periods," said Howard.

Gregor thought of alligators. They could sleep underwater, too. He hoped these weren't giant alligators — the regular-sized ones were scary enough.

"I can smell it!" Twitchtip said. She rose up on her back feet, leaning her front feet on the bow. "I can smell the Bane!"

Up until that moment, Gregor had been secretly half-hoping they'd gotten the whole thing wrong. That maybe the Bane was like a fairy tale or a myth or something, and the rats had just been planting the rumor it was around. But if Twitchtip could smell it...

"Are you sure?" asked Gregor. "I mean, how do you know it's the Bane and not another rat?"

"I can smell its whiteness," said Twitchtip. "Only a flash, here and there. It's deep in the Labyrinth, and there are many layers of stone between us. But it's definitely there."

Gregor felt the need to move. He paced up and down the four-foot strip of floor that was available to him. "Okay, so what's the plan? I mean, what do we do when we get to this Tanker?"

"Tankard," said Howard. "There are several entrances to the Labyrinth in the tunnels above the Tankard. Our original plan involved secretly slipping into one of them and tracking down the Bane on foot. But this was before the shiners turned on us."

"So much for Plan A. What's Plan B?" asked Gregor. There was a long pause. "Come on, everybody has a Plan B!"

"In all fairness to the council, Overlander, coming up with any plan that brought us this far was difficult," said Mareth. "In the Underland, in the event that a plan fails, we usually have two options to fall back on: We may fight or flee."

"Flee?" Ahead lay rat-filled tunnels. Behind lay the Waterway with nowhere to land except that island teeming with flesh-eating insects. "There's nowhere to flee!" said Gregor.

"That makes our decision simpler," said Howard. He began to pass out swords.

"Twitchtip, which entrance betters our chance of survival?" asked Mareth.

"There's one at the far end of the Tankard. It's right at the waterline. No rat's been in it for years. It may be forgotten, or it may hold some danger that keeps the rats away from it, although I can't detect what that would be," said the rat.

"Can you direct us once we enter the Tankard?" asked Mareth.

"We are already here," said Twitchtip. Gregor flipped on his flashlight, and the others followed suit. They were floating across what appeared to be a giant, round pool. The surface was as smooth and unbroken as a mirror. There were no beaches; the water went straight up to stone walls on all sides. Tunnel openings dotted the walls, some almost concealed by the waterline; others, hundreds of feet up. In many of them, Gregor could see a large rat.

No one moved. Not the rats. Not the visitors. An eerie silence surrounded them. Then there was a slight scraping sound from above.

Splash! Something landed off to their right, causing a fountain of water to spray into the air. Splash! Splash! The rats were tipping boulders out of the tunnels and sending them hurtling to the water below.

"Well, that's weak. None of the rocks are even getting near us," said Gregor. It was true; the boulders were missing them by a mile. He felt a little better, knowing the rats were launching such a worthless attack.

Splash! Splash! Splash! Splash! Splash!

Luxa frowned. "Something is wrong here."

Mareth nodded. "Yes, it is not like the gnawers to waste their energies on futile attacks." Howard's eyes widened, and he began waving his arms frantically. "Get the boat up! Fliers! Get the boat up now!"

Twitchtip sprang up at almost the same time. "They're waking! They're waking! Fly!"

And that's when Gregor put it all together. The rats weren't trying to sink their boat with the rocks — they were trying to wake the serpents! Aurora and Andromeda latched on to the front ropes; Ares got his claws around the two loops in the back. They lifted the boat out of the water, spinning it in a circle as they rose.

"Where fly we?" came from all three bats.

"Twitchtip, where lies the tunnel?" asked Mareth.

"Stop spinning the boat so fast and I'll tell you!" said the rat. The bats maintained a slower circle, and Twitchtip indicated a tunnel opening opposite the channel they'd come in by. "There! The one shaped like an arch!"

Gregor caught it in his flashlight beam. It was only about six feet high, and you could've swum right into it. "But it's half under water! Does it even have a floor?"

"Further in. Look, this is no time to be picky," snapped Twitchtip. "The serpents are —!" Bam! Something hit the side of the boat, ripping away a chunk of it. They were knocked sideways. The bats barely managed to hang on.

Gregor thought one of the rats' rocks had made contact. Then he saw it. "Oh!" he gasped. "Oh, geez!"

His first thought was, "So, I guess they're not extinct after all." He meant dinosaurs, but that wasn't quite right. Dinosaurs had the ability to

walk on land. This creature propelled itself with flippers. Some kind of aquatic reptile then, but as old as the dinosaurs. And as big as the biggest skeletons he'd seen at the museum in New York City. Its body was a flattened oval. A whiplike tail beat the water, causing waves to roll across the calm pool. The neck was at least thirty feet long, and atop its sinuous, scaly pink length was a bullet-shaped head. There were indentations where eyes might have been, somewhere in its evolution, but they were long gone. What use were eyes to it down here? Its mouth opened, letting loose a low howl that chilled Gregor right down to his DNA. And then his light hit the teeth. Hundreds and hundreds of teeth in three rows headed their way. Crunch! Another piece of the boat was gone!

"Abandon ship!" Mareth choked out.

Gregor was impressed he'd managed to form a coherent sentence at all. He grabbed up Boots and his pack in one swoop and stumbled for Ares.

"On the count of three, everyone jumps!" called Mareth.

Gregor realized he meant "jumps off the side of the boat." It was the only way the bats could catch them. He scrambled up onto the edge.

"One — two — three!" Gregor felt his legs pushing off the boat, and then it was gone, but almost immediately Ares was under them. The bat dipped and swerved, and Temp landed behind them. The poor roach was shaking like a leaf. Well, who wasn't? Temp began nudging him in the back with his head. Gregor turned and saw the roach had a sword in his mouth.

"Oh, man, thanks, Temp!" Gregor said, grabbing the hilt with his good hand. He hadn't even thought to bring it. Some warrior.

Everyone's flashlight was on high beam now, which was good, since the single torch that had been lit had just hit the water with a sizzle. A prehistoric nightmare unfolded before them. Half a dozen serpents had broken the surface of the pool, and Gregor had a bad feeling that more were coming. They were swinging their heads and tails through the air, trying to take down whatever they could find. Since they had no eyes, Gregor guessed they had some other direction system. Maybe even echolocation.

There was no chance of fighting them. It was all Gregor could do to cling to Ares's back while the bat dodged the heads and tails frantically. He caught glimpses of Mareth and Howard on Andromeda, Luxa on Aurora...but wait a minute! Where was Twitchtip? Gregor heard a shriek and saw poor Twitchtip dangling by the tail from a serpent's mouth.

"Go, Ares!" he cried, and the bat flew straight for the rat. Gregor lifted his sword to attack when a tail caught Ares broadside and sent them hurtling into the air. Boots flew from his arms. "Boots! No!" he screamed. "Ares! Get her, Ares!" But the bat caught him first.

"Luxa has her!" the bat cried, before Gregor could flip out. "Luxa has her and Temp!"

"Get in the tunnels!" Howard shouted as Andromeda whizzed by. "The tunnels!" He was sitting upright on the bat, trying to hold on to an unconscious, bloody Mareth.

Twenty-foot-high waves were rolling across the pool now, smashing into the rock walls. Rats who had not moved quickly enough into their tunnels were screaming in the serpents' mouths. The air was filled with drenching splashes from the impact of the reptiles' tails.

Gregor felt Ares dive. They went straight into the waves, and for a moment he was submerged. When they came up, he was coughing and bewildered. He could feel his bat struggling under the weight of something. They rose in the air, jerking this way and that, as Ares dodged the numerous snapping mouths. Then the bat rocketed toward a stone wall, dipped, and they were inside a tunnel.

Ares dropped his burden and collapsed. Gregor rolled off his back and hit the floor with a thud. There was light behind them in the tunnel. Howard was rapidly working over Mareth on the ground, while Andromeda hung over them. One of Mareth's pant legs was soaked in blood. In front of him, Gregor saw the shuddering heap of wet fur that was Twitchtip. Blood poured from her nose, which appeared to have been smashed in, and oozed from the stump that had been her tail.

There was a sound at the front of the tunnel, and Gregor aimed his flashlight beam, hoping to see Aurora come in with Luxa, Boots, and Temp.

Instead, shooting down the tunnel at them were three rows of bared teeth.

CHAPTER 18

The sword Temp had saved was still in his hand. As the jaws were about to snap down on Twitchtip, Gregor vaulted over her and drove the blade straight down into the serpent's tongue. Liquid spurted up into his face. He stumbled back and slipped in a puddle of Twitchtip's blood. His feet went out from under him, and he landed against the rat's body.

The creature reared up, smashing its head into the tunnel ceiling. Rocks showered down on them. Gregor could physically feel the serpent's primeval roar going through him. It continued crashing its head up and down in pain and rage as it withdrew from the tunnel, the sword still lodged in its tongue.

Would more come in?

"I need another sword!" Gregor shouted, and Howard tossed one up to him. He stood crouched before Twitchtip, senses heightened. He could feel himself buzzing on the edge of going into that rager mode. He fought it, trying not to lose control as he stood there awaiting the next onslaught. It never came. Maybe word had gotten around that if you stuck your head down this tunnel you could mess up your tongue. Or maybe the serpents had found more interesting food. Whatever it was, things were beginning to quiet down out there. The howls became fewer, the splashes died.

Gregor unclenched his hands and turned around. Ares was right behind him, providing backup. Twitchtip had both paws on her nose to staunch the flow of blood. Howard was pounding on Mareth's chest, trying to restart his heart.

"Mareth!" Gregor ran back to where the soldier lay on the ground. "Come on, Mareth!"

Howard pounded a few more times and pressed his ear against Mareth's chest. "His heartbeat is back! What have you in your pack, Overlander?"

Gregor dumped his pack on the floor. It held his last batteries, the duct tape, the two candy bars, and a few catch cloths he'd put in to have handy in case Boots needed a change. Howard ripped off the remains of Mareth's blood-soaked pant leg, revealing jagged flesh around a gaping wound. "A serpent bit him when we went to help Twitchtip." He laid three catch cloths over the wound. "Hold them," he ordered Gregor. Then he wrapped the duct tape around the leg to keep them in place. He sat back on his heels and

shook his head. "We have to get him home, if he is to survive. Warm him, Andromeda, while I tend to the rat."

Andromeda lay beside Mareth and enfolded him in her wings. "I must take him home. I must take him home."

Howard grabbed the last two catch cloths and went to Twitchtip. He used one to bandage the stump of her tail. "I am sorry I had to sever it," he said to the rat. "There was no other way to free you."

"I would've bit through it myself if I could have," said Twitchtip.

Howard placed the other catch cloth over her nose and wound duct tape around it. "You will have to breathe through your mouth, until it heals." The rat nodded.

"What happened to your nose?" asked Gregor.

"Just before Howard cut me free, a serpent crushed it with his tail," said Twitchtip. "I can't smell a thing."

"You can't smell?" said Gregor. Twitchtip would not be able to smell the Bane then, but there was a much more pressing matter. "Then you can't tell, where my sister is, I mean?"

"Do not fret, Overlander. My cousin and Aurora are an excellent team. I am sure they have all taken refuge in one of the tunnels," said Howard. But he looked uneasy.

"I believe they meant to," Twitchtip said, avoiding Gregor's gaze.

Gregor felt time stop. "You believe they meant to?"

Twitchtip hesitated. "It was all very confusing. The serpent was swinging me around and there was so much motion, it was difficult to place any smell."

"Luxa and Aurora caught Boots. They caught Temp. Aurora said this to me," said Ares.

"Yes, they did. I know their smells were all together. But then...but then...there was water between us," said Twitchtip.

"What does that mean? There was water between us?" Gregor said.

"It means...I still smelled them. But there was water between us. Many feet of it. Their scent was getting fainter. And that's when the serpent hit my nose and everything went dark," said Twitchtip.

"You think...they were pulled under, then?" said Howard.

"I don't know for sure. But that would be my guess, if I were forced to make one," said Twitchtip. She looked up at Gregor. "I'm sorry, Overlander."

"This did not happen. I will call. I will call for Aurora now!" Ares said, and shot out of the tunnel.

No one moved while he was gone. Gregor's body was slowly turning to ice. The numbness started in his feet and began spreading up his legs. Over his hips. Up through his stomach. By the time Ares came back and landed beside him, it had reached his rib cage.

"There is no answer," said the bat.

And the ice encircled his heart.

Die the baby, die his heart, Die his most essential part.

They had killed Boots. Nothing could be worse than this. He imagined going back to New York City and walking in the front door of his apartment...alone.

"What do you wish to do, Gregor?" Howard asked, after some indistinguishable period of time had passed.

DIE the baby, die his heart,

Die his most essential part.

Die the peace that rules the hour.

Gnawers have their key to power.

They were off celebrating somewhere, the gnawers. Gnashing their ratty teeth and laughing and congratulating one another on how well their plan had worked. On how they had killed his baby sister and broken him in two.

The ironic thing was that, for the first time, Gregor could envision what he was going to do.

"Gregor?" repeated Howard.

The ice had come up over his throat, and his voice was calm and cool. "I want you guys to go home. Get Mareth back. Twitchtip, too, if you can," said Gregor.

"And what will you do, Overlander?" asked Twitchtip. Gregor felt the last bit of warmth disappear as the ice went across his forehead and up over the top of his head. There was nothing left that anyone could do to him now. There was nothing left to fear.

"Me?" he said. "I'm going to go kill the Bane."

PART 3

The Maze

CHAPTER 19

"You cannot. You cannot do it alone," Howard said, with a shake of his head.

"Yes, I can," said Gregor. "Tell them why, Twitchtip."

Twitchtip raised one rat eyebrow at Gregor, to see if he was sure. He nodded. "All right, then," she said. "He may stand a chance. He's a rager."

The word had an effect on everybody. Ares and Andromeda both ruffled their wings. Howard's mouth dropped open. "A rager?" he said. "How know you this?"

"Ragers put out a very specific scent when they fight," said Twitchtip. "It's slight, even for me, but I can detect it. I smelled it the first time I met the Overlander, but later wondered if I'd confused it with Ripred's scent. He'd been fighting as well."

"I was hitting the blood balls that day," said Gregor. "That was the first time I felt like that."

"Yes, and then when the squid attacked, I was certain about it," said Twitchtip. "I told him he was a rager a few days later, but he denied it."

There was a pause, and Gregor could feel the others watching him. "Because I didn't want it to be true. But that doesn't matter, what I want. I don't know what it is; something happens when I fight. Something weird. And if Twitchtip thinks she smells this rager thing on me, she's probably right."

"Well, say it is true, Gregor, and you are a rager. It does not make you immortal. It does not mean you can walk into a maze full of rats alone," said Howard.

"He will not be alone," said Ares. "I will be with him."

"And I'll lead him into the maze as far as I'm able," said Twitchtip. "I got a good whiff of white fur before I lost my nose. If I can't lead him to the Bane, I can get him close."

"Then Andromeda and I will come, too," said Howard.

"You're not invited," said Gregor.

"What?" said Howard.

"I don't want you in the maze, Howard. I want you to take Mareth back and tell people what happened. Someone has to. And if I don't come back, I need you to somehow get word to my family," said Gregor.

"You are not in charge of this mission," said Howard. "I had orders from Regalia."

"Okay, but if you try to follow me, I'll fight you," said Gregor.

"You will not stand a chance on foot, fighting a rager on a flier," said Ares.

"Especially with a rat on their side," threw in Twitchtip.

Howard was starting to lose it now. "Maybe I will take that chance! Maybe Andromeda will, too!"

"Please don't, Howard. Please go back. I don't want my mom and dad waiting for Boots and me to walk in the door when it's not going to happen. And sooner or later, if we don't show up, I know they'll come looking for us," said Gregor. "And they need to know in Regalia, too. About Luxa. They have to find a new queen or king now, right? Because no matter what Luxa said, Nerissa probably can't handle it. So it will be Vikus, then your mom, and then you. But if you die, it will be —"

"Stellovet. Oh, I did not think of that," said Howard.

"You going to leave her in charge of Regalia?" asked Gregor.

"No, I am not, I am —" Howard ground the palms of his hands into his forehead. Between losing Pandora and Luxa, whom he'd only just found, really, and the responsibility of a kingdom hanging over him — he was clearly overwhelmed. "I do not know what to do. Andromeda, what say you?"

"I will not fight the Overlander and risk injuring him. I am taking Mareth home," said Andromeda. "And you should come with me."

"Oh..." The resistance seemed to go out of Howard. "I cannot fight all of you," he said. He sat there for a few moments, his head bowed. Then he shook it off and tried to get back to business. "Well, then, every second counts if we hope to get Mareth back alive. But Andromeda cannot make the flight without rest, and there is nowhere safe to land."

That was true. They all pondered it, then Ares spoke up. "There are some pieces of the boat in the Tankard. Not large, but they still float."

"Maybe you could make them into a lifeboat," said Gregor.

"What is this, a lifeboat?" asked Howard.

"In the Overland, big boats, like ships and things, have lifeboats attached to them. They're small boats you can get in if your ship sinks or something," said Gregor.

"If the boat were light enough to carry, and I could rest for a few hours at times, I could make it," said Andromeda.

Ares volunteered to search for wreckage.

"I'll go with you," said Gregor. He needed to talk to his bat. He waited until they were flying out over the Tankard to speak. "You don't have to do this, Ares. Come after the Bane. I'll go alone."

"No. We will go together," said Ares. "Besides, the gnawers have killed every reason I had to return to Regalia. If by some strange chance we live and you return home, the silence begins for me."

What the bat said was true. With Luxa and Aurora gone, Ares would have no contact with anyone. He could probably sit in his hideout for years without anyone bothering to check on him. Gregor would go home, his heart dead, and Ares would be as good as banished.

"Okay," said Gregor. "We'll go together." He had a feeling they would never have a discussion like this again — about whether one would go into danger without the other. He didn't bother to thank Ares. Somehow they were past thanking each other. Somehow it would almost be like thanking himself. Gregor realized that the journey filled with squids and whirlpools and mites and serpents and loss, great loss, had changed them. It had made the oath they had sworn in front of that furious crowd in Regalia real. He remembered the feel of Ares's claw clasped in his hand and thought of the words he'd said with Luxa prompting him.

"Ares the Flier, I bond to you,

Our life and death are one, we two.

In dark, in flame, in war, in strife, i save you as i save my life."

Ares was his bat. Gregor was Ares's human. They were truly bonded now.

If there was one positive note, they made a good haul. Ares found three pieces of the boat, and Howard was able to fashion them into a sort of raft using the last few strips of duct tape. It wasn't anything you'd want to try crossing the Waterway on, but when they went down and tested it, it held up under the combined weight of Gregor, Ares, and Howard.

"It should do for a few hours at a time," said Howard. "Long enough for Andromeda to sleep a bit."

Almost as important as the boat wreckage were the two packs they retrieved. They had washed up inside one of the tunnels when the waves

were high. The first contained food. The second, to Howard's great relief, was his first aid kit.

"Oh, this! This is as good as light itself!" he said. He immediately opened the pack and began to work on everyone. He changed Mareth's and Twitchtip's bandages, dousing the wounds with medicine. He rewrapped Gregor's arm, which was actually showing some improvement, and dabbed Ares's mite bites with salve.

Howard insisted Gregor take the rest of the food, since Mareth couldn't eat, anyway, and he and Andromeda could live on raw fish. "And who knows what you will find in the Labyrinth?"

Gregor took Mareth's sword; Howard still had his own. Finally, they divided up light. They had two working flashlights; Howard's had died during the serpent attack, and two had disappeared into the deep with Luxa and Boots. So, there was one flashlight per party, but Howard made Gregor take every spare battery. "Even with no light, Andromeda will get us home. You have many more difficulties with which to contend."

Gregor nodded. He put his candy bars, the food, and the spare batteries in one backpack. He wedged Mareth's sword between two straps. The flashlight was still taped onto his good arm.

Andromeda flattened out her back, and they laid Mareth on it. Howard tucked the spare blanket from his first aid kit around him. Then he swung his leg over the bat's neck. "Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander."

"Fly you high," said Gregor. Although "Been nice knowing you" seemed more appropriate. He didn't really expect to see Howard again.

Andromeda took off, snagging the raft in her claws as she left the tunnel. Almost immediately, they were lost from view.

Gregor, Ares, and Twitchtip turned and headed into the tunnel without a word.

CHAPTER 20

Guided by what she remembered of the Labyrinth before her nose was injured, Twitchtip led Gregor and Ares through the maze. Almost at once, the tunnel began to divide. Some paths led to intersections that branched off into four or five directions. Others twisted around like a corkscrew so that it took ten minutes to cover the distance you could've walked in one if the path had been straight. As they moved farther into the maze, the tunnels became even more unpredictable. A narrow passage they could barely squeeze through would suddenly open onto a huge cavern that in turn would lead to an obstacle course of boulders.

It was hardest on Ares, since most of the journey had to be made on foot. He hopped along, fluttering, taking tiny, rapid bat steps in the tighter passages and opening his wings with relief when they reached a larger space.

There were no rats. "They must have witnessed your sister's fate," said Twitchtip. "The gnawers think they have defeated you, and the Bane is safe. But eventually one will get your scent, and then the fight begins."

They drove themselves forward for about an hour, then stopped to catch their breath.

"You can remember all this? Just from what you smelled from the Tankard?" Gregor asked Twitchtip.

"Well, that, and the fact that I'm more familiar than most with the Labyrinth. I lived here for about a year after I was banished," panted Twitchtip. She was not doing well. The bandages on her nose and tail stump were soaked with blood, and her eyes had a hot, fevered look.

"I thought you lived in the Dead Land," said Gregor.

"Not at first. I hid in a cave down by the Tankard. The rats never came there because of the serpents. It wasn't ideal, but it offered more protection than the Dead Land. Then one day I dozed off gathering mushrooms and a patrol saw me. I had to run, and the only place left to go was the Dead Land," said Twitchtip. "I didn't speak to a soul for years. Then I realized there was another rat around."

"Ripred," said Ares.

"He let me stay in his nest sometimes, if he was gone. You've been near there. It's where you first spoke to him," said Twitchtip. "Now he has a

whole band of rats. But I can only stay, he says, if I help you find the Bane," said Twitchtip. "Otherwise, I'll be on my own again." This fear seemed to rouse her. "We have to keep moving."

As they took off again, Gregor found himself thinking of Ripred. Letting Twitchtip stay near him in the Dead Land, letting her use his nest and join his pack, these could almost seem like acts of kindness. But were they? Everything was conditional on Ripred getting something back from Twitchtip. Ripred knew he could use her and that incredible nose. Twitchtip was desperate to belong somewhere again. They had mutual need. Like Ripred and Gregor did. For Twitchtip, like Gregor, the question would be what would happen when that need ran out.

Or was he being too hard on Ripred? He seemed to be friends with Vikus and Solovet. There had been moments when Gregor thought he'd sensed a genuine compassion in the rat, behind the sarcasm and the snarls.

Maybe things were more complicated for ragers. They certainly were for Gregor.

Twitchtip began to stumble, and Gregor could see she was about to give out. She lost her footing one last time, fell on her belly, and did not get up. He squatted down beside her. Her breathing was rapid and shallow.

"I can't go on," she said. "It doesn't matter — I'm at the end of my scent map, anyway. Ahead, the path splits in three directions. Your guess is as good as mine," she said.

"Are we supposed to just leave you here?" said Gregor.

"I'll rest awhile. If the rats don't find me, I may be able to make my way back to my old cave. But, you...you have to move forward now. You are close to the Bane. I know it. The rats will smell you soon. Go...go..." she gasped.

Gregor pulled out a hunk of meat and some stale bread for her. What was there to say? "Fly you high, Twitchtip."

She laughed, and blood dripped from the bandage on her nose. "You don't say that to rats."

"What do you say in a situation like this?" asked Gregor.

"Like this? Run like the river," said Twitchtip.

"Run like the river, Twitchtip," said Gregor.

"You, too," said Twitchtip.

And Gregor and Ares left her lying on the tunnel floor. When they came to the place where the tunnel split in three, they paused. Gregor had an

image of Twitchtip, lying in the darkness, bleeding to death.

Ares read his thoughts. "She is strong and cunning, to have survived in the Dead Land on her own. And she has a place near enough to hide."

"I know," said Gregor.

"She loathes her life alone. Your killing the Bane is her only hope. If I were Twitchtip, I would not want you to come back," said Ares.

Gregor nodded and surveyed the tunnels. "Which one looks good to you?"

"The one on the left," said Ares.

They followed it for a while, hit another corkscrew, and somehow wound up back at the stop where the three tunnels met.

"On further reflection, I favor the right," said Ares.

They took the right tunnel and within five minutes had reached a dead end and retraced their steps to the opening.

"I think you should choose," said Ares.

They headed down the middle tunnel and after about twenty minutes arrived in a large, circular cavern. It was almost perfectly cone-shaped, with the walls slanting up fifty feet to meet at a single point at the top. Around the base, at least a dozen tunnels led out from it like the spokes on a bicycle wheel.

"Oh, great," said Gregor. "Now which way?"

Ares had no idea. "But, Overlander, it has been many hours since we fed. If we are to continue, we must eat."

When had they last eaten? Gregor tried to think back — back through the time with Twitchtip, through the serpent attack, through the passage into the Tankard, through Temp's voice waking him, through the night to that evening when they were all together. He'd eaten a slab of raw fish and given Boots all his bread and meat.

"We shut eyes?" he heard her little voice say, and a hot pain stabbed him in the heart. He took a deep breath, pushed Boots out of his mind, and imagined the rats laughing. The ice sealed back over his chest.

"You're right. We have to eat," Gregor said, and opened the pack. They sat on the stone floor, choking down the dry food, washing it down with water from a leather bag that looked like a wineskin.

"There is something wrong about it. My still being alive," Ares said out of the gloom.

"How do you mean?" asked Gregor.

"When Henry and Luxa and Aurora are no longer. How many days ago was it that you first fell?" asked the bat.

"I don't know. Maybe five or six months," said Gregor.

"There was a match. Henry and I had scored seven times. A feast was planned that night for Nerissa's birthday. The rats seemed far away. And then you ran into the arena with your sister and the crawlers, and nothing has ever been the same. What happened to that world? How did it change so quickly?" said Ares.

Gregor knew what he meant. His world had completely transformed the night his dad disappeared. And it had never really been right since. "I don't know. But I can tell you this, that world — it's not ever coming back."

"I let my bond die. I am an outcast. Luxa and Aurora are gone. It seems a crime for me to be alive," said Ares.

"It wasn't your fault, Ares. Not any of it," said Gregor. "It's like Vikus said to me once, we just all got trapped in one of Sandwich's prophecies."

This did not seem to cheer Ares up much. For a while he was silent, then his black eyes caught and held Gregor's gaze. "Will it make us feel any better, do you think, to kill the Bane?"

"I don't know," said Gregor. "But I don't see how it could make us feel any worse."

Ares's head lifted sharply in a manner Gregor had begun to recognize.

"Rats?" Gregor asked.

"Two of them. Coming at a run," said Ares.

In seconds, Gregor was on Ares's back. The bat shot up into the cone, and they were circling as the rats ran in. There were two, as Ares had predicted, with mud-gray coats and gnashing teeth.

"There he is!" cried one rat.

"We were fools to leave him with Goldshard," said the other.

"That will be remedied as soon as these are dead!" growled the first. Although Gregor was well out of range, the rats began to leap for him immediately. They could not reach him, but they prevented Ares from flying down low enough to escape through one of the tunnels. Eventually, Gregor would have to fight them, and it was best to do it now, before Ares tired or more rats showed up.

As he pulled the sword from the strap on his pack, the rager sensation began. He didn't fight it this time. The rats broke up into fragments in his vision, as if he were looking at their reflection in a shattered mirror, but

only certain parts were lit. He caught glimpses of an eye, a spot under a raised paw, a neck...and somewhere in his brain, he understood that these were his targets.

"Now," said Gregor quietly. And Ares began to dive.

CHAPTER 21

Gregor was almost within striking distance of one of the rats when something caused Ares to veer straight upward. A third rat with an unusual gold coat had bolted into the cone right beneath them.

"That makes three to fight," Gregor thought as Ares shot up and off to the side, but as the ground came back into view, he could see the gold rat tearing the throat out of one of his attackers. Then it spun around, blood flying from its muzzle, to face the other gray rat.

Gregor shook his head slightly, to clear it. What was going on?

"Don't be an idiot, Goldshard! He's come to kill the Bane!" snarled the gray rat.

"I would rather have the Bane dead than have it trust you," the gold rat hissed back. The rat's voice was slightly higher pitched, like Twitchtip's, and Gregor felt certain it was female.

"All you guarantee is your own death!" The gray rat crouched down to lunge.

"Someone will die, Snare, the question is who?" said Goldshard. As Snare sprang toward her, she went into action.

Gregor had never seen a full-scale rat fight before. Ripred had killed two rats in a tunnel en route to rescuing his dad, but they hadn't had time to fight back. Then the big, scarred rat had taken on some of King Gorger's soldiers. But Gregor hadn't witnessed it because he was busy leaping to what he had thought would be his death. Now he had a bird's-eye view.

When Goldshard had killed the first time, she'd had the element of surprise on her side. This time her opponent was on the offensive. And Snare, who Gregor was pretty sure was a male, was a lot bigger than she was.

The combat was vicious. The rats attacked each other in violent bursts. They'd circle for a minute, looking for an opening, then one of them would leap and there would be a blur of teeth and claws. As they pulled apart to circle again, both would have new wounds. Snare lost an eye. Goldshard's ear dangled from a shred of fur. You could see the bone in Snare's shoulder. Goldshard's left front paw was snapped in two.

Finally, the gold rat came in on her opponent's blind side and locked her fangs on his neck. In the final throes of death, Snare got his hind feet

between their bodies and slashed open the length of Goldshard's belly. She lost her grip, staggered back, and collapsed. Her intestines spilled out on the ground. The rats lay a few feet apart, eyes locked in hate, bodies helpless. With a terrible gurgling sound, Snare suffocated in his own blood.

Goldshard turned her gaze to Gregor. The look was pleading, and he was sure she wanted to say something to him. "Don't...", she whispered. But before she could finish, her eyes glazed over, and she stopped moving.

"What just happened?" Gregor blurted out.

"I do not know," said Ares.

"Are they dead?" asked Gregor.

"Quite dead. All three of them," the bat replied. He coasted down to the ground, avoiding the pools of blood that were spreading out from the rats' bodies.

"Do you know who they are?" asked Gregor. "Did you recognize their names? Goldshard? Snare?"

"Not Goldshard," said Ares. "I have heard of Snare. He was one of Gorger's generals. He was out fighting the war when Gorger fell. He must have joined with the Bane then. It would make sense. Whoever is close to the Bane would have much power when he becomes king," said Ares.

Gregor hadn't spent much time thinking about the rats' political struggles, but now that he did, something seemed strange. "So why hasn't the Bane become king yet? You'd think a rat as big and strong as he is would have taken over by now," said Gregor. "What's he waiting for?"

"Even the Bane must gather an army around him," said Ares. "He has his own enemies among the rats. Ripred, for instance. He wants the Bane dead."

That was true. Part of Ripred's plan for his own rise to power included killing the Bane. Snare had wanted to keep the Bane alive, but Goldshard was willing to let Gregor kill it rather than let it trust Snare.

There was something else about Goldshard. That last look she had given him. Like she was begging him, almost. What was it the rat had wanted to say to him? Don't? Don't what? Hurt her? It was a little too late for that. Ares's head snapped around to a tunnel entrance.

"How many?" asked Gregor.

"Just one, I think," said Ares. "It is hard to tell. The path spirals." His chin jerked up again. This time, Gregor did not have to ask; he had heard

the scratching himself. The sound stopped. Nothing emerged from the tunnel. Suddenly Gregor knew why.

"It's the Bane," he whispered to Ares. The bat gave a nod of agreement. It had to be. The other rats would simply attack, but the Bane knew it was being hunted. By a human. By an Overlander. By the warrior.

The words of "The Prophecy of Bane" came back to Gregor.

Hear it scratching down below,

Rat of long-forgotten snow,

Evil cloaked in coat of white

Will the warrior drain your light?

Yes, he would. That was what the warrior had come to do.

There was another faint scratch. It was in there then. Just a few feet away. Waiting.

The tunnel mouth was small, only about five feet high and four feet wide. There would be no flying in on Ares. The Bane must know that. It wanted to lure him in alone. Okay, then. He'd face it alone.

Gregor slid the pack off his shoulders and onto the ground. He didn't want anything restricting his movements. He checked the switch on his flashlight; it was already on high beam. Gripping his sword, he began to move toward the tunnel.

Ares's wing came up to stop him. "You cannot fight him in there, Overlander."

"Well, he's not coming out," said Gregor.

"Wait, then," said Ares.

"For what? Another bunch of rats to show up?" said Gregor.

Ares dropped his wing reluctantly.

"Look, I've got a feeling it was supposed to be this way, anyway. Like I was supposed to do it alone," said Gregor. "But you be ready, because after I kill it, we've got to get out of here fast. Okay?"

"I will be ready," said Ares. He extended his claw, and Gregor grasped it with his hand.

Then Gregor turned to the tunnel. In the dozen paces it took him to reach the opening, he could feel himself slipping into rager mode, the heightened senses, the rush of adrenaline, the selective vision. Every molecule in his body was preparing to kill.

He moved swiftly inside and almost immediately encountered the spiral Ares had mentioned. Another corkscrew-like path. With his bad hand

tracking along the wall and his good one leading with his sword, he went around one, two, three full turns and burst out into a square chamber.

It was trying to hide from him, the Bane. He caught just a glimpse of white fur, a flash of pink tail in a cave off to the side of the chamber.

Gregor thought of Luxa, who would never be queen, of Twitchtip bleeding on the ground, of his dad crying on the phone, and of Boots...sweet, trusting Boots...

Heart pounding, blind to everything except that patch of fur, he lunged toward the cave. He raised the hilt in the air, flipping the sword so it would come down point first, at an angle. His bad hand joined his good one, and with every ounce of strength he drove the blade toward the Bane.

But just before the point made contact, the creature made a sound that hit Gregor like a cannonball.

"Ma-maa!"

CHAPTER 22

Gregor turned the sword at the last second, driving it into the stone wall of the cave with such force that the blade snapped off near the hilt and clattered to the floor. His teeth rattled at the impact.

He fell back from the cave. "Boots?" he said hoarsely. But he knew it wasn't Boots's voice. There'd just been something in it that was so like how Boots had sounded when she was upset, the pitch, the distress, and the way she'd break that word into two long syllables. "*Ma-maa!*"

The chamber reeled around his head. Where was the Bane? What was that white furry thing a few yards away? Because it sure wasn't some ten-foot rat trying to attack him!

Gregor forced himself forward and shone the flashlight into the cave. Huddled against the wall, shaking in fear, was a small, white rat. Suddenly it all made sense to him — why almost nothing was known about the Bane, why it had not taken over the rat kingdom, why it had not attacked him. It was only a baby!

Still, it was the Bane. He was supposed to drain its light. His blade had broken off, leaving a jagged daggerlike weapon in his hand. It would be so easy to kill the creature in front of him. But...but...

"Ma-maa!"

But it sounded just like Boots!

"Oh, geez. Oh, geez," Gregor said, and tossed aside what remained of his sword. He knelt down and reached out his hand to pat the thing. "It's okay. You're okay, baby."

The rat shuddered in terror and pressed back against the wall, wailing its head off. "*Ma-maa! Ma-maa!*"

"Shh! Shh! It's okay. I'm not going to hurt you," Gregor said soothingly. "Ares!"

He shouldn't have shouted. He'd scared it again, and now it was sobbing.

Ares scampered out of the last curve and wobbled into the chamber. "What is it? Where is the Bane?"

"In here," Gregor said, gesturing to the cave. "And we've got a problem."

"What? What?" Ares had come in ready to fight to the death, and now he was completely disoriented. "What is the problem?"

"This is the problem," said Gregor. He leaned down and scooped up the baby rat in his arms. It weighed about as much as a full-grown cocker spaniel. One day it probably would be ten feet tall. But today, he could pick it up and rock it. He turned to show Ares.

"What is that? That is not the Bane!" said Ares.

"Actually, I think it is. Or at least, it's a baby Bane," said Gregor.

"I do not believe it! That is some decoy. Some trick of the gnawers to lure us into a trap so that they may destroy us!" said Ares.

"I don't think so. I mean, look at its coat. How many white rats have you ever seen?" asked Gregor.

"None. Save this," said Ares. "But perhaps it is not a rat! Perhaps it is a mouse they have captured and used to deceive us! I have seen white mice!"

Gregor examined the baby, but he was no rodent expert. He held it up for Ares to inspect. "You take a look. Is it a mouse?"

"No. It is most definitely a gnawer," said Ares.

"So, you think there are two white rats?" said Gregor.

"Yes. No. I do not know. Two white rats at one time, it is highly improbable. It must be the Bane. Ohhh. Oh, Overlander. What are you going to do with it?" said Ares.

"Well, I can't kill it, can I? I mean, it's just a baby!" said Gregor.

"Aha! I doubt that argument will hold much water in Regalia!" said Ares. Gregor had never seen him off-balance. The bat was fluttering around the chamber, so agitated that he bumped into a wall.

"Hey, you bumped into something!" said Gregor. The bats never bumped into anything.

"Can you blame me? I am...we are...do you have any idea what you hold in your arms?" said Ares.

"The Bane, I guess," said Gregor.

"Yes! Yes! The Bane! The scourge of the Underland! The creature who may well cause the extinction of fliers, humans, and countless others. What we do at this moment determines the fate of all who call the Underland home!" said Ares.

"What am I supposed to do, Ares? Run my sword through its head? Look at the thing!" The Bane wiggled out of his arms and ran for the tunnel. "Hey! Wait a minute! Hold on, you!"

Gregor chased the baby rat through the corkscrew curves and out of the tunnel. What he saw made his heart ache.

The little white rat was trying to curl up in the curve of Goldshard's neck. "*Ma-maa*," it whimpered. "*Ma-maa*." Getting no response, it pawed frantically at the dead rat's face. "*Ma-maa!*"

He heard the rustle of Ares's wings behind him. "So, that's it. She was its mom. And when she said 'Don't' to me..." Gregor had to stop for a minute. "She was trying to say, 'Don't kill my baby.'"

"She must have been desperate to keep it from Snare. He would have taken the pup and raised it to do his bidding," Ares said quietly.

Blood was staining the baby's white fur. Its cries were piteous. As if that wasn't enough to deal with, Ares's head whipped up.

"How many this time?" asked Gregor.

"A dozen, at least," said Ares. "You must decide what to do, Overlander."

Gregor bit his lip. He couldn't decide. Everything was happening too fast. He needed more time. "Okay, okay," he said. He bounded over and lifted the baby into his arms. "We're taking it with us."

"We are?" Ares said, as if the thought had never crossed his mind.

"Yeah. Because I'm not going to kill it, and I'm not leaving it here for the other rats to use," said Gregor.

Ares shook his head in a combination of exasperation and denial, but he offered his back.

Gregor grabbed his backpack in one hand, threw a leg over Ares, and settled the Bane in front of him. "Okay," he said. "Let's run like the river."

As Ares lifted into the air, a dozen rats galloped into the cone. They took in the dead bodies, the bat, the baby in Gregor's arms.

"The Overlander has the Bane!" shouted one, and the whole pack went wild, howling, leaping into the air, slashing at the invaders with their claws.

"Hold on!" said Ares. Of the dozen tunnels that led out of the cone, about four were big enough for Ares to fly down. He dove for one, and they were off.

It was like the most horrifying theme park ride ever. Gregor hated those rides, but they were nothing compared to this spinning, jerking, flipping around in the dark, with only his flashlight beam, and insane live rats jumping out at him from every turn. Gregor clung to Ares with his legs and one hand while he kept the other arm wrapped around the baby.

At one point, when they were darting around a cave barely evading several sets of snapping teeth, Ares cried out, "Use your sword!"

"I don't have it! It broke and I left it back in the cave!" said Gregor. He hated dumping this whole escape thing on Ares, but what could he do?

Ares twisted sideways and made it into a tunnel with the rats hot on his tail.

The baby rat had given up crying "*Ma-maa!!*" and was now issuing a series of high-pitched alarm shrieks. "Eek! Eek! Eek!"

"Make it stop, Overlander. Its voice carries great distances. Every rat in the maze can hear that the pup is threatened!" shouted Ares.

Gregor remembered how far Boots's cry carried — through doors, down hallways, you could even hear her on the elevator when you were coming up. It was like nature had designed her baby cry so it would travel. Must be the same with rats.

At first he tried to calm the Bane with his voice. It wasn't enough. It might have helped if they were sitting somewhere quietly on the ground, but it was useless here in this nightmare of motion. He tried stroking its back and head, but that didn't work, either. Gregor's human voice and touch and smell were just more scary unknown things to the rat. Finally he managed to get a hand into his backpack and pull out one of the candy bars. He ripped it open, broke off a piece, and stuck it into the baby's wailing mouth.

There was an "Eek!" of surprise, then a smacking sound, and the Bane was consumed by its first wonderful taste of chocolate.

"More!" It was so weird to hear the rat baby talking, but it was. "More!" it said again, just like Boots would have.

Gregor popped another piece of chocolate into the little rat's mouth, and it was gobbled up. The Bane seemed to think better of him now that he had given it chocolate. It relaxed a little, back into his body, which made it easier to hold on to.

"You think we're almost out of here?" Gregor said as they swept out of a tunnel.

"See for yourself," said Ares.

Gregor shone the flashlight around the place they'd just entered. Lying on the floor were Goldshard, Snare, and the third rat. "No! What are we doing back here?" he gasped.

"Perhaps you should try navigating!" said Ares. What with him insisting on taking the Bane, having no sword, and being pretty worthless in general at the moment, Gregor could tell the bat had lost patience with him.

"Okay, okay, I'm sorry," said Gregor.

"It is our scent, Overlander," said Ares. "They track us with such ease. I cannot lose them."

"Hey, I know!" said Gregor. "Maybe we can trick them!" He'd seen some movie once where a guy running from bloodhounds had fooled them. "We need to confuse their noses." But with what?

Gregor ripped the bandage from his arm. It was soaked with blood and pus and ointment. "Fly around the cone, Ares! I need to touch the top of every tunnel."

Ares followed his instructions, if not his plan. "Why do we do this?"

Gregor held out the bandage and swiped it along the inside of every tunnel entrance as they passed it. "I'm just trying to spread our scent around."

They completed the full circle, hitting each tunnel opening. Gregor tossed the bandage up the last one.

"They come!" warned Ares.

"Get out! Get out now!" said Gregor.

Ares dipped into a tunnel they had not yet tried. After about thirty seconds, they could hear the rats reaching the cone. And they *were* confused. Different rats were calling for them to chase down different tunnels. A big argument broke out, and then the sound of fighting.

It grew softer as they moved away, until Gregor could no longer hear it at all.

Ares zigzagged down a tunnel, and this one opened out over a nice, wide, shallow stream.

"I must stop for a moment...I must drink..." Ares landed on the edge of the stream, panting. He dunked his face in the water, gulping it down.

Gregor got down and scooped up handfuls of water for himself and the Bane. The stream was not too deep, but the current was fairly strong and he didn't want the baby being swept away.

Ares raised his wet face. "I have only just thought of something," said Ares. "This stream. Where do you suppose it goes?"

"I don't know. A bigger stream. Maybe a river eventually, or —" Gregor caught Ares's drift. On his very first night in Regalia, when he'd tried to

escape, he'd followed the water out of the palace. It had led to a river that had led to the Waterway. "It's sure worth a try."

Gregor hauled the Bane onto Ares's back, and they took off again.

It was not too promising for a while. The main thing about the stream was that it was long and it had as many twists and turns as the tunnels in the maze. Gregor could feel Ares's wings slowing; he was going to have to have a real rest soon. But to stop in the maze was certain death. The rats would catch up to them. Gregor had no sword. The baby would begin to cry again, and then they would —

"A river," Ares puffed out. "A river is at hand."

In another minute, they followed the stream out of the tunnel and into a huge cavern. A river ran through it. They were out of the maze!

Ares flew up high above the water. There were stony cliffs along the sides.

"Any rats around?" asked Gregor.

"Just the one on my back," said Ares.

"You want to pull over and take a break?" said Gregor.

"In a short while. I want to put more distance between the gnawers and us. They will be coming, Overlander. We have the Bane," said Ares.

"Yeah, I bet they hate that," said Gregor. He petted the Bane's head. It was getting used to him now. It curled up against him and gave a big yawn. "You've had a pretty big day, huh, little guy?" It didn't take long for it to fall asleep.

They flew awhile in silence. Then Ares spoke in an odd voice.

"Overlander, I think I know this place. I think we both do."

"What?" said Gregor. How could he possibly know where they were?

"Shine your light down," said Ares.

Gregor obeyed. There below them was the river, very wide now, and very strong. Hanging down from the high banks on either side of it were the remnants of a broken bridge.

"Oh," said Gregor. And the memory of that day flashed before his eyes. Running across the bridge, trying to go back for Boots, Ripred carrying him by his backpack as the bridge swung dizzyingly below, being smacked to the ground by Ripred's tail while the rat and Luxa and Henry and Gox had hacked away at the ropes that held the bridge and the pack of rats catching up to the cockroaches and his baby sister and — and —

It was the place where Tick had died.

"You're right," said Gregor. "How did we end up here, do you think?"

"The Tankard, the Labyrinth, and what remains of this bridge are all in the rats' domain," said Ares. "At least now we have some sense of where we are."

The bat coasted in and landed on the riverbank across from where the bridge had been hacked off. "It will be safer on this side. The rats would have great difficulty swimming the river, which is, as we know, filled with flesh-eating fish."

Gregor climbed off Ares's back holding the Bane, who was snoring softly. They were at the mouth of a tunnel. He ran his flashlight beam over the surrounding rocks, remembering how they'd been filled with waiting rats on their first visit. Now the rocks were empty. "Anything in the tunnel?" he asked Ares.

The bat shook his head. "Not as far as I can tell. I believe we are safe for the moment. Overlander, I must rest."

He could see Ares's weary eyes starting to shut.

"You go ahead and sleep. I'll keep watch," he said. "And, Ares? You were amazing back there."

"I was not bad," Ares agreed, and promptly fell asleep, his back to the tunnel wall.

Gregor trained his flashlight down the tunnel. If any intruders appeared, he would be ready. He sat cross-legged on the ground with the Bane on his lap. The baby stirred restlessly in its sleep, probably reliving the trauma of the last few hours. He patted its back to quiet it. The Bane's fur was stiff with its mother's dried blood.

The baby snuggled closer to him. It was so much like holding Boots. Boots. Why wasn't he crying about her? He had cried for a roach, in a cave just across the river there, but hadn't shed one tear for his sister. He remembered how Luxa had told him, in that same cave, that she hadn't cried since her parents died. It had been that bad. Maybe something like that was happening to Gregor.

His fingers traced the outline of one of the baby's soft ears.

So it turned out Sandwich had been right again. The rats had killed Boots, and he could not kill the Bane. Although, Gregor didn't think he could have killed the Bane even if Boots had survived. Or could he have? If he had thought that only one of them could live? He didn't know. But it didn't matter anymore.

"Now what?" he thought. "Now what?" He had to think clearly. He had to figure out what to do with the Bane.

He couldn't take it back to the rats' land. Goldshard had lost her life trying to protect it from her fellow rats. If he showed up with it in Regalia, he bet the humans would decide to kill it. If they let it live, which seemed unlikely, the rats would definitely overrun the city trying to get it back. For a brief moment he wondered if he could take it home with him, but he knew his mom wouldn't have any part in raising a ten-foot rat, especially when Boots had —

Okay, so what did that leave? Nothing, pretty much.

He looked out over the water.

This was such a sad place. Not just because of Tick, but because when he'd come through here on the first quest, he'd been in a party of ten, and of that ten, how many were still alive? He did the math in his head. Three. Only three. Tick had died here. Henry and Gox were lost when they rescued his father. Luxa, Aurora, Temp, and precious Boots drowned at the Tankard. The only ones left alive were he and Ares and Ripred.

Ripred. He was going to go crazy when he found out Gregor hadn't killed the Bane. He wanted the Bane dead. That's why he'd brought Twitchtip and tried to teach Gregor echolocation. But then Ripred hadn't known the Bane was a baby, either. Would that make any difference to the rat? Maybe, just maybe, it would.

Gregor felt a plan beginning to form in his head.

Ares awoke after about three hours, famished. He went down to the river and came back with a large fish, not one of the flesh-eating kind. The Bane awoke and wolfed down fish with the bat while Gregor scraped the mold off a piece of cheese and finished the last of the bread.

While they ate, he bounced his plan off Ares. "Okay, I have an idea about what to do with the Bane."

"I am listening," said Ares.

"This tunnel, it leads back to Ripred's nest," said Gregor.

"Does it?" said Ares.

"Yeah, remember? Twitchtip said his nest was where we first met him. And we first met him at the other end of this tunnel," said Gregor.

"Oh, yes, after we had fought the spinners," said Ares.

"Right, so I say we go find Ripred and give him the Bane and let him deal with it," said Gregor. Ares opened his mouth to object, but Gregor held

up his hand. "Wait! Only tell me why we can't do it if you can come up with a better plan."

There was a very, very long pause. "I do not have a better plan, but this one has no possible good endings," said Ares.

"Probably not," said Gregor. "So, should we give it a try?"

CHAPTER 23

Ares insisted Gregor sleep for a few hours. When he woke, they began their trek into the tunnel. It was narrow initially, but soon opened up into a space wide enough for Ares to fly, which was a relief, since Gregor's arms were aching from carrying the Bane.

They stopped to break for a drink at a stream in a cavern.

"Remember you this place?" asked Ares.

"No," said Gregor. "Wait, maybe..." They had stopped here to rest when Ripred was their guide. "Is this where Henry tried to kill Ripred in his sleep?"

"Yes, and you stepped between them," said Ares.

"I couldn't figure out if you knew Henry was going to try to kill him," said Gregor.

"I did not. It was one of many things Henry neglected to mention to me," said Ares. Gregor could tell he didn't want to talk about it anymore.

As they flew on, the Bane began to whimper for its mother again. How bizarre this must all seem to the baby rat. Flying through the air on a bat, being held by a human, knowing something very wrong had happened to its mother. Gregor fed it the rest of the chocolate bar from the Labyrinth. He had one left but decided to save it for a real emergency.

The smell of rotten eggs began to permeate the tunnel, and Gregor knew that they were fast approaching the cavern where they had first encountered the spiders, Treflex and Gox. Ares landed at the entrance, and they went in on foot. The sulfur-scented water still rained down the walls. There, on the floor, was the husk of Treflex's body, all that remained of the spider after his companion, Gox, had drained his insides.

"Want to rest?" asked Gregor.

"Not here," said Ares.

"Good," Gregor said, even though what lay ahead was nasty.

The tunnel dripped the evil-smelling water down on them. Ripred had taken them through it with the idea of concealing their scent from the rats, and they had certainly reeked of rotten eggs when they came out. This trip was, if possible, less comfortable. Gregor had been wearing a hard hat the first trip, which had offered some protection. He had not been injured. He

had been eager to find his father instead of dreading the moment when they next met. And he had been carrying Boots on his back, not a rat in his arms.

Poor Ares had ridden on Temp's back before, because the tunnel was so narrow and long. Now he limped along, scraping his wings on stone outcroppings, ducking his head in the eye-stinging drizzle.

In minutes, they were all soaked. The rat mewed miserably. Gregor trudged along, putting one foot in front of the other. He and Ares did not speak the entire time they were in the tunnel, although it was many hours.

When eventually they staggered out of the mouth into open space, Gregor's knees gave way under him and he sat on the ground hard. He expected the Bane, who'd been squirming for most of the trip, to try to run off. Instead, it burrowed up under his shirt and pressed against his chest.

Ares slumped against a rock next to him.

"Are there rats around?" asked Gregor.

"About ten are coming now. But that is what we want, right?" said Ares.

"That is what we want," said Gregor.

Neither of them made any attempt to move as the rats surrounded them. And then, he saw the diagonal scar that split Ripred's face.

"If I had known that you were coming, I'd have fixed the place up," said Ripred.

"Don't bother. We won't be here long. I just came to give you a present," said Gregor.

"For me? You shouldn't have," said Ripred.

"You brought me Twitchtip," said Gregor.

"Not because I expected anything in return," said Ripred. His nose was beginning to move; his eyes fastened on the lump under Gregor's shirt.

"You're getting something, anyway," Gregor said, and pulled up his shirt. The Bane slid out on the floor in front of him. Every rat except Ripred gasped. Seeing another rat, the baby started to run to Ripred, but it jumped back at the violent hiss that issued from his mouth and scurried over to Ares.

"You don't like little kids, do you?" said Gregor. Ripred had hissed at Boots, too.

"Not this one in particular," snarled Ripred. "What's it doing here?"

"I didn't know where else to take it," said Gregor.

"You were supposed to kill it!" said Ripred.

"But I didn't. I brought it to you," said Gregor.

"And what makes you think I won't kill it?" said Ripred.

"I don't think you'd kill a pup," said Gregor.

"Ha!" Ripred said, pacing angrily in a circle. Gregor wasn't sure whether that meant yes or no.

"Okay, how about I don't think you'd kill the Bane? Because if you do, you'll never get the other rats to follow you," said Gregor.

It was lucky he'd been sitting down, because Gregor smacked back onto the rock so fast, he would have cracked his skull open if he'd been standing up. As it was, it hurt plenty.

Ripred pinned him to the ground with one paw as he bared his fangs in Gregor's face. "And have you also thought that, under the circumstances, I might very well kill you?"

Gregor swallowed hard. The answer was yes. But instead of admitting it, he looked Ripred dead in the eye and said, "Okay, but I think I'd better warn you that, if we fight, you've only got a fifty-fifty chance of winning."

"I do?" said Ripred. It was enough to distract him for a second. "And why is that?"

"Because I'm a rager, too," said Gregor.

Ripred began to laugh so hard he fell over on his side. The other rats were laughing, too. Gregor didn't even feel like sitting up. "It's true," he said to the ceiling. "Twichtip smelled it on me. Ask Ares."

No one asked Ares; they were guffawing too hard. That was one thing you had to give the rats: They enjoyed a good joke. Finally Ripred pulled himself together and swept his tail around, shooing the other rats away. "Go," he said. "Leave them to me."

"All right, Rager," he said when they were gone. "Tell me what happened, and don't leave out any details. I left you after our sorry excuse for an echolocation lesson *and* —"

"And then I ran into Nerissa," said Gregor. He told Ripred everything: about the fireflies and squid tentacles, about saving Twichtip at the whirlpool and losing Pandora at the island, about the serpents in the Tankard and taking refuge in the cave. And then he found he couldn't go on.

"Yes, you six were in the cave and what about the others?" asked Ripred.

"They were lost," Ares said, after it was clear Gregor wasn't going to answer. And the bat picked up the story, telling how the remaining group had split. How Twichtip had led them until she'd collapsed. How

Goldshard and Snare had fought. How Gregor had taken the Bane. "And now we are here."

Ripred looked at them thoughtfully. "So, you are. What's left of you," he said. "I am sorry for your losses."

That was the thing about Ripred: One minute he was about to kill you, and the next he seemed to understand it was all you could do not to curl up into a ball and die.

"Just out of curiosity, Gregor, what do you expect me to do with that pup if I don't kill it?" said Ripred.

"I thought you might, you know, kind of raise it. Everyone's so afraid of what it's going to turn into. And if Snare had got hold of it, it probably would've grown up to be a monster. But maybe if you take care of it and stuff, it might turn out okay," said Gregor.

"You thought I'd be its daddy?" said Ripred, as if he hadn't heard right.

"Or, at least its teacher. One of the other rats could be its parent," said Gregor. "Just for, you know, eighteen years, or whatever."

"Ah, here's something you obviously don't know about rats," said Ripred. "That ball of fluff over there will be full grown by the time you've seen another winter."

"But...it's just a baby," said Gregor.

"Only humans grow so slowly," said Ares. "It is one of their great weaknesses. The rest of us in the Underland mature as the rats do. Some even more quickly."

"But how do you teach it everything it has to know?" said Gregor.

"Rats learn faster than humans. And what does it really need to know? To eat, to fight, to find a mate, to hate everyone who is not a rat. It doesn't take long to learn these things," said Ripred.

"You know other things," said Gregor. "About what goes on in the Overland, even."

"Well, I've spent a lot of time in your libraries at night," said Ripred.

"You come up and read books?" asked Gregor.

"Read them, eat them, whatever mood strikes me," he said. "All right, Overlander, you may leave the pup with me. I won't kill it, but I can't promise I can teach it much. And you know, there will be hell to pay in Regalia."

"I don't care," said Gregor. "If they think I'm going to do their dirty work, they can think again."

"That's the stuff, Boy. You're a rager. Don't let them push you around," said Ripred.

"I *am* a rager," said Gregor sheepishly.

"I know. It's just that there are brand-new ragers, and there are old veteran ragers who have fought in countless wars. And you would be...?" said Ripred.

"The first kind," said Gregor. "And I don't even have a sword."

"How's your echolocation coming along?" asked Ripred.

"It's not," said Gregor. "I stink at it."

"But you'll keep practicing, because you have such unflagging confidence in my judgment," said Ripred.

"Okay, Ripred," Gregor said, too tired to get into an argument about the whole worthless echolocation thing. He stood up. "Are you going to be able to handle it? The Bane, I mean?"

"If it's anything like its mother, I'll have my paws full," said Ripred. "But I'll manage."

Gregor went over and patted the baby on the head. "You take care, you hear?" The Bane nuzzled his hand.

"Give it this, when we're gone," Gregor said, handing Ripred the remaining candy bar. "It'll help. Ready, Ares?"

Ares fluttered forward, and Gregor climbed on his back. "Oh, yeah, and about Twitchtip. You'll let her stay if she makes it back, right?"

"Oh, dear. You haven't become attached to Twitchtip, have you?" said Ripred.

"As rats go, she is among our favorites," said Ares.

Ripred grinned. "She can stay if she can drag her pathetic hide back here. Fly you high, you two."

"Run like the river, Ripred," said Gregor.

As they flew off, he looked back over his shoulder. The Bane was sitting next to Ripred, eating the candy bar, paper and all.

Maybe it would work out in the end.

CHAPTER 24

After they had flown for a while, Gregor remembered that Ares hadn't rested after the long trip through the tunnel. "You want to find a place and take a nap?" he asked. "I can keep watch." But even as he spoke, he yawned. He hadn't had much sleep, either.

"I am strangely wakeful," said Ares. "Why do you not sleep while we fly? I will rouse you when I have need of rest."

"Okay, thanks." Gregor stretched out on Ares's back. The fur was damp, and it smelled of rotten eggs, but Gregor's clothes were in no better condition. Beneath the fur was the warmth of Ares's body. He closed his eyes and let oblivion take over.

Ares let him sleep about six hours before waking him. They camped in a niche high in the rocks of a cavern. The bat conked out immediately after providing Gregor with a few raw fish.

Gregor picked up one of the fish and ripped off a strip of skin with his teeth. Then he took a bite of the cold meat. Howard had always cleaned the fish with a knife, cutting neat pieces away from the bones. Gregor didn't have a knife or even a sword now. And what did it matter, anyway? Still, hunched over his fish on the stone ledge, he felt like he was in a time warp. He'd become a Neanderthal man or something, tearing into raw flesh, just trying to get the life-sustaining calories into his body. That must have been a hard life. Of course, his own wasn't exactly a picnic.

He thought longingly of rich, fatty foods. Mrs. Cormaci's lasagna, loaded with cheese and sauce and noodles. Chocolate cake with thick frosting. Mashed potatoes and gravy. He ripped off a stubborn piece of fish with a grunt. It didn't take long, he thought, to erase hundreds of thousands of years of change if you were hungry.

Gregor wiped his hands on his pants and leaned back against the stone. He found himself staring into his flashlight beam, drawn toward the one bit of light in this huge, dark place. He was down to his last set of batteries. If they ran out, he'd be entirely dependent on Ares to get him out. Who was he kidding? He was already entirely dependent on the bat. In fact, it didn't really seem fair. Ares kept them alive about ninety percent of the time, anyway. Gregor didn't feel like he'd really been holding up his end of this bond thing.

"So, stop staring at your flashlight and keep an eye out for trouble!" he thought. Disgusted with himself, he swept the beam over the surrounding rocks. Nothing new. Still, he had to get better about being on watch. Howard had said there were tricks to keeping your mind alert. Gregor did his multiplication tables for a while; that seemed to help. Next he tried to remember the capitals of all fifty states. But that only lasted for, well, fifty states. Finally, he forced himself to calculate something he'd been consciously ignoring: the number of days he'd been in the Underland.

It was almost impossible to figure out. He'd been in Regalia less than two days before they'd set sail on the Waterway, he was pretty sure of that. He thought someone had said the trip to the Labyrinth was about five days. Then another day or two until he met up with Ripred? Nine days? Ten?

His family must be a complete wreck. He would be coming home right around Christmas. Without Boots. Forever.

Gregor went back to his multiplication tables.

When Ares woke up, there was more raw fish and then they took off again. They followed the same pattern for a day or two. Gregor sleeping while Ares flew, Ares sleeping while Gregor kept watch, until finally Gregor awoke to the words, "Overlander, we are here."

They were not moving. Gregor sat up and rubbed his eyes. The light was brighter than any he'd encountered for days. He slid off Ares's back onto a polished stone floor and looked around. They were in the High Hall. It was completely empty. Somewhere, not too far away, he could hear music playing.

"Where is everybody?" asked Gregor.

"I do not know. But if there is music, there must be some sort of gathering," replied Ares. "I believe it is coming from the Throne Room."

They shuffled along a few corridors and came to the doorway of a huge room that Gregor had never seen before. The floor sloped down slightly, like a movie theater, and was filled with rows and rows of stone benches. The place was packed with bats and humans, who were dressed a lot fancier than usual. Many people held objects wrapped in cloth and tied with ribbons. Presents, maybe? Everyone's attention was on a large stone throne at the far end of the room. Nerissa was sitting on the throne.

They had cleaned her up for the occasion. Her unkempt hair had been worked into elaborate braids and piled on top of her head. A jewel-trimmed gown hung loosely off her bony shoulders. Vikus stood behind her. He was

reciting some sort of speech as he lowered a large gold crown onto her head. It was hard to imagine either Nerissa or Vikus looking sadder than they did at this moment.

"What's going on?" whispered Gregor.

"A coronation. They are crowning Nerissa queen," Ares said softly.

Luxa had been right. If she died, Nerissa would be crowned, and not Vikus, and his family. At least, not yet.

"So I guess Howard and those guys got back," said Gregor. How else would they know that Luxa was dead?

"So it would seem," said Ares.

If Mareth had survived, he would be down in the hospital, but Howard and Andromeda should be here. Gregor looked around the hall but couldn't find them.

Vikus finished speaking just as he settled the crown on Nerissa's head and released it. Her thin neck bent forward under the weight, and Gregor thought how ill-suited she was to be queen of this violent, warring place. Whether she was mentally unstable or actually could see the future wasn't the issue. The girl was too weak to hold up her head with a crown on it. The image of Luxa shoving back her gold band flashed before Gregor's eyes. Whether she wanted to be queen or not, there was no doubt in his mind she would have been up to the job. But she was gone now.

Howard was right: They should have made Vikus king. Vikus would make a good leader; he was smart and diplomatic. And he did not seem like he would let power go to his head.

As Nerissa braced her hands on the arms of the throne and managed to raise her head, her eyes caught Gregor's. Something registered on her face, and then she fainted dead away, tumbling to the floor. The crown hit the stone with a clank and then rolled off.

There was a big commotion. A stretcher appeared almost immediately, and Nerissa was carried away. There was a lot of head shaking and murmuring in the crowd from the Underlanders who had probably been opposed to Nerissa being made queen in the first place. Then somebody spotted Gregor and Ares. They had been standing in the doorway, unnoticed, since everyone had been watching the crowning. Now hundreds of faces turned their way and began to shout questions. Gregor could see Vikus waving for him to come down. This wasn't really how he would have

chosen to reveal the story about the Bane. He had planned to tell Vikus, alone, and then head home. But that option was gone.

As Gregor and Ares made their way down the aisle to Vikus, the crowd parted and gradually grew silent. By the time they'd reached the throne it was as if everyone was holding their breath.

"Greetings, Gregor the Overlander, Ares, we are happy to see you alive. What news do you bring us?" asked Vikus. "Did you find the Bane?"

"We found it," said Gregor.

The Underlanders broke into chatter. Vikus motioned for them to be quiet. "And did you drain its light?" he asked.

"No, we took it to Ripred," Gregor said.

There was a moment of disbelief, and then the crowd went crazy. He could see the faces, human and bat alike, twist into fury. Something hit him on the side of his head. His hand went up and came away bloody. A small, ornate crystal jar was down by his feet. It must have been meant as a present for the new queen. More objects began to rain around him. An ink pot. A medallion. A goblet. The one thing they had in common was that they were all made of stone. Gregor realized that it didn't matter how beautifully the gifts were carved. You could call them works of art, but it didn't change the fact that he and Ares were being stoned to death.

Ares tried to get between Gregor and the mob, but it was no use. It was pressing in, forcing the pair up against the back wall. Voices cried out for their death.

Gregor remembered Ripred's words. "And you know, there will be hell to pay in Regalia." The rat might have been a little more specific!

Through the chaos he heard a horn blowing and then the crowd was falling back. A ring of guards formed a semicircle around them. They were escorted out of the room.

"You will follow," said a woman who seemed in charge, and Gregor did, happy to be getting away from the mob.

They went down flight after flight of steps, and eventually reached a quiet hallway deep under the palace. The woman held a stone door open for them, and Gregor sensed that this was odd. There were few doors of any kind in the palace.

He and Ares went inside the torchlit room, and the door swung shut behind them. There was the sound of something sliding into place. "Where are we?" he asked Ares. "Is this like a special room to keep us safe?"

"It is to keep others safe from us," said Ares. "This is the dungeon. We have been placed under arrest for high treason."

"What?" said Gregor. "What for?"

"For committing crimes against the state of Regalia," said Ares. "Did you not hear the charge?"

Gregor hadn't heard anything but a bunch of people yelling.

"Oh, man!" He pounded on the door with his fist. "Let me out of here! I want to talk to Vikus!" There was no response. He gave up pretty soon since it really hurt to hit the stone door.

He turned back to Ares. "So, treason, huh? That's great. What happens if we're found guilty? We get banished or something?"

"No, Overlander," said Ares. "The punishment for treason is death."

CHAPTER 25

"Death?" It took Gregor a moment to register. "You mean...they're going to kill us for not killing the Bane?"

"If it is determined that it was a treasonous act," said Ares.

"And who decides that?" Gregor asked, hoping it was Vikus.

"A tribunal of judges. The final sentence must be approved by the queen," said Ares.

"Well, Luxa isn't going to let them —" he started. Then he remembered that Nerissa was queen now. No telling what she would do. "Would Nerissa let them kill us?"

"I do not know. I have not seen her since I allowed her brother to fall to his death," said Ares. "I could not face her."

Gregor slid down the wall and sat clumsily on the ground, overwhelmed. He had risked so much, lost so much for these people, and now they were going to kill him?

"I am sorry, Overlander. I should not have brought you back to Regalia. I should have foreseen this would be a possibility," said Ares. "This is all my fault."

"It's not your fault," said Gregor.

"I thought there was a very good chance we would be banished, but then I could have flown you home. I am as good as banished, anyway, so what matter? But treason...I did not think they would take it this far. They have never put an Overlander on trial before, and certainly not one so young." Ares began to rock back and forth. He seemed to be talking more to himself than to Gregor. "I cannot let this happen! I have already lost one bond; whatever his intentions, it does not change the fact that I let Henry die. I will not lose the Overlander, I will not let him be — wait! I have a plan!" Ares turned to Gregor, his eyes darting around as the plan took shape. "I will tell them that this was all my idea. That I would not let you kill the Bane... I...I...stole your sword...yes! That will work because you came home without one. And then I forced you to take the Bane to Ripred because I am in a league with the rats. They will believe this...I am much hated and deeply distrusted here already!"

Gregor stared at Ares in disbelief. Did Ares actually think he would agree to that? "I'm not going to let you do that! I mean, just the opposite

happened. I'm the one who wouldn't kill the Bane and I'm the one who wanted to take it to Ripred. If anyone should be cleared, it's you."

"But it will not help me, Overlander. I will die no matter what. This is what they all want. We may still be able to save you. Think of your family," Ares pleaded.

Gregor did, and it was awful. First Boots, now him. But he couldn't throw Ares to the lions that way. His family wouldn't want him to lie and get Ares killed for something he'd done. "No," said Gregor.

"But you —" Ares began.

"No," said Gregor. "I'm not doing it, Ares."

"Then we will both die!" Ares said angrily.

"Then we will!" They sat there, both of them stewing for a minute. "So, how do they do it?" asked Gregor.

"You will not like it," said Ares.

"Well, probably not. But I'd rather know," said Gregor.

"They will bind my wings and your hands and drop us off a very high cliff to the rocks below," said Ares.

It was Gregor's recurring nightmare. For as long as he could remember he'd had terrible dreams about it. Falling through space...smashing into the ground...it was how Henry had died. And King Gorger's rats. He had heard their screams as they fell, had seen their bodies bursting open on the rocks.

For a moment, he was tempted to take Ares up on his offer. But he couldn't.

A small hatch at the base of the dungeon door swung open, and two bowls of food were pushed in. The hatch slammed shut.

It seemed impossible to eat at a time like this, but Gregor's stomach began to growl at the smell of food. "You want to eat?" he asked Ares.

"I suppose we should to keep up our strength," said the bat. "Some opportunity for escape may arise."

The bowls contained some kind of porridge and a chunk of bread. It wasn't the most exciting meal on earth, but after days of raw fish, it tasted great. Gregor wolfed his down and felt a little better. Just because they were accused of something didn't mean they'd been found guilty. Maybe when the tribunal heard his version of what had happened, they would understand. And then there was Nerissa...

"So no matter what the tribunal decides, Nerissa can keep us alive if she wants to?" asked Gregor.

"Yes, she can spare our lives. But Overlander, I let Henry die," said Ares.

"Yeah, but you know what she told me? She told me she thought it was best that he died. Because if he hadn't, everybody else would have died, too," said Gregor.

"Did she?" said Ares. "It must have taken many dark nights to come to that conclusion."

"Does she really see things? I mean, like the future?" said Gregor.

"Yes, she does. I have witnessed it. But she is young, and her gift is a torture to her. She sees many things she does not understand, and many things that frighten her. At times she doubts her own sanity," said Ares.

Gregor didn't respond to that. He wasn't convinced that she was sane, either.

The door swung open, and the guards stepped in. "It is time for your hearing," said the one in charge.

His hopes for escape dimmed when they bound his hands behind his back. Ares's wings were pinned against his body with a rope. It was like they were already being prepared for the execution. All they needed was the cliff.

Several guards hoisted Ares onto their shoulders and marched off briskly. Gregor followed behind as they retraced their steps up several flights from the dungeon and then veered off to another part of the palace.

They entered a room that was set up for judgment. This was not the room where the Underlanders had threatened to banish Ares. It was more formal. More official. A long, stone table with three chairs sat at the front. "That's for the judges," Gregor thought. Directly behind the center chair, elevated by a platform was a throne. Off to the right, as you faced the table, was a stone cube with three steps going up to it. It was positioned so that not only the judges but anyone sitting in the seven tiers of seats that rose to the high ceilings could get a good view of it. The witness stand.

Every seat in the house was filled with either a bat or a human. They stared down at Gregor and Ares with undisguised hatred, but it was eerily quiet. It had almost been better when everybody was screaming and throwing stuff. Gregor was directed to an open area in front of the table. The guards set Ares down next to him. They stood staring at the empty table before them. Then there was the sound of more footsteps. Gregor

turned his head and found Howard and Andromeda behind him. They were both bound and looked ragged.

"What are you doing here?" Gregor exclaimed.

"We, too, are on trial for treason," Howard said hoarsely.

"For what?" said Gregor. "You never even made it to the Bane!"

"That is precisely the reason," said Howard.

Then Gregor realized what he meant. Howard and Andromeda were on trial because they had not finished their mission; they had returned to Regalia with Mareth.

"But," objected Gregor, "I made you go back!"

"No one made me do anything," said Howard. "I came back of my own free will."

"Well, that's not what I'm saying," said Gregor. He was suddenly overwhelmed by the way his decision had jeopardized the lives of those who had fought by his side. He couldn't let this happen.

A side door opened, and an old man and a decrepit white bat entered. A moment later an elderly woman appeared with several scrolls. All three took seats at the table. The woman, who seemed to be the head judge, took the center seat. She glanced back at the throne and addressed a guard.

"May we expect Queen Nerissa?" she asked.

"They are checking now to see if she has regained consciousness, your honor," said the guard.

The woman nodded, but Gregor could hear people in the crowd murmuring, probably about the frailty of their new queen. One glance from the head judge and the room fell silent. Gregor had the feeling that whoever she was, his life was in her hands.

For a few minutes, nothing much happened. The judges preoccupied themselves with examining the scrolls.

Gregor shifted his weight slightly from side to side. The rope was really biting into his wrists. He wondered if he could ask them to cut it loose or if that would be a major breach of court behavior. Well, it was worth a try.

"Excuse me, your honor?" he said. The judges all looked at him in surprise.

"Yes, Overlander?" said the woman.

"Do you think you could untie us now? I'm losing all the feeling in my fingers," said Gregor. "And they knotted the rope right over one of my squid-sucker sores. You can't see it, but Ares's whole back is covered with

open wounds from those flesh-eating mites that killed Pandora. And Howard and Andromeda are pretty beat up, too."

Even if she said no, Gregor was still glad he'd spoken. He wanted them to know — all these idiots packing the seats, waiting for his death sentence — that he and Ares and Howard and Andromeda were the ones who had been out risking their lives. Suddenly he couldn't wait to testify.

"Cut free the defendants," the head judge said, and turned back to her scroll.

No one in the crowd dared object. A guard cut all their bonds. Gregor rubbed his wrists and glanced back to see that Howard was doing the same.

"Did Mareth make it?" he asked.

Howard's tormented face broke into a brief smile. "Yes. He will mend."

"I can't believe you kept him alive after that serpent attack!" said Gregor. He said "serpent attack" extra loud to make sure everyone heard, then turned back to the front before anyone could tell him to shut up. A guard hurried into the room and whispered something to the head judge.

"Very well," said the head judge. "We will begin." She cleared her throat and read off the series of charges against the defendants. The language was pretty complicated, but it all seemed to boil down to the fact that Gregor hadn't killed the Bane, and nobody else had, either.

The head judge finished the list of charges and looked up. "We will now question those on trial."

"Can I go first?" It burst out of Gregor before he could stop it, but suddenly he knew he had to. He could sense that Howard, Ares, and probably Andromeda were already convinced they were guilty. If they got up on the stand, they might not be able to defend themselves. He, on the other hand, was absolutely bubbling over with the injustice of the whole thing.

"Overlander," the head judge said firmly, "it is not our custom to shout out inquiries during a trial, especially one so serious in nature."

"Sorry," Gregor said, but he didn't hang his head or look away. "What should I do if I have a question, raise my hand? I mean, I don't have a lawyer or anything, right?"

"Raising your hand should be sufficient," the head judge said, ignoring his lawyer question.

He thought about raising his hand and asking if he could go first again. But that might seem snotty. Whether it was because he had asked or

because he was already slated to do so, Gregor was called directly to the stand. He climbed the steps to the cube. It was designed so people could see any twitch, any shift in the defendant's body language. He felt very exposed.

Gregor expected to be bombarded with questions, like you saw on TV, but the judges merely settled back in their seats and looked at him.

"Tell us, then," said the head judge. "Tell us about your journey."

This threw him a little. "Where...where do you want me to start?"

"Start from the day you sailed away from Regalia," said the head judge.

So, he did. He told his story. And every chance he got, he made sure to emphasize the courage the others on trial had shown. When he got to the part at the Tankard, he said, "I made Howard leave. He didn't have any choice. I was going to fight him if he tried to come with us. I'd have fought Andromeda, too, she knew that. That's why they went home. How could they risk injuring me when I still had to kill the Bane?"

"And why did you not want them to accompany you?" said the old bat judge.

Gregor had a moment of confusion. "Because...I don't know...because we needed to get Mareth back, for one thing. And I didn't want a whole bunch of people in that maze, I guess. I wanted my family to know what had happened to my sister...and me, if I didn't come back. And because...because..." He spun back in his mind to the cave, to the ice that had engulfed him. "Because the Bane was mine."

A gasp rose from the crowd at his insolence.

"What do you mean, the Bane was yours?" asked the bat.

"It was mine to kill. That's what your prophecy says, right? I'm the guy who's supposed to kill it? In the end, it was always my job," said Gregor. "And it was my call, who I wanted to take into that maze — not yours." He paused. "Anyway, if you kill Howard and Andromeda because they came back, that's just murder. Nobody could have done better than they did."

He looked over to where the others stood. It was hard to read Andromeda, but she did shake her wings a little. Howard's lips silently formed a couple of words. Gregor was pretty sure they were "thank you." Maybe he'd made a convincing enough argument to keep them alive.

"Go on with your story. What happened after your company parted ways?" asked the head judge.

Gregor took a deep breath. This part was going to be harder. He told about entering the Labyrinth, having to leave Twitchtip behind, finding the cone, and witnessing the bloody fight between Goldshard and Snare. There was a reaction from the crowd again. Gregor suspected they were happy that Snare was dead.

Just then Nerissa appeared in the doorway, leaning heavily on Vikus's arm. Her coronation gown was lopsided, and stray braids hung out of her hairdo. There was not even the suggestion of a crown — no tiara, no gold band — on her head. She kept squinting, as if she were in bright sunlight.

It took Vikus and a pair of guards to help her up onto the throne. She swayed slightly, even when she was seated, as if at any moment she might plunge to the ground.

"Queen Nerissa, are you well enough to attend this trial?" the head judge asked in a neutral tone.

"Oh, yes," said Nerissa. "I have seen myself here before, although I do not know the outcome."

This was the sort of stuff that made everybody think she was crazy. Maybe someone ought to tell her to keep her visions under her hat. Crown. Whatever.

"The charge is treason?" Nerissa said doubtfully, and Gregor realized she had no idea what was going on.

The head judge said slowly, "Yes, the defendants are on trial for treason."

Nerissa stared at an empty spot on the wall for a moment, then shook her head. "Forgive me. I have only just awoken."

"Do you wish us to begin the proceedings again?" asked the head judge.

"Oh, no, please continue," said Nerissa. She knotted up her hands in her skirt, hiking it up above her knees. Another braid sprang free from its pins and fell down the side of her face. Her whole body was shaking.

The head judge looked over at Vikus, who avoided her gaze and busied himself placing his cloak around Nerissa's shoulders.

The queen gave him a smile. "I wish I had some soup."

"Oh, geez," thought Gregor. She wasn't going to help their case any.

The head judge turned to Gregor. "So, after the fight between the gnawers, Goldshard and Snare. What occurred next?"

Gregor tried to regain his focus. "So, then, we heard a scratching in one of the tunnels, and we knew it was the Bane. But the tunnel was small; Ares

couldn't fit into it. I had to leave him in the cone. I went down the tunnel; I was ready to kill it. Then when I found the Bane, it started crying and calling, 'Mama,' and I mean — you told me it was like this ten-foot rat! I guess you didn't know, or whatever, but I wasn't expecting the Bane to be a baby."

Nerissa flew to her feet. "A baby!"

"Yeah, it was a baby rat," Gregor said, surprised she was even following along.

She stumbled down the steps and came reeling around the table, her skirt still twisted up in one hand while the other waved wildly. "Oh, Warrior! Oh, Warrior!" she cried frantically. As she lurched toward him, he was torn between trying to catch her and just getting out of the way. Right before she made it to the cube, he leaped off and grabbed her by the shoulders. The icy fingers of her free hand clutched the neck of his shirt.

"Oh, you did not kill it, did you?" she said.

"No, Nerissa, I didn't kill it," he said, totally baffled. "I couldn't."

She heaved a huge, shuddering sigh and sank down to the ground at his feet, laughing in relief. "Oh...oh..." She patted his knee reassuringly. "Then we may all yet be saved."

CHAPTER 26

She sat on the floor rocking back and forth laughing, the very picture of madness.

"Man, somebody needs to help this girl," thought Gregor.

Vikus came up and crouched beside her on the floor. "Nerissa, perhaps you should rest longer. Are you feeling ill?"

"Oh, no, I am well. We are all well!" giggled Nerissa. "The warrior has fulfilled the prophecy."

"No, Nerissa, he did not succeed in killing the Bane," Vikus said gently.

"Vikus," said Nerissa. "The baby lives. So lives the warrior's heart. The gnawers do *not* have their key to power." Vikus looked like a lightning bolt had hit him. He plunked down on the floor next to her. "This is what Sandwich meant?" he said. "We never considered it."

"What?" said Gregor. He wasn't sure what was going on.

"The baby in the prophecy was never your sister, Gregor. It was the Bane," said Vikus.

"The Bane? Why would it kill my heart if the Bane died?" said Gregor.

"Why did you not drain its light?" asked Vikus.

"Because it's a baby. It's just wrong," said Gregor. "It's the most evil thing...I...I mean, if you can kill a baby, what can't you do?"

"So says your heart. So says your most essential part," said Nerissa.

Gregor took a few steps back and sat on the cube. Nerissa's meaning was slowly dawning on him.

DIE the baby, die his heart, Die his most essential part.

His most essential part was the part that had spared the Bane. If he had killed it, he would have never been the same. He would have lost himself forever.

"You know," Vikus said to Nerissa, as if they were the only two in the room, "I am continually amazed by how badly we can interpret one of Sandwich's prophecies. Then the moment it is understood —"

"The whole thing is as clear as water," agreed Nerissa.

Vikus quoted a section from the prophecy:

*What could turn the warrior weak? What do burning gnawers seek?
Just a barely speaking pup Who holds the land of Under up.*

"The gnawers have always sought the Bane...," said Vikus.

"Who is just a barely speaking pup. Sandwich even went so far as to use the word 'pup.' The gnawers' own word for baby," said Nerissa.

"And the Bane holds the land of Under up," nodded Vikus.

"Because if Gregor had killed it...," continued Nerissa.

"Total war," said Vikus. "Its death would have been enough to rally them. Taking that pup to Ripred was a stroke of genius, Gregor. Oh, they will not know how to parry that move."

"Queen Nerissa, are we to continue this trial?" asked the head judge.

Nerissa looked up, as if she was surprised at her surroundings. "Trial? For the warrior? Of course there will be no trial! He has saved the Underland." She got to her feet, using Vikus for support, and saw the other defendants staring at her. She gave them a small smile, but directed her next line to Ares. "And all who helped him are held in our highest regard."

Ares ducked his head. Maybe it was a bow or maybe he couldn't look at her.

"Will you dine with me, you four? You look half-starved," said Nerissa. It was kind of ironic coming from her, but a welcome invitation.

Somewhat dazed by the recent turn of events, Gregor, Ares, Howard, and Andromeda straggled out of the courtroom after Nerissa. She led them to a small, private dining room. The table could seat no more than six. In one corner, water trickled in a fountain. Old tapestries hung on the walls. Gregor guessed the first Underlanders must have brought them from above, because they depicted scenes from the Overland, not this dark world. It was a calming place.

"It's nice in here," said Gregor.

"Yes," said Nerissa. "This is where I often take my meals."

They all took seats. People brought in platters of elegant food. Large fish stuffed with grain and herbs, tiny vegetables arranged in geometric patterns, steaming braided bread studded with fruit, paper-thin piles of roast beef, and Ripred's favorite, that shrimp in cream sauce. Heaping plates were placed in front of each of them.

"Do not suppose I always dine so sumptuously," said Nerissa. "This food was prepared for the coronation. Please, begin."

Gregor lifted his bread, dipped it in the cream sauce, and took a big bite.

For a while, they all concentrated on the food. Except Nerissa, who seemed to be mostly rearranging hers.

"I am afraid I am a poor conversationalist," said Nerissa. "Even at my best. And at present, grief for my cousin's fate has robbed me of what little I might venture to say."

"It is the same for all of us," Howard said sadly.

"Yes, no one here has been spared," said Nerissa.

It was true. The journey to the Labyrinth had given them all ample reason for grief. Gregor was glad that Nerissa acknowledged it and that they could continue in silence.

After days of insufficient food, Gregor's stomach was soon heavy with the rich dishes before him. The others stopped eating as well. You would think they'd all be shoveling down seven or eight helpings, but it didn't work that way.

Nerissa then sent the four of them down to the hospital. Andromeda and Howard hadn't received medical care or been allowed a bath, either.

"When did you guys get back?" asked Gregor.

"About twelve hours before you arrived. Andromeda was astonishing. She barely rested at all. When we landed, they took Mareth to the hospital, and locked us up. But I knew one of our guards. She whispered word of Mareth's recovery to us," said Howard.

At the hospital, all four of them were immediately sent to bathe. Gregor realized he must be knocking people over with the rotten-egg smell. After several days, he didn't much notice it anymore. He sank into a tub and felt all his injuries object. The squid-sucker marks on his arm, the aching ribs, the bump on his head from Ripred, the various abrasions and bruises from the stoning, the rope burns around his wrists. Wincing, he scrubbed himself down. It was lucky that the bathwater was continually carried away by the current. It would have been the color of mud by the time he was through.

The doctors treated his wounds. He spoke only when they asked him a direct question about an injury. When he finished, the others were waiting for him.

"I suppose we should all get some rest," said Howard.

"Is that safe?" asked Gregor.

No one answered. Their status in Regalia was foggy. Nerissa had cleared them, but Gregor had a feeling plenty of people still thought they were guilty.

"I have a large chamber that would accommodate us. It is reserved for my family at all times," said Howard. "At least we know we are safe with

one another."

They all followed Howard back to his room. Gregor was glad he had offered. He didn't want to go back to the room he had always shared with Boots here.

"Where's your family?" asked Gregor.

"They returned to the Fount a few days after we left. I expect they are trying to travel here now, as I am...as I was on trial for treason," said Howard.

Howard's family actually had several chambers reserved for them. It was like a small apartment of connecting rooms. But they all gathered to sleep in one that the kids shared. Howard and Gregor took beds next to each other. Ares and Andromeda huddled together in the space between them.

"To sleep, then," said Howard.

The bats dropped off almost instantly. Howard tossed and turned awhile, but then Gregor could hear his breathing slow down and become rhythmic. He lay in bed wishing sleep would carry him away. But it wouldn't come.

What would happen now? He guessed he would be allowed to go home. Probably pretty soon. Then there would be his family to face. And life without Boots. It still wasn't quite real. It would be, when he was back in the apartment, looking at her bed, her toys, her cardboard box of books.

Gregor thought of her clothes sitting in the museum. He didn't want to leave them here for people to poke through. He grabbed a torch off the wall and left Howard's room.

A few guards saw him along the way, but no one tried to stop him. Nor did they greet him or say anything. He had the feeling they didn't know how they were supposed to treat him, so they left him alone.

He found the museum on his own. There, by the door, was the little pile of Boots's clothes. He pressed her shirt against his nose and could smell that sweet combination of shampoo and peanut butter and baby that was his sister. For the first time, his eyes welled up with tears.

"Gregor?" said a voice behind him.

He stuffed the shirt in the pack and wiped his eyes as Vikus came into the museum.

"Hey, Vikus," he said. "What's up?"

"The council has just adjourned what I believe to be the first of many meetings addressing 'The Prophecy of Bane.' I am convinced Nerissa's interpretation is correct, but there is dissension. This is to be expected, as it

is a new idea. But until it is decided, her word stands. As that could change, I think it best if you leave here as soon as possible."

"Fine by me," said Gregor. "What about the others?"

"I believe charges will not be reinstated against Andromeda and Howard. Your testimony of their innocence was quite convincing," said Vikus.

"And Ares?" said Gregor.

Vikus sighed. "He is at greater risk. But if he is to be charged again, I will get word to him so that he may flee. He can at least escape execution."

Gregor nodded. That was about as much as he could hope for.

"Is there anything you would like to take back with you?" Vikus asked, gesturing to the shelves.

"I don't want anything but our stuff," said Gregor.

"If not for yourself, perhaps for your parents," said Vikus. "How does your father...does he teach again?"

"No, he's still too sick," said Gregor.

"How so?" Vikus asked, frowning.

Gregor choked out a list of his dad's symptoms. His father's health was just one more thing the Underland had stolen from them.

Vikus tried to question him in more detail, but he couldn't take it. "You know, maybe I will take that clock," he said, pointing to the cuckoo clock he had seen when he was collecting batteries. He had said it to change the subject, but he knew someone who might like it.

"I will have it wrapped for you," said Vikus.

"Great, so I guess I'll see if Ares is up for flying yet, and like you said, get out of here," said Gregor. He scooped up his clothes and left the museum. Vikus could learn a thing or two from Nerissa. Sometimes people just didn't want to talk.

He got all turned around on his way back to Howard's room. The route was unfamiliar, and the tears that had started back in the museum were streaming down his cheeks. Well, maybe it was better to break down here than in front of his parents. He turned left, then right, then backtracked. Where was he? Where was his sister? She had just been here, he had her clothes, he could feel her in his arms...Boots!

He gave up and pressed his forehead into a stone wall, sobbing as he let the pain in. Images of her swarmed back into his mind. Boots on the

sled...Boots showing him how she could hop on one foot...Boots's eyes, upside down, their foreheads pressed together....

Two rows Tiny, tiny toes

Boots ten ...wiggle my nose Whew!

He could even hear her voice trying to do the silly bath rhyme Howard had coaxed her out of her tears with.

Wiggle nose Nine, ten toes

She couldn't get it right. The words were too complicated....

Give them bath so ten toes goes.

And then she gave a sneeze.

Gregor looked up. That didn't make sense. He heard a second sneeze. Not in his head. In the palace. He started to run.

Two rows Tiny, tiny toes

Either he was completely losing it...

Boots ten ...wiggle my nose Whew!

...or that sound was real! He flew down the halls, crashing into walls and a couple of guards who called for him to halt. He didn't.

Wiggle nose Nine, ten toes

Gregor ran into the room just in time for the last line.

Give them bath so ten toes goes.

She was sitting on the floor, surrounded by six big cockroaches, rubbing her toes with both hands to show how she washed them. He stumbled across the room and grabbed her up in his arms and held on tight as a happy voice squeaked in his ear. "Hi, you!"

CHAPTER 27

"Hi, you," Gregor said, thinking he would never let go of her. "Oh, hi, you! Where've you been, little girl?"

"I go swim, I go ride. Flutterfly," said Boots.

"Okay, all right," laughed Gregor. "That sounds great." He'd have to ask the others what happened. "Hey, Temp," he said, turning to the roaches, and then he realized something was wrong. Before him stood six roaches with two perfect antennas each and six solid legs. Maybe he was finally learning to tell them apart, because he knew, anyway, that none of them was Temp.

"Where's Temp?" he asked, and six pairs of antennas drooped.

"We do not know, not we," said one of the roaches. "I be Pend, I be." Gregor turned in a full circle, just to be sure. It was the room where you could ride the platform down to the ground. Temp wasn't there. Neither were Luxa and Aurora. He tightened his grip on Boots.

About this time, Vikus came hurrying into the room, followed by several guards. His face lit up when he saw Boots. "They have returned!" he said to Gregor.

"Just Boots, Vikus. I'm sorry," Gregor said, and watched the color drain out of the old man's face.

Vikus turned to the roaches. "Welcome, Pend. Many thanks for the return of the princess. Tell us, will you, tell us the fate of the others?"

Pend tried to fill him in, but the roaches knew very little. A moth — that must have been Boots's flutterfly — had arrived in their land carrying Boots. It had been flying in the Dead Land when it had discovered the little girl and Temp hiding in the rocks. Temp was very weak and unable to travel farther. He begged the moth to take Boots back to the other crawlers. Since the moths and cockroaches were allies, the moth had agreed. When the crawlers sent a party back to rescue Temp, he was nowhere to be found.

"Did they make any mention of my granddaughter?" asked Vikus. "Queen Luxa?"

"Run you, Queen Luxa said, run you," said Pend. "Many gnawers, there were. Temp said no more."

Vikus reached out and fumbled with Boots's hair. "Temp seepy," she said. "He shut eyes. I ride flutterfly." She looked around. "Where Temp?"

"He's still sleeping, Boots," said Gregor. Sleeping like Tick was sleeping, probably.

"Shh," Boots said, putting her finger to her lips.

Someone had wakened Dulcet. When she tried to take Boots out of Gregor's arms, he resisted. "It is all right, Gregor. I will bathe her and bring her back directly," said Dulcet. Since it was Dulcet, he made his hands let go.

He followed Vikus to the dining room, where they'd last eaten with Ripred, and they both took a seat. Gregor tried to piece it together in his head.

"It seems," Vikus said at last, "they did not perish in the Tankard."

"No," said Gregor. "But Twitchtip was sure there was water between us, and they didn't answer Ares."

After a while, Dulcet came in with a clean and shiny Boots. Vikus sent for food. Gregor held her on his lap while she gobbled up enough dinner for ten toddlers.

"Boots," said Gregor, "you know when we saw the big..." He didn't know what to call those things. "Serpents" wasn't a word she knew. "Those big dinosaurs."

"I no like," said Boots. "I no like dinosaws."

"Me, either," said Gregor. "But remember when we saw them. And they knocked us off the bat. And Luxa caught you and Temp. Where did you go?"

"Oh, I swim. Too cold. I bump head," Boots said, rubbing the top of her head.

Gregor separated her curls with his fingers. He could see little scrape marks on the delicate skin of her scalp. Where had she been? Not in the Tankard. "Was it a big pool, Boots?"

"Baby pool," said Boots. "I bump head."

Gregor suddenly remembered the tunnel Twitchtip had been guiding them to. The one half under water. If Luxa had dived for that tunnel and made it, the entrance soon would have been flooded with the waves churned up by the serpents. Maybe that was the water between them. At some point they all must have been floating in water, or Boots wouldn't have said she'd been swimming. How had they kept from drowning? Then he remembered the life jackets. Boots was not wearing hers when she came in, but she had had it on at the Tankard.

He told his theory to Vikus. "Yes, something of that nature must have occurred. But then they would have been trapped in the Labyrinth," said Vikus. "Boots, did you see rats?"

Boots put her hand to her nose. "Ow," she said. At first Gregor thought she had hurt her nose, but when she said, "Bandidge. No touch. I no touch it. Ow," he knew.

"Twitchtip found them. Or they found her," he said. "Was it Twitchtip, Boots? With the bandage?"

"I no touch. Ow," Boots confirmed, pressing her nose.

"And then what happened, Boots?" asked Gregor. "What did you do with Twitchtip? Did you see more rats?"

"Temp give Boots ride. Fast ride!" Boots said, but that was all they could get out of her.

"They were attacked, no doubt, by gnawers. Luxa told Temp to run with Boots, then stayed to fight with Aurora and perhaps Twitchtip," said Vikus. "I am sure their odds were not good." Gregor was sure their odds had been next to zero, but he tried to be encouraging. "Well, if they had Twitchtip, they could get out of the maze, Vikus. Or maybe the rats wanted to keep them alive and took them prisoner. Like they did my dad. I mean, she's a queen, she's important."

Maybe Gregor shouldn't have said that, because the idea of what the rats might do to Luxa if she was their prisoner was almost scarier than thinking of her dead. He thought of his dad, waking up screaming from nightmares...

Vikus nodded, but his eyes shone with tears.

"The point is...the point is...we don't know," said Gregor. "A lot of things could have happened to them. And remember the gift you wanted to give me? The last time I was here?"

"Hope," whispered Vikus.

"Yeah. Don't give that up yet, okay?" said Gregor.

"I done," Boots said, pushing her plate off the table and watching with satisfaction as it banged to the floor. "I done."

"Well, if you are done, Boots, how would you like to go home?" said Vikus.

"Ye-es!" said Boots. "I go home!"

"I can stay, Vikus. Or I can take Boots home and come back and help you look for Luxa and —" Gregor started, but Vikus cut him off.

"No, Gregor. No. If they are dead, there is nothing any of us can do. If they are held prisoner, it will likely be months before we can locate them. In that time, who knows? They could reverse Nerissa's verdict and execute you. If I have need of you, believe me, I will find some way to send for you," said Vikus. "For now, you must go home. You have worries of your own there, yes?"

Well, yes. Gregor had worries wherever he was.

In about half an hour they were down on the dock, dressed in their own clothes, climbing on Ares's back. The only ones who had come to see them off were Vikus, Andromeda, Howard, and Nerissa.

"Give my best to Mareth," Gregor said to Andromeda.

"Yes, Overlander. He would wish you well also," said the bat.

Gregor turned to Howard. "If you hear anything about Luxa and the others, let me know. My laundry room's right at the top of one of those gateways. Ares knows which one. Leave me a note or something, okay?"

"I will get word to you," said Howard.

To his surprise, Nerissa tucked a scroll in his coat pocket. "The prophecy. So you can reflect on it sometimes."

Gregor shook his head. "I don't think I can forget it, Nerissa. But thanks." What did she think he was going to do? Take it home and frame it?

Vikus handed him a flashlight, a large package in the shape of a cuckoo clock, and a silk bag that held a heavy stone jar. "Medicine," he said. "For your father. The instructions are written inside."

"Oh, good!" said Gregor. Maybe they had something down here that could cure his dad. He gave Vikus a hug. "Hang in there, okay, Vikus?"

"Yes. Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander," said Vikus.

"Fly you high," said Gregor.

"See you soon!" Boots said as they took off, but there was no response from the dock. Last time, he had been horrified to think that they would ever return. Now, with Luxa and the others on his mind, he felt reluctant to leave.

"You let me know!" he called to them, but if anyone answered, he couldn't hear them. Ares carried them down the river, across the Waterway, up through the tunnels, and back to the foot of the steep staircase that led to Central Park. He climbed off the bat's back with Boots.

"You going to be okay?" he asked Ares.

"As well as you," said Ares. "Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander."

Gregor lifted his hand to grasp Ares's extended claw. "Fly you high, Ares the Flier."

Ares took off into the dark of the tunnel, and Gregor and Boots headed up the stairs.

It took a little while to move the rock — it had frozen into place — but finally Gregor was able to wiggle it loose. It was night. The park was empty. Lamplight shone down on the foot of snow that covered the ground. It was beautiful.

"Sedding? We go sedding?" asked Boots.

"Not now, Boots," said Gregor. "Maybe another time." If he could find another park with a hill. He'd never bring her back here.

They caught a taxi. New York City was ablaze with Christmas decorations and lights. "Do you know the date today?" he asked the driver, who tapped on a cheap block calendar on the dashboard. December 23. They hadn't missed it. They would all be home for Christmas. And that idea, which had been so impossible a few hours before, made him feel like the luckiest person alive.

Boots snuggled up under his arm and gave a big yawn. Boots...the Bane...right now they were so alike that the entire Underland could misinterpret the prophecy and mistake them for each other. But what would happen when the Bane grew up in a year or so? Would it become the monster predicted in the prophecy, or an entirely different creature? He hoped Ripred would do a good job raising it.

Although even if Ripred did all the right things, it might be out of his control. Gregor's parents were great, and here he was, a rager. He was going to have to be very, very careful not to get into any fights now that he was home. He wished he'd talked to Ripred more about their condition. "Next time I go down there —" Gregor thought, and a jolt went through him. Because he suddenly knew there would be a next time. He was too tied up in the Underland now, there was too much he cared about: finding Luxa and Aurora and Temp and Twitchtip, if they were still alive; protecting Ares; helping the friends who had helped him. Gregor paid the driver from the last of the money Mrs. Cormaci had given him.

The elevator was out of order, so he hauled Boots up the stairs. They came through the front door and made it about three steps into the room before his dad caught them in his arms. In minutes, the whole apartment was up. His mom was kissing him, Lizzie was swinging on his hand, his

grandma was calling from the bedroom. A million questions were flying at him, but he must have looked whipped, because his mom took his face between her hands and said, "Gregor, you need to go to bed, baby?" And that was exactly what he needed.

The next morning he told the whole story. He softened some of the bad parts, because everybody looked so scared. "But it's okay. Boots wasn't the baby. It was the Bane. So there's no reason the rats would want her now," said Gregor.

"I not baby. I big girl," said Boots, who was sitting on her dad's lap, lining up little plastic animals along the arm of the couch. "I ride bat. I swim. Temp seepy. I tell flutterfly tiny, tiny toes."

"And what about you, Gregor?" said his mother.

"Well, I had my chance to kill the Bane and I didn't do it, so I don't think the rats will come looking for me." He didn't tell her that the Regalians might. "Oh, hey, look what I brought for Mrs. Cormaci. It's a clock. She's been so nice and all, and you know how she loves all those old clocks —"

Gregor pulled open the pack, and a cloud of money floated out. Confused, he emptied the pack on the sofa. There was the clock, all right. But Vikus had ordered them to pack it in money. All those wallets in the museum must be a lot lighter now, because there were literally thousands of dollars in cash on the sofa.

"Oh, my goodness," said his grandma. "Now, what are we going to do with all that?"

"We're going to pay off the bills," his mom said grimly. Her face softened. "And then, we're going to have Christmas."

And they did. They had to rush around like crazy to pull it together, what with Christmas being the very next day, but who cared? Gregor, Lizzie, and their mom went shopping. His grandma and Boots watched Christmas specials on TV, while his dad cleaned up Mrs. Cormaci's cuckoo clock.

Even after the money had been set aside for the bills, there was plenty for Christmas. First they took the old metal laundry cart out and loaded it up with groceries. For a few weeks, anyway, Gregor would not have to feel tense when he opened the kitchen cabinets. Then the guy on the corner who sold trees gave them one half-price, since he was about done for the season, anyway. Lizzie stayed home to help decorate the tree, while Gregor and his

mom shopped for presents. He had a hard time getting his mom anything that was a surprise since she wouldn't let him out of her sight.

"Mom, it's not like some giant rat is going to come after me in the middle of Eighty-sixth Street," he said. "There's a million people out."

"You just stay where I can see you," she answered.

He finally managed to get her a pair of earrings while she was buying everybody socks.

That evening, when Mrs. Cormaci came by with an armload of presents for them, Gregor answered the door.

"So, you're finally up and around, Mister," she said.

At first Gregor didn't know what she was talking about; then he remembered he was supposed to have had the flu. "Yeah, that pretty much wiped me out."

"You're thin as a rail," Mrs. Cormaci said, and handed him a plate of Christmas cookies. Gregor wished he had a picture of her face when she opened the clock. He could tell it blew her away. "Oh, my! Where did you get this?"

There was a pause.

"In one of those places that has old things," said Lizzie.

"An antique shop?" said Mrs. Cormaci.

"Oh, no, just a secondhand place," said his dad. In a way, it was true.

When she left, Gregor carried the clock home for her. She was chattering on about her kids flying in the next day and tickets she'd gotten for some Broadway musical when she stopped short. She was staring at Gregor's feet.

Gregor looked down. The boots were a mess. Badly scarred from Ares's claws, streaked with blood and squid slime, one toe bent in. Before he could think up a story, she spoke.

"Well, looks like you're getting a lot of use out of those," she said.

Gregor didn't answer. He couldn't lie to her again; she had been too good to them.

"You know, one day you're going to realize you can trust me, Gregor," she said.

"I do trust you, Mrs. Cormaci," he mumbled.

"Do you? Flu. Hmph," she said. "I'll see you next Saturday." She shook her head and closed the door.

The tree was decorated, the fridge was packed, the stockings were hung, everyone was in bed except Gregor and his mom. They were wrapping presents in his room. When they were down to the last few, he left her to finish while he tiptoed in to tidy up the living room. His dad was snoring peacefully on the pulled-out sofa —maybe that medicine would help after all. Their coats were in a pile on the floor where Lizzie had dumped them so they could hang their stockings on the coat pegs by the door. As he gathered them up, the cell phone fell out of his coat pocket. He stuffed it back in and felt something.

There, lying flat along the bottom of his jacket pocket, was the prophecy Nerissa had given him. It had been there all day, but he hadn't noticed it. What had she said? He was supposed to reflect on it? He wasn't sure what she'd meant.

Gregor unrolled the scroll and held it in the Christmas tree lights. Something was wrong with the prophecy. It took him a moment to realize it was written backwards. He traced the title from right to left with his fingers, deciphering the words. "The Prophecy of Bane" — no wait! The last word wasn't "Bane." It was "Blood."

He released the top of the scroll and let it snap shut as his mom came into the room with a big pile of presents.

"You ready for this?" she said.

Gregor slipped the scroll in his back pocket and held out his arms. "Sure," he said. "Ready as I'll ever be."

**GREGOR
AND THE CURSE OF THE WAR
BOOK THREE OF THE BESTSELLING
UNDERLAND CHRONICLES**

SUZANNE COLLINS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

PART 1

The Plague

CHAPTER 1

Gregor stared in the bathroom mirror for a minute, steeling himself. Then he slowly unrolled the scroll and held the handwritten side up to the glass. In the reflection, he read the first stanza of a poem entitled "The Prophecy of Blood."

As usual, the lines made him feel sick to his stomach.

There was a knock on the door. "Boots has to go!" he heard his eight-year-old sister, Lizzie, say.

Gregor released the top of the scroll and it snapped into a roll. He quickly stuck it in the back pocket of his jeans and pulled his sweatshirt down to conceal it. He hadn't told anyone about this new prophecy yet and didn't intend to until it was absolutely necessary.

A few months ago, right around Christmas, he had returned home from the Underland, a dark war-torn world miles beneath New York City. It was home to giant talking rats, bats, spiders, cockroaches, and a variety of other oversized creatures. There were humans there, too — a pale-skinned, violet-eyed people who had traveled underground in the 1600s and built the stone city of Regalia. The Regalians were probably still debating whether Gregor was a traitor or a hero. On his last trip, he had refused to kill a white baby rat called the Bane. For many Underlanders, that was unforgivable, because they believed the Bane would one day be the cause of their total destruction.

The current queen of Regalia, Nerissa, was a frail teenager with disturbing visions of the future. She was the one who had slipped the scroll into Gregor's coat pocket when he was leaving. He had thought it was "The Prophecy of Bane," which he had just helped to fulfill. Instead it was this new and terrifying poem.

"So you can reflect on it sometimes," Nerissa had said. Turned out she'd meant it literally — "The Prophecy of Blood" was written backward. You couldn't even make sense of it unless you had a mirror.

"Gregor, come on!" called Lizzie, rapping on the bathroom door again.

He opened the door to find Lizzie with their two-year-old sister, Boots. They were both bundled up in coats and hats, even though they hadn't been outside today.

"Need to pee!" squealed Boots, pulling her pants down around her ankles and then shuffling to the toilet.

"First get to the toilet, then pull down your pants," instructed Lizzie for the hundredth time.

Boots wiggled up onto the toilet seat. "I big girl now. I can go pee."

"Good job," said Gregor, giving her a thumbs-up. Boots beamed back at him.

"Dad's making drop biscuits in the kitchen. The oven's on in there," said Lizzie, rubbing her hands together to warm them.

The apartment was freezing. The city had been clutched in record-breaking lows for the past few weeks, and the boiler that fed steam to the old heating pipes could not compete. People in the building had called the city, and called again. Nothing much happened.

"Wrap it up, Boots. Time for biscuits," said Gregor.

She pulled about a yard of toilet paper off the roll and sort of wiped herself. You could offer to help, but she'd just say, "No, I do it myself." Gregor made sure she washed and dried her hands, then reached for the lotion so he could rub some into her chapped skin. Lizzie caught his sleeve as he was about to squeeze the bottle.

"That's shampoo!" she said in alarm. Almost everything alarmed Lizzie these days.

"Right," said Gregor, switching bottles.

"We have jelly, Gre-go?" asked Boots hopefully as he massaged the lotion into the backs of her hands.

Gregor smiled at this new pronunciation of his name. He'd been "Ge-go" for about a year, but Boots had recently added an *r*.

"Grape jelly," said Gregor. "I got it just for you. You hungry?"

"Ye-es!" said Boots, and he swung her up onto his hip.

A cloud of warmth enveloped him as he brought Boots into the kitchen. His dad was just pulling a tray of drop biscuits out of the oven. It was good to see him up, doing something even as simple as making his kids' breakfast. More than two and a half years as a prisoner of the huge, bloodthirsty rats in the Underland had left his dad a very sick man. When Gregor returned from his second visit at Christmas, he brought back some special medicine from the Underland. It seemed to be helping. His dad's fevers were less frequent, his hands had stopped shaking, and he had regained some weight. He was a long way from well, but Gregor's secret

hope was that if the medicine kept working, his dad might get to go back to his job as a high school science teacher in the fall.

Gregor slid Boots into the cracked, red plastic booster seat they'd had since he was a baby. She drummed her heels happily on the chair in anticipation of breakfast. It looked good, too, especially for an end-of-the-month meal. Gregor's mom got paid on the first of every month, and they were always out of money by then. But his dad served each of them two biscuits and a hard-boiled egg. Boots had a cup of watery apple juice — they were trying to make that last — and everybody else drank hot tea.

His dad told them to start eating while he took a tray of food to their grandma. She spent a lot of time in bed even when the weather was milder, but this winter she'd rarely left it. They'd put an electric space heater in her room and she had lots of quilts on her bed. Still, whenever Gregor went in to see her, her hands were cold.

"Jel-ly, jel-ly, jel-ly," said Boots in a singsong voice.

Gregor broke open her biscuits and put a big spoonful on each. She took a huge bite of one immediately, smearing purple all over her face.

"Hey, eat it, don't wear it, okay?" said Gregor, and Boots got a fit of the giggles. You had to laugh when Boots laughed; she had such a goofy, hiccuppy little-kid laugh, it was contagious.

Gregor and Lizzie had to hurry through breakfast so they wouldn't be late for school.

"Brush your teeth," reminded their dad as they rose from the table.

"I will, if I can get in the bathroom," said Lizzie, grinning at Gregor.

It was a family joke now. How much time he spent in the bathroom. There was only the one bathroom in the apartment, and since Gregor had taken to locking himself in to read the prophecy, everybody had noticed. His mom kept teasing him about trying to look good for some girl at school, and he pretended she was right by doing his best to act embarrassed. The truth was, he was thinking about a girl, but she didn't go to his school. And he wasn't worried about what she thought of his hair. He was wondering if she was even alive. Luxa. She was the same age as him, eleven, and already she was the queen of Regalia. Or at least, she had been queen until a few months ago. Against the Regalian council's wishes, she had secretly flown after Gregor to help him on the mission to kill the Bane. She had saved Boots's life by taking on a pack of rats in a maze and allowing his baby sister to escape on a devoted cockroach. But where was Luxa now?

"Wandering lost in the Dead Land? A prisoner of the rats? Dead? Or had she by some miracle made it home? And there was Luxa's bat, Aurora. And Temp, the cockroach who had run with Boots. And Twitchtip, a rat whose nose was so keen she could detect color. All his friends. All missing in action. All weaving through his dreams at night and preoccupying his thoughts when he was awake.

Gregor had told the Underlanders to let him know what happened. They were supposed to leave him a message in the grate in his laundry room, which was a gateway to the Underland. Why hadn't they? What was going on?

Not knowing about Luxa and the others...trying to decipher the mysterious prophecy on his own...the combination of these things was driving Gregor crazy. It was a huge effort to pay attention in class, to act normal around his friends, to hide his worries from his family, because any hint that he was planning to return to the Underland would throw them into a panic. He was constantly distracted, not hearing people when they spoke, forgetting things. Like now.

"Gregor, your backpack!" said his dad as he and Lizzie headed out the door. "Think you might need that today."

"Thanks, Dad," said Gregor, avoiding his father's eyes, not wanting to see the concern there.

He and Lizzie took the stairs down to the lobby and braced themselves before stepping out into the street. A bitter blast of wind went right through his clothes as if they weren't even there. He could see tears spilling out of Lizzie's eyes; they always watered in the wind.

"Let's hustle, Liz. Least it will be warm at school," said Gregor.

They hurried through the streets, as fast as the icy sidewalks would let them. Fortunately, Lizzie's elementary school was only a couple of blocks away. She was small for her age, "delicate" his mom called her. "One good strong wind would blow you away," his grandma would say when she hugged Lizzie. And today Gregor wondered if she might be right.

"You'll pick me up after school, right? You'll be here?" asked Lizzie at the door.

"Of course," said Gregor. She gave him a reproachful look. He'd forgotten twice in the last month, and she'd had to sit in the office and wait for someone to come get her. "I'll be here!"

Gregor plowed back into the wind with almost a sense of relief. Even if his teeth were chattering, at least he could have a few minutes without anybody interrupting him. Immediately, his thoughts turned to the Underland and what might be happening there now, somewhere far beneath his feet. It was just a matter of time before Gregor would be called back down — he knew that. That's why he spent so much time in the bathroom, studying the new prophecy, trying to understand its frightening words, desperate to prepare for his next challenge in any way he could. The Underlanders were depending on him.

But the Underlanders! At first, he'd made excuses for their silence, but now he was just mad. Not only was there no word about Luxa or his other missing friends, Gregor also had no clue what had happened to Ares, the big black bat whom he trusted above anyone in the Underland. Ares and Gregor were bonds, sworn to protect each other to the death. The journey to track down and kill the Bane had been dreadful, but if one good thing had come of it, it was that the relationship between Gregor and Ares had become unshakable. Unfortunately, Ares was an outcast among the humans and bats. He had let his first bond, Henry, fall to his death to save Gregor's life. Even though Henry was a traitor and Ares had done the right thing, the Underlanders hated him. They also blamed the bat for not killing the Bane although, technically, that had been Gregor's job. Gregor had a bad feeling that wherever Ares was, he was suffering.

As he pulled open the door to his school, Gregor tried to replace thoughts of the Underland with his math assignment. Every Friday, they had a quiz first thing. Then there was half-court basketball in gym, some kind of sugar crystal experiment in science, and finally lunch. Gregor's stomach was always growling at least a full hour before he reached the cafeteria. Between the cold, trying to make the groceries stretch at home, and just growing, he was hungry all the time. He got free school lunch and he ate everything on his tray, even if he didn't like it. Fortunately, Friday was pizza day, and he loved pizza.

"Here, take mine," said his friend Angelina, plunking down her slice of pizza on his plate. "I'm too nervous to eat, anyway." The school play opened that night and she had the lead.

"Want to run your lines again?" asked Gregor.

Her script was in his hand in a flash.

"Are you sure you don't mind? I come in right here."

Like he didn't know. Gregor and their friend Larry had been running lines with Angelina every day for six weeks. Usually Gregor did it, though. The cold, dry winter air aggravated Larry's asthma, so reading out loud made him cough. He'd been in the hospital last week with a bad attack and was still looking kind of wiped out.

"It's doesn't matter, you won't remember a thing," said Larry, who was drawing something that looked like a fly's eyeball on his napkin. He didn't look up.

"Don't say that!" gasped Angelina.

"You'll be rotten, just like you were in that last play," said Larry.

"Yeah, we could barely sit through that," Gregor agreed. Angelina had been wonderful in that last play. They all knew it. She tried not to look pleased.

"What were you again? Some kind of bug, right?" said Gregor.

"Something with wings," said Larry.

She had been the fairy godmother in a version of Cinderella set in the city.

"Can we start now?" said Angelina. "So I don't totally humiliate myself tonight?"

Gregor ran lines with her. He didn't mind really. It distracted him from darker thoughts.

"Keep your head in the Overland," he told himself. "Or you'll just make yourself nuts."

And he did a pretty good job of it for the rest of the day. He got through his classes and took Lizzie home and then went over to Larry's apartment. Larry's mom ordered out Chinese food for a special treat, and they went and saw the play. It was fun and Angelina was the best thing in it. When he got home, Gregor gave his sisters a pocketful of fortune cookies he'd saved from dinner. Boots had never seen fortune cookies and kept trying to eat them, paper and all.

They went to bed earlier than usual because it was just too cold to do anything else. Gregor piled not only his blankets but his coat and a couple of towels on top of him. His mom and dad came in to say good night. That made him feel secure. For so many years his dad had been absent or too ill to come in. To have both parents tuck him in seemed like a real luxury.

So he was doing all right, keeping his head in the Overland, until his dad leaned down to hug him good night and whispered in a voice his mom

couldn't hear, "No mail."

He and his dad had worked out a system. Gregor's mom had put the laundry room off-limits last summer. You couldn't blame her. In the last few years, first her husband, then Gregor and Boots had fallen through a grate in the laundry room wall that led to the Underland. Their disappearance was agonizing. How his mom had kept the family going both emotionally and financially through all this...well, Gregor couldn't say. She had been amazing. So it seemed a small enough thing to let her have her way about the laundry room.

The tricky thing was...that made checking the grate that led to the Underland impossible for Gregor. But his dad knew how anxious he was for news of Luxa and the others, so once a day he would make a brief visit to the laundry room and see if a message had been left for his son. They didn't tell his mom; she would have just been upset. It was different for her. She had never been to the Underland. In her mind, everyone who lived there was somehow connected to the abduction of her husband and children. But Gregor and his dad both had friends down there.

So there was no mail. No word again. No answers. Gregor stared into the dark for hours, and when he finally fell asleep, his dreams were troubled.

He woke late the following morning and had to rush to get to Mrs. Cormaci's apartment by ten. He went over every Saturday to help her out. There had been times in the fall when Gregor had felt like she was making up work for him to do because she knew his family was hurting for money. But with the weather so bad, Mrs. Cormaci actually did need his help. The cold made her joints ache and she had trouble navigating the icy sidewalks. She talked a lot about falling and breaking a hip. Gregor was glad he was really earning his money now.

Today she had a big list of errands for him to run — the dry cleaners, the greengrocer's, the bakery, the post office, and the hardware store. As always, she fed him first. "Did you eat?" she asked. He hadn't but he didn't even have time to answer. "Never mind, in this cold you can stand eating twice." She placed a big steaming bowl of oatmeal on the table, loaded with raisins and brown sugar. She poured him orange juice and buttered several slices of toast.

When he had finished, Gregor felt ready to face any weather, which was good, since it was ten below not even counting the windchill factor.

Following the list, he ran from place to place, grateful to have to wait in lines so he had a chance to thaw out. After he had dropped his purchases on Mrs. Cormaci's kitchen table, he was rewarded with a large cup of hot chocolate. Then they both bundled back up to go to the two places where Gregor could not run her errands, the bank and the liquor store. Once they got outside, Mrs. Cormaci was on edge. She clung to Gregor's arm tightly as they confronted patches of ice, pedestrians half-blinded by scarves, and swerving taxicabs. They had a chance to warm up at the bank, since Mrs. Cormaci didn't trust automatic bank machines, and they had to stand in line for a teller. Then they went to the liquor store, so she could pick out a bottle of red wine for her friend Eileen's birthday. But by the time they had made their way back home, Mrs. Cormaci's fingers were so numb that she dropped the wine in the hall outside her apartment just as Gregor got the door open. The bottle broke on the tile, and the wine splattered all over the throw rug inside the entrance.

"That's it, Eileen's getting candy," said Mrs. Cormaci. "I've got a nice box of chocolate creams, never been opened. Someone gave it to me for Christmas. I hope it wasn't Eileen." She made Gregor stand back while she cleaned up the glass, then gathered up the throw rug and handed it to him. "Come on. We better get this down to the laundry room before the stain sets."

The laundry room! While she collected detergent and stain remover from the closet, Gregor tried to think of an excuse for why he couldn't accompany her. He could hardly say, "Oh, I can't go down there because my mom is afraid a giant rat will jump out and drag me miles underground and eat me." If you thought about it, there was almost no good reason a person couldn't go to the laundry room. So he went.

Mrs. Cormaci sprayed the throw rug with stain remover and stuffed it into a washer. Her fingers, still stiff from the cold, fumbled as she picked the quarters from her change purse. She dropped one to the cement floor, and it rolled across the room, clanking to a stop against the last dryer. Gregor went to retrieve it for her. As he bent down to get the coin, something caught his eye, and he bumped his head into the side of the dryer.

Gregor blinked, to make sure he hadn't imagined it. He hadn't. There, wedged between the frame of the grate and the wall, was a scroll.

CHAPTER 2

"Are you okay over there?" asked Mrs. Cormaci as she dumped detergent into the washer.

"Yeah, I'm fine," said Gregor, rubbing his head. He picked up the quarter and resisted the impulse to yank the scroll out of the grate. Trying to appear like nothing had happened, he returned the coin.

Mrs. Cormaci stuck the quarter in the machine and started it up. "Ready to grab some lunch?" she said.

There was nothing for Gregor to do but follow her to the elevator. He couldn't retrieve the scroll in front of her. She would want to know what it was, and since she was already suspicious about the stories he used to cover his family's time in the Underland, it wasn't likely he could come up with a believable lie. Shoot, he hadn't even been able to make up an excuse to avoid the laundry room!

Back at the apartment, Mrs. Cormaci heated up some homemade chicken soup and ladled out big servings. Gregor ate mechanically, trying to keep up his end of the conversation, although he was only half-listening. As they were finishing off some pie, Mrs. Cormaci glanced at the clock and said, "I guess that rug's about ready to go in the dryer now."

"I'll do it!" Gregor sprang to his feet so quickly his chair fell over backward. He set the chair back up as casually as possible. "Sorry. I can change the rug."

Mrs. Cormaci gave him an odd look. "Okay."

"I mean, doesn't take two of us to change a rug," said Gregor with a shrug.

"You're right about that." She put some quarters in his hand, watching him closely. "So, how come your family doesn't use our laundry room anymore?"

"What?" She'd caught him off guard.

"How come you and your mother walk all the way over to use that place by the butcher's?" she said. "It's the same price. I checked."

"Because...the washers...are...bigger there," said Gregor. Actually, they were. It was not a complete lie if it were not the whole truth.

Mrs. Cormaci stared at him a moment, then shook her head. "Go change the rug," she said shortly.

The elevator had never moved so slowly. People got on, people got off, a woman held the door for what seemed like an hour while her kid ran back to their apartment to get a hat. When he finally made it to the laundry room, Gregor had to wait for some guy who had obviously not done his clothes for about a month to load up six washers.

Gregor stuck the rug in the dryer next to the grate and fussed around with it until the guy left. The moment the coast was clear, he leaned down and yanked the scroll out of the grate. He stuck it up the sleeve of his sweatshirt and walked out. Ignoring the elevator, he slipped into the stairwell and closed the door securely behind him. He went up one flight and sat on the landing. No one would disturb him here, not with the elevator working.

He slid the scroll out of his shirtsleeve and unrolled it with shaking hands. It read: *Dear Gregor,*

It is most urgent that we meet. I will be at the Stair where Ares leaves you when the Overland clock strikes four. We are at your mercy. "The Prophecy of Blood" is upon us.

Please do not fail your friends,

Vi kus

Gregor read the note three times before it began to register. It was not what he had expected. It was not about Luxa and his other missing friends. It did not tell him about Ares. Instead, it was a flat-out cry for help.

"The Prophecy of Blood" is upon us.

"It's here," Gregor thought. His heart began to pound as a sense of dread coursed through him. "The Prophecy of Blood."

He didn't really need a mirror to read it anymore, although looking at the lines sometimes helped him figure out parts. By now he knew the thing by heart. There was something in the rhythm of the words that made it get in your head and stick there, like one of those annoying songs on TV commercials. It played in his brain now, adjusting to the beat of his boots as he slowly climbed the stairs.

Warmblood now a bloodborne death

Will rob your body of its breath,

Mark your skin, and seal your fate.

The Underland becomes a plate.

Turn and turn and turn again.
Y OU see the what but not the when.
Remedy and wrong entwine,
And so they form a single vine.
Bring the warrior from above
If yet his heart is swayed by love.
Bring the princess or despair,
No crawlers care without her there.
Turn and turn and turn again.
You see the what but not the when.
Remedy and wrong entwine,
And so they form a single vine.
Those whose blood runs red and hot
Must join to seek the healing spot.
In the cradle find the cure
For that which makes the blood impure.
Turn and turn and turn again.
You see the what but not the when.
Remedy and wrong entwine,
And so they form a single vine.
Gnawer, human, set aside
The hatreds that reside inside.
If the flames of war are fanned,
All warmbloods lose the Underland.
Turn and turn and turn again.
You see the what but not the when.
Remedy and wrong entwine,
And so they form a single vine.

Gregor had survived two other prophecies by the man who had written this one. Bartholomew of Sandwich. It was Sandwich who had led the Underlanders far beneath what was now New York City and founded the human city of Regalia. When he died he had left behind a stone room whose walls were entirely carved with prophecies, his visions of the future. And not just the humans but all the creatures in the Underland believed Sandwich had been able to see what was to come.

Gregor went back and forth on how he felt about Sandwich's predictions. Sometimes he hated them. Sometimes he was grateful for their

guidance, although the prophecies were so cryptic they seemed to mean a lot of things at once. But within the loaded lines you could usually get the general idea of what awaited you. Like in this one...

*Warmblood now a bloodborne death
Will rob your body of its breath,
Mark your skin, and seal your fate.
The Underland becomes a plate.*

Gregor had figured out it was about some kind of disease, a deadly one, and a lot of people were going to get it. Not just people, but anything that was warmblooded. Any mammal. Down in the Underland, that could include the bats and rats...he really didn't know how many other creatures could be affected. And what was that scary line about a "plate" supposed to mean? That everybody got eaten up?

*Bring the warrior from above
If yet his heart is swayed by love.
Bring the princess or despair,
No crawlers care without her there.*

The warrior was Gregor, no use trying to kid himself about that. He didn't want to be the warrior. He hated fighting, hated that he was so good at it. But after having successfully fulfilled two prophecies as the warrior, he had stopped believing they had gotten the wrong guy.

Then, there was the princess....He was holding out hope that it wasn't Boots. The crawlers — that was the Underlander name for the cockroaches — called her the princess, but she wasn't a real one. Maybe the crawlers had a princess of their own to bring.

Other stanzas seemed to suggest that the humans and the gnawers — the rats — were going to have to band together to find the cure for the disease. Boy, they were going to love that! They'd only spent centuries trying to kill one another. And then there was Sandwich's usual prediction that if things didn't work out, there would be total destruction and everybody would end up dead.

Gregor had to wonder if Sandwich had ever written a cheerful prophecy. Something about peace and joy, with a big old happy ending. Probably not.

The thing that drove him craziest about "The Prophecy of Blood" was the one stanza that appeared four times. It was like Sandwich was trying to drum it into his brain.

Turn and turn and turn again.

*you see the what but not the when.
Remedy and wrong entwine,
And so they form a single vine.*

What did that mean? It made absolutely no sense at all! Gregor had to talk to Vikus! Along with being Luxa's grandpa and one of the most influential people in Regalia, Vikus was one of the best interpreters of Sandwich's prophecies. If anyone could explain the passage, he could.

Gregor realized he was standing on the landing of his floor, gripping the railing. He was unsure of how long he'd been there. But now he had to finish up with Mrs. Cormaci and get home.

If he had been gone too long, she didn't seem to notice. She gave him the usual forty bucks plus a big bowl of stew for his family. As he was leaving, she wrapped an extra scarf around his neck because, "I've got enough scarves to choke a horse." Mrs. Cormaci never let him leave empty-handed.

Back in his own apartment, Gregor got his dad alone in the kitchen as soon as he could and showed him the note from Vikus. His dad's face became grave as he read it.

"'The Prophecy of Blood.' Do you know what that is, Gregor?" he asked.

Without a word, Gregor handed his dad the scroll with the prophecy. It was crumpled and somewhat grimy from many readings.

"How long have you had this?" asked his dad.

"Since Christmas," said Gregor. "I didn't want you to worry."

"I will start worrying if I think you're hiding things from me," said his dad. "No more of that, okay?" Gregor nodded. His dad opened the scroll to read it and looked perplexed.

"It's written backward," said Gregor. "But I know it by heart." He recited the prophecy aloud.

"A 'bloodborne death.' Well, that doesn't sound good," said his dad.

"No, it sounds like a lot of people will get sick," said Gregor.

"Vikus seems to think they need you to go down there again. You know your mom's not going to let that happen," said his dad.

He knew. It was not hard to imagine his mom's horror once she heard about the prophecy. After his dad had disappeared, she'd spent endless nights sitting alone at the kitchen table. First crying. Then silent...her fingers tracing the pattern on the tablecloth. Then absolutely still. And it

was probably much worse when he and Boots were gone. Could he really put her through that again? "No, I can't!" he thought. Then the images of his friends from the Underland crowded into his brain. They might die — all of them — if he did not go.

"I've got to at least go hear what Vikus has to say, Dad," said Gregor, his voice choked with agitation. "I've got to at least know what's happening! I mean, I can't just tear this up and pretend it never came!"

"Okay, okay, son, we'll go and hear the man out. I'm just saying, don't be making him any promises you can't keep," said his dad.

They got Mrs. Cormaci to come over for a while, saying they were thinking of seeing a movie. She seemed to be glad for a chance to visit with his sisters and his grandma. Armed with a deck of "Go Fish" cards and a jar of popcorn, she waved Gregor and his dad toward the door. "You two go ahead. You need a little father-son time."

Maybe they did. But not this kind.

Before they left, Gregor made sure he had a good, strong flashlight. He watched his dad slip a crowbar under his jacket. At first, Gregor thought it was for protection, but his dad whispered, "For the rock." The spot where Ares always left Gregor was at the foot of a stairway under Central Park. A stone slab covered the entrance to the stairway. In this weather, it would be frozen in place.

To reach Vikus by four o'clock, they had to take a cab to the park. Gregor thought the trek to the subway would be too much for his dad, anyway. As it was, he seemed exhausted by the time they took the short walk from the street to the Underland entrance among the trees.

In the frigid weather, Central Park was almost empty. A few visitors scurried along with their heads ducked low, their hands crammed in pockets. No one took any notice as Gregor pried the stone slab loose and slid it over to reveal the entrance.

"We're a few minutes early," said Gregor, peering down into the darkness.

"Vikus may be, too. Let's go on down. At least we'll be out of this wind," said his dad.

They lowered themselves into the hole. Gregor made sure to bring the crowbar with him — the rock would probably freeze up immediately, and he didn't want to get stuck underground. He moved the slab back in place,

blocking out the daylight. It was pitch-black. He clicked on his flashlight and illuminated the long flight of stairs.

"Ares usually drops me at the bottom," Gregor said. He started down and his dad moved slowly behind him, taking each step carefully.

The stairway led into a large, man-made tunnel that appeared to be deserted. The air was heavy, cold, and dank. No sounds filtered down from the park, but along the walls there was a faint scampering of tiny mouse feet.

When he reached the last few steps, Gregor looked back over his shoulder at his dad, who was only about halfway down. "Take your time. He's not here yet."

The words had barely left his mouth when a sharp blow landed on his wrist and Gregor felt the flashlight fly out of his hand. He turned his head in time to glimpse a large, furry form leaping at him from the shadows.

The rat had been waiting for him.

CHAPTER 3

Gregor swung the crowbar, but the rat caught it in its teeth and yanked him forward. He was airborne for a moment before he slammed onto his stomach in the tunnel. The crowbar clattered into the dark as his hands barely kept his face from smacking into the cold cement floor.

"Gregor!" He could hear his father's anguished cry as the rat pinned him to the ground with its chest. Hot breath hit his cheek. He tried to swing backward but he was helpless.

"Pitiful. Just pitiful," a familiar voice hissed in his ear.

Gregor felt a wave of relief that was immediately followed by annoyance. "Get off me, man!"

The rat simply shifted into a more comfortable position. "You see, the second you lose your light, you're as good as dead."

The beam of the flashlight hit them. Gregor squinted and saw his dad approaching them with a chunk of concrete in one hand.

"Let him go!" shouted his father, lifting the concrete.

"It's okay, Dad! It's just Ripred!" Gregor squirmed to free himself but the rat weighed a ton. "He's a friend," he added to reassure his dad, although calling Ripred a "friend" was something of a stretch.

"Ripred?" said his dad. "Ripred?" His chest was heaving up and down, his eyes wild as he tried to make sense of the name.

"Yes, I try and give your boy survival tips but he just doesn't pay attention." Ripred rose and easily flipped Gregor over with his paw. The rat's scarred face was accusing. "You haven't been practicing your echolocation, have you?"

"I have, too!" shot back Gregor. "I practice with my sister."

This was true, although Gregor omitted saying that he mainly did it because Lizzie made him. She was extremely conscientious about homework. When she found out that Ripred had told Gregor to practice his echolocation, she took it very seriously. At least three times a week she'd drag him off somewhere in the building — the hallway, the stairwell, the lobby — and blindfold him. Then he'd have to stand there making a clicking sound with his tongue, trying to find her. The sound of his click was supposed to bounce off her, and somehow he was supposed to know

where she was standing. But despite her best efforts, Gregor's echolocation skills weren't improving much.

Now, with Ripred getting on his case, Gregor felt defensive. "Look, I told you, that echolocation stuff doesn't work for me. Where's Vikus, anyway?"

"He's not coming," said Ripred.

"But he wrote me about 'The Prophecy of Blood.' I thought he was meeting us," said Gregor.

"And I thought you'd be alone," said Ripred. He sat back on his haunches and looked at Gregor's father. "Do you remember me?"

His dad was still clutching the piece of concrete, but it was down by his side. He stared at Ripred as if he were trying to remember someone from a dream. A long dream filled with hunger and loneliness and fear and the taunting of voices in the dark. Voices of rats. Like the one who sat before him. His brow furrowed as he tried to make sense of the jumble in his head. "You brought me food. Down in the rat pit...you brought me food sometimes."

"That's right," said Ripred. "And did anyone here bring *me* food? I'm famished."

Ripred did look thinner than usual. His belly had shrunk down some and the bones in his face were more pronounced.

Gregor hadn't even planned to see Ripred, let alone feed him. But his hands automatically dug in his jacket pockets. His fingers found a stray fortune cookie from the night before and he pulled it out. "Here," he said.

Ripred reacted with exaggerated amazement. "Oh, heavens, is this whole thing for me?"

"Look, I didn't even know —" Gregor began.

"No, please. Don't apologize." Ripred's tongue darted out and flicked the cookie into his mouth. "Oh, yes, oh, my word," he raved as he chewed and swallowed. "I'm absolutely stuffed!"

"How come you're so hungry?" asked Gregor.

"Well, what with Solovet bent on starving the rats out —" said Ripred. Gregor vaguely remembered Ripred bringing this up at dinner in Regalia once. The humans had taken one of the rats' rivers or something.

"And having to feed that gluttonous baby you dumped on me —" said Ripred.

"The Bane?" interrupted Gregor. "How is he?"

"He's a royal pain, frankly. He eats three times as much as the rest of us, yet he can't seem to get the knack of hunting. If we don't feed him he whines. So, of course, we do feed him and then he grows another six inches and whines louder. Believe me, he's doing a lot better than I am," growled Ripred.

The rat found an old two-by-four by the stairs and began to gnaw on it. Strips of wood curled away from the board like apple peel.

"What about Luxa? Is she home?" asked Gregor, almost afraid to hear the answer.

"No, she's not home," said Ripred, a little less brusquely. "I have it on good authority that she's not being held prisoner by the rats. It's possible she did escape the Labyrinth but...I wouldn't be too hopeful there, if I were you."

Gregor gave a small nod. It had been months. If Luxa had escaped the rats, why wasn't she back in Regalia?

"And the others?" he said.

"Her bat's still missing. And the lovely Twitchtip's unaccounted for as well. Oh, you know who did show up? That crawler who was carting around your sister. What's his name, Tock...Ting...?" said Ripred.

"Temp?" said Gregor's dad.

"That's it, Temp. He got home a few weeks after you left, as good as ever. Spent some time in the Dead Land growing a new leg or two," said Ripred. "He's very excited about seeing 'the princess' again."

Gregor and his dad exchanged a look. Even if they could somehow convince his mom to let him go down, getting her to let Boots return to the Underland would be impossible.

Ripred caught the moment that passed between them. "Well, you do know she has to come back? I mean, you've read 'The Prophecy of Blood,' right?"

"I've read it," said Gregor evasively. "I'm just not sure what happens next."

"I'll tell you what happens next," said Ripred. "Vikus is sending a bat up to your laundry room at midnight. He expects you and your sister to be waiting for it. We all do."

"And if we're not?" asked Gregor.

"If you're not, there's very little chance of any warmblooded creature surviving in the Underland. There's a plague running around down there

causing all kinds of trouble, or didn't you hear?" said Ripred.

"Yeah, that plague thing, that's not going to be a real plus when I ask my mom if we can go," said Gregor.

"The plague. Tell us about it," said Gregor's dad.

"Oh, it's some kind of pox," said Ripred. "High fever, pustules on the skin, eventually shuts down the lungs. They call it 'The Curse of the Warmbloods' because it only affects warmblooded creatures. The rats are dropping like flies. The bodies of a few bats who were scouts were found in the Dead Land. And nobody's heard from the nibblers yet."

"The nibblers?" said Gregor.

"Mice. That's what we call them. But listen, they've only had three plague cases in Regalia, and they're quarantined, so you'll be perfectly safe there. That's all we really need you for, the meeting in Regalia. All the warmbloods are sending representatives. Every creature's blood will be tested for the plague by the humans before they can participate. Just show up for that and you can go right home," said Ripred.

"I can?" said Gregor. Usually a prophecy required a lot more of him.

"Why not? All the prophecy says is to bring you from above. After that, what use will you be? You're eleven. No one expects you to personally whip up some cure for the plague with your chemistry set," said Ripred.

The rat was right. Curing a plague was really more of a job for doctors and scientists than for warriors.

Gregor looked at his dad hopefully. "It's just for one meeting, Dad. And no one with the plague will be there. That would be okay, don't you think?"

"I don't know, Gregor," said his dad with a shake of his head.

"Oh, the warrior will come. We know that. It's his sister we're worried about," said Ripred.

"What makes you so sure I'll be there?" asked Gregor.

"Because of that bat of yours. The big moody one," said Ripred.

"Ares?" said Gregor. "What's this got to do with Ares? Are they going to banish him if I don't show up?"

"It's worse than that, I'm afraid." The board Ripred was gnawing on snapped in two. He spit out a mouthful of wood shavings and looked at Gregor tiredly. "Those three plague cases in Regalia? He's one of them."

CHAPTER 4

"Oh, no," said Gregor softly. Of all the horrible possibilities that had been running through his mind in the last few months, this was not one of them. "How bad is he?"

"He's bad. He was the first case in Regalia. They think he contracted the plague when he was attacked by those mites in the Waterway. Then he must have passed it on to the rats in the Labyrinth," said Ripred.

"Mites? But, I thought only warmblooded animals could get it," said Gregor's dad.

"Yes, but bloodsucking or carnivorous insects can carry it and spread it from warmblood to warmblood," said Ripred.

"So, he's going to die?" Gregor said in a cracked voice.

"Well, let's not write him off yet," said Ripred. "They've got medicines in Regalia that can at least ease his symptoms, which is more than the rats have. And he's strong."

"That's true," said Gregor, feeling slightly more optimistic. "He's the strongest bat down there. And he's stubborn, too. He'll fight it."

"Yes, he'll try and hang on because he believes help is on the way. Because the warrior, his bond, will come. There will be a meeting. Then a search for the cure will begin. Of course, if you take that hope away..." Ripred let the sentence dangle on purpose.

"I'll be there, Ripred," said Gregor.

"Don't bother coming without your sister. It's a waste of time. According to Sandwich, the crawlers have to be involved, and they've only agreed to send a representative if Boots is there," said Ripred.

"I don't know how I'm going to get my mom to let her —" Gregor said.

"Your mom. You tell your mom this from me. If you and your sister don't show up, the rats will send an escort," said Ripred.

"What's that mean?" said his dad.

"It means, be there at midnight," said Ripred.

"But —" Gregor began.

The rat gave a groan of pain and hunched over for a few moments. "Argh, I've got to find something to fill my belly. And in another minute it will be one of you," he snarled. "Go on. Go home! You know what you have to do! So do it!"

Ripred turned and vanished into the shadows.

Gregor and his dad climbed back up to the park, pried the stone slab loose, and pulled themselves out. They quickly repositioned the rock and headed toward the street.

"What are we going to do, Dad?" Gregor asked, as they stood on the curb, trying to hail a cab.

"Don't worry, we'll figure out something," said his dad. "Just don't you worry."

But Gregor was very worried, and he could tell his dad was, too.

His mom was home from waiting tables when they returned. She was still in her uniform, with her feet propped up on the coffee table, looking beat. She worked seven days a week, every week, unless it was one of those major holidays like Thanksgiving or Christmas when almost everybody was off. She joked that Saturday and Sunday evenings were her days off because she got finished at four o'clock. She never mentioned how she also had to show up for work at six in the morning on the weekends. No, his mom never complained. Probably because she was so grateful to have them all home again. And now he was going to have to tell her they were going back to the Underland.

"How was the movie?" she asked with a smile as they came in.

"We didn't see a movie, Mom," said Gregor.

His mom raised her eyebrows questioningly, but before Gregor could continue, the door to the kitchen swung open and Mrs. Cormaci stuck her head out. "Good, you're back. Dinner in three minutes," she said and disappeared.

"What's she still doing here?" Gregor blurted out.

"I invited her to stay for dinner. She made the stew after all. Then she and the girls wouldn't let me help," said his mom. "What's with you, anyway? I thought you liked Mrs. Cormaci."

"I do," said Gregor. "I do."

"Then go wash up and find your manners while you're at it," said his mom. The kitchen door swung open again and Lizzie and Boots stuck their heads out. "Two minutes," said Lizzie importantly.

"Two!" Boots echoed.

"Go ahead and wash up, Gregor," said his dad. "We can tell your mom about our afternoon later."

Gregor understood. There could be no talking about the Underland until Mrs. Cormaci cleared out. But who knew when that would be? There weren't that many hours left until midnight.

He was fidgety the whole meal, wishing Mrs. Cormaci would go home. He felt kind of guilty because she was obviously having such a good time. They all were, his sisters, his mom, and even his grandma had come out and sat at the table instead of eating off a tray in her bed. There was stew and warm bread, and Mrs. Cormaci and his sisters had baked a cake for a surprise. It was practically a party. But Gregor could not join in the fun; he could not think of anything except getting to the Underland to help Ares.

The meal dragged on endlessly. Then everyone sat in the living room to talk for a while. Gregor gave big yawns, hoping Mrs. Cormaci would pick up on the hint, but she didn't even seem to notice. Finally, at around nine-thirty, she stood up and stretched and said she better get home to bed.

Everyone was so keyed up, it was another hour before his grandma, Lizzie, and Boots had settled down in their rooms. When his mom came out from kissing them all good night, Gregor grabbed her hand and without a word led her into the kitchen. His dad was right on their heels.

"What? What is going on with you two?" said his mom.

"I heard from the Underland today. We went and talked to Ripred under Central Park, and Ares is dying, Mom, and Boots and I have to go back down to save him! At midnight! Tonight!" The words that had been pressing on Gregor's chest spilled out before he could stop them. He instantly regretted his impulsive delivery. The horrified look on his mom's face told him this had not been the way to break the news.

"No, you do not! You are not! You are never going down to that place again!" she said.

"Look, Mom, you don't understand!" said Gregor.

"I understand all I need to understand! First your father locked up down there for years. You and Boots disappearing like that. Giant roaches stealing my baby! There is nothing to understand and there is nothing to discuss! You are not going down there again! Ever!" His mom was gripping the back of a chair so hard her knuckles had turned white.

His dad intervened. He sat her down at the table and tried to explain the situation in a calm, rational voice. The more he talked, the larger her eyes grew in disbelief.

"What did you tell him? Did you tell that rat they were coming? Did you tell Gregor he could go?" she asked.

"Of course I didn't! But it isn't so simple, letting a whole civilization die! There are a lot of good people down there. Good people and animals, too, who risked their lives saving me, saving the kids. We can't just turn our backs on them!" said his dad.

"I can," said his mother bitterly. "You just watch me."

"Well, I'm going," said Gregor flatly.

"Oh, no, you're not. You're not going anywhere but to bed," said his mom. "Now go brush your teeth. And I don't want to hear another word out of either of you about this." His mother's face was set like stone. Gregor felt his dad's hand on his arm. "Better go to bed, son. I don't think we're going to change her mind."

"Nothing will change my mind," said his mom.

And that's when it started.

At first, there was just a faint scratching in the wall. Then a skittering sound. And suddenly, it was as if the kitchen were alive. Scores of small, clawed feet were running around and around inside the walls. Only a thin layer of plaster separated Gregor and his parents from them.

"What's that? What's that sound?" said his mother, her head darting from side to side.

"It sounds like rats," said his dad.

"Rats? I thought they couldn't get up here!" said his mom.

"The Underland ones can't. But I guess the regular ones can. And they know each other," said Gregor. He looked anxiously at the walls. What was going on?

"Maybe this is what Ripred meant by the rats sending you an escort," said his dad.

The creatures began to squeak now, as if to confirm what his dad had just said.

"That must be it," Gregor thought. "The rats are going to try and scare my mom into letting us go." But how far would they take this? The Underland rats believed their whole existence was in jeopardy. That they would all die if Gregor and Boots didn't come. "They'll kill us before they let us stay here," he said aloud, without thinking.

"I'm calling the police. Or the fire department. I'm calling 911!" said his mother. She rushed into the living room, and Gregor and his dad went after

her.

"It won't do any good, Mom!" said Gregor. "What's the fire department going to do?"

The rats began to pour into the living room walls. They were louder now.

"Oh, my. Oh! Get the girls! Get Grandma!" Gregor's mom grabbed the phone receiver and dialed the emergency number. "Come on, come on!" Then a look of shock crossed her face. "The line just went dead."

"Okay, we're getting out of here!" said his dad.

They all rushed into the bedroom for Gregor's grandma and sisters. His mom swept a sleeping Boots right out of her crib. "They're not getting Boots again! They're not getting her!" said his mom shrilly.

His dad pulled back the covers on the main bed and wrapped his grandma in a quilt.

"What's going on?" said the old woman in confusion.

"Nothing, Mama. We think there might be a fire in the building, so we're just getting out while they check," said his dad. He struggled as he lifted her out of the bed like a baby.

Gregor shook Lizzie's shoulder. Her eyes flew open and she was instantly wide awake. "What is it, Gregor? What's that sound?"

The rats had not followed them to the bedroom, but they were still making a racket in the living room walls.

"That's rats, isn't it?" she said. "They're in the apartment!"

"No, not in the apartment. Just in the walls. But we got to get out of here. Come on now!" He guided his sister out of bed and into the living room. As the full impact of the rat noise hit her, Lizzie began to tremble all over.

"Come on, Lizzie! It'll be okay once we're outside!" said Gregor, and propelled her across the room. He grabbed their coats as his mom flung open the front door and ran. Gregor pulled Lizzie along after her. His dad brought up the rear with his grandma.

"Nobody get on the elevator," said his mom. "Take the stairs." Clutching Boots, she led them to the far end of the hall and yanked open the door to the stairwell.

At the top of the stairs, his dad had to set his grandma on her feet. "I'm going to need your help, Gregor. I can't get her down myself."

Gregor thrust the coats into Lizzie's arms. "You carry these." Lizzie stared back at him, her pupils huge, her breath coming in short, painful pants. "It's okay, Lizzie. It's okay. Listen, you can't even hear them out here."

You couldn't hear anything. The stairwell didn't border anyone's apartment. It was sandwiched between the outside wall of the complex and the elevator shaft. It was quiet at night where they lived, anyway. Most people in the building had small kids or were elderly. Even on a Saturday night it seemed like everybody went to bed by ten.

Lizzie clutched the coats against her chest. "I — can — carry — them," she got out.

Gregor locked forearms with his dad behind his grandma's back and legs, and they lifted her in a sitting position. They had carried her this way before around the apartment, when her arthritis was particularly bad.

"Stay right with us, honey," his dad said to Lizzie. "Hold on to my arm so I know you're there."

His family moved in a tight clump down the stairs. They had gone down about two floors when the rat noise started up again. It wasn't much at first. But it increased in volume at every step until they had to raise their voices to be heard.

"Hurry!" said his mom. "It's not far now!"

Finally, the door to the lobby came into view. His mom backed into the door, holding it open as Gregor and his dad stumbled by. "When we get outside, we go straight to the avenue. Get a cab. Then the bus station. Come on, Lizzie! Come on, baby!" said his mom.

Tears were coursing down Lizzie's cheeks now. She had stopped at the bottom of the steps and was gasping so hard she couldn't speak. Shifting Boots to one hip, his mom got an arm protectively around Lizzie's shoulders and they fled for the entrance.

The clamor of the rats was worse than ever. The rodents' squeaks had evolved into horrible shrieks. Claws were scratching now with purpose, trying to dig through the plaster. Gregor and his dad reached the entrance first. It was a double door made of thick, warped glass. They set his grandma's feet on the ground, and Gregor's dad reached for the handle. He had opened it only a crack when Gregor saw something. Gregor let go of his grandma and threw his shoulder against the glass, slamming the door shut.

His dad fell to his knees as he caught his grandma. Gregor could see his mom yelling at him, but he couldn't really hear her over the din of the rats. Knowing he couldn't be heard, either, Gregor pounded his fist into the glass near his knees, drawing everyone's focus to the base of the door.

Pressed against the outside, smearing the glass with saliva as they tried to gnaw through it, were hundreds of rats.

CHAPTER 5

Gregor's family staggered back from the front door and huddled in a knot at the center of the lobby. Lizzie was crouched down in a ball, panting, her palms shining with sweat. Gregor's mom knelt on the floor, one arm wrapped tightly around Lizzie, the other around Boots, who had started to wake. The toddler rubbed her sleepy face in her mother's shoulder and blinked into the fluorescent lights of the lobby. His dad had gotten back to his feet, holding his grandma, who had her eyes squeezed shut and had her hands over her ears.

Gregor was afraid to leave the door to join them. Afraid the bolt would give way under the pressure of the rats. He braced his back against the door and looked at his family helplessly. There was no leaving the building. What were they going to do? Something caught his mom's attention and she seemed to stop breathing. Gregor followed her eyes to the wall off to his right. At first he didn't see anything. Then a puff of plaster dust floated out near the baseboard. A small clawed paw broke through the wall and a rat's nose poked through.

"All right!" screamed his mother. "All right, they can go!"

It was like someone had thrown a switch. The rat noise stopped instantly. Gregor could hear only Lizzie's ragged gasps, the hum of the fluorescent lights, and the distant sound of traffic from the street. He looked down at the glass door. Not a rat in sight. But he knew they were there, in the walls, in the bushes, waiting and watching.

"We can go?" asked Gregor.

"You can go," said his mother in a hoarse voice. "But this time, I'm going with you."

"Come on. Let's get back upstairs and talk about this," said his dad.

Gregor went over to Lizzie and helped her up. "You okay, Liz?"

"My — fingers — got — pins and — needles," she choked out.

"I think you're having a panic attack, honey," Gregor's dad said softly. "And no wonder. When we get upstairs, I'll get you a paper bag to breathe in. Fix you right up." He jabbed the elevator button with his elbow and the doors to it opened at once. Like it had been waiting.

His family stepped inside.

"I can do button," said Boots. His mom held her out so she could press the number for their floor.

"See?" said Boots proudly.

"Good girl," said Gregor's mom dully, and the doors closed.

Back in the apartment, the clock on the wall said eleven-thirty. "We've got a half hour," said Gregor.

His dad settled his grandma back in her bed. Then he sat Lizzie on the couch and taught her to breathe into a small paper bag. "Too much oxygen getting into you, pumpkin. Just take it slow."

Lizzie nodded and tried to follow his instructions. But she looked miserable. "I don't — want Mom — to go."

"I think she's right," said Gregor's dad. "We need you up here. I'll go down with Boots and Gregor."

"No," said his mom. "I have to go."

"Why can't dad go?" said Gregor, a little too forcefully. His mom shot him a look and he began to backpedal. "I mean, he's been before. People know him."

This was true, but it was not the real reason Gregor wanted his dad instead of his mom. For starters, she was furious. No telling what she'd say to the Underlanders. There was something else, too. Down in the Underland, Gregor had an identity. He was the warrior. Even if he didn't always buy into that himself, it was important that everybody else did. And somehow, he didn't think it was going to look so hot for the warrior to be showing up with his mom. Especially when he knew she'd have no problem saying stuff like, "Now go wash your hands and find your manners while you're at it," or sending him to bed even if there was a bunch of people around.

"I can't be the one waiting and wondering what's happening to the rest of you. Not this time." His mom set Boots down and wrapped her arms around Lizzie. "You know what I'm talking about, don't you, Lizzie?"

Lizzie nodded. "I could — go — too," she said bravely. But the very notion was so scary, it caused her to start panting again.

"No, I need you to stay up here and keep an eye on your dad and grandma. We won't be gone long. There's just one meeting, and we're coming straight back," said Gregor's mom, stroking Lizzie's hair.

"And then — can we go — away?" said Lizzie.

"That's right," said his mom. "How'd you like to move down to your uncle's farm in Virginia?"

"Good," said Lizzie, looking a little better. "That'd be — good."

"Well, you better start packing while I'm gone. Okay, baby?" said his mom.

"Okay," said Lizzie. And she actually smiled.

Gregor felt like a jerk. Here he'd been worried about how cool he'd look having his mom around in the Underland. He wasn't thinking about her at all. Or about the rest of his family. He reached out and gave Lizzie a pat. "We'll be back in a couple hours, Liz," he said.

"That's right." His mom kissed Lizzie and gave her a squeeze, then turned to him. "So, what do we need to take?"

"Light," said Gregor. "That's the main thing. I'll get it, Mom."

While his dad took the crowbar down to the laundry room to pry open the grate, Gregor dug around the apartment for a couple of flashlights and all the batteries he could find. His mom just sat on the couch, an arm around each of his sisters, talking in a soothing voice about what their new life would be like in Virginia.

Gregor went into the bedroom and saw that his grandma wasn't asleep.

"You need to go back down to that place," she said to him. It wasn't a question.

"I'm in another prophecy, Grandma," Gregor said, and showed it to her.

"Then you got to go. You can run away, but the prophecy will find you somehow," she said.

"That's how it seems to be working out," said Gregor. He straightened her quilts. "You take care of yourself, okay?"

"You, too. See you soon, Gregor," she said.

"See you soon," he said. He kissed her on the forehead and she gave him a smile.

They had to risk leaving his grandma alone for a short time, while they went to the laundry room. But it was doubtful she would try and get out of bed, anyway. And the rats weren't coming back. They had what they wanted.

His dad had pushed the dryer over. Now there was some space in front of the grate, which was propped open. Wisps of white vapor were curling out of the darkness inside the wall. "Looks like the currents are active," said

his dad. "You could probably ride them right down to the Underland. But Ripred said there would be a bat."

The words were not out of his mouth when a large, furry face appeared in the opening. The bat was extraordinary looking — white with dramatic black stripes radiating out from its nose to its ears.

His mother gasped, and Lizzie let out a sharp cry. It was the first Underland creature either of them had ever seen.

But Boots immediately put out her little hand to stroke the bat's fur. "Oh, you look like zebra. Z is for zebra. Hi, you!"

"Greetings," purred the bat. "I am she called Nike. Are you ready to depart?"

Gregor's family looked at one another, then wordlessly exchanged hugs.

"How do we...get on you?" his mother asked the bat.

"You must fall. But do not worry. The current is such that you will ride safely to the ground with or without a flier. I am only here for your ease of mind," said Nike.

The bat dropped out of sight. Boots started eagerly for the grate. "Me next!"

Gregor grabbed her and almost laughed at her excitement. "I think I'm going to hold on to you this time. Ready, Mom?"

His mom knelt down by the grate and stuck her head into it. "We're just...supposed to jump?" She pulled her head out, looking bewildered.

"Wait a sec," said Gregor. He set Boots on the floor and climbed out into the mist, hanging from the edge of the grate opening by one hand. "Now pass down Boots," he said. His dad swung Boots into his free arm. She latched on to him like a baby koala bear. "Come on, Mom. You jump, grab on to us, and we'll all go down together."

His mother bit her lip, gave one look back at his dad and Lizzie, and scooted herself, feet first, out of the laundry room. As she came through, her hand latched on to the wrist that was supporting Gregor, and he released the grate.

Within seconds, the swirling mist blotted out the light from the laundry room. He locked his fingers around his mom's wrist and could feel her pulse going a mile a minute. He tried to block out the terror he felt of heights, of falling, but it wasn't really something he could control. The first time he'd taken this trip he had calmed himself down by telling himself this was just a bad dream.

But the little voice squealing delightedly in his ear was all too real.
"Gre-go! Mama! Boots! We all go wheeeeee!"

CHAPTER 6

"Gregor! We're going to be killed!" cried his mother. "No, Mom, we'll be fine," said Gregor, sounding calmer than he felt. "Hey, Nike?" he called. "Do you think we could ride down?"

He didn't know if the bat had heard him, or if she was even still around, but suddenly he was sitting on her back. Nike gave a twist and his mom was riding behind him.

"Certainly you may ride," said Nike. "Whatever manner is most comfortable." Her voice had a pleasant, cheerful quality that seemed unusual for a bat. Of course, the main bat Gregor talked to was Ares, and he was usually pretty depressed. Not that his friend didn't have good reason to be.

"Thanks," said Gregor. He settled Boots in front of him and clicked on a flashlight. The beam caught the swirls of mist. It gave the impression that they were surrounded by a beautiful, spooky white forest. But through the vapors, Gregor could make out the walls of the wide, stone tube they were descending.

"I can ride bat," said Boots, rubbing her hands on Nike's striped neck. "Z is for zebra. Z is for zoo. And zip!" She'd been a little obsessed with the alphabet lately.

"I expected only yourself and your sister, Gregor the Overlander. Could it be that this third human is your mother?" asked Nike.

"Yeah, she wanted to come see the Underland," Gregor said. To himself he added, "like she wanted a hole in the head."

"Oh, there has been much speculation in the Underland as to the greatness of she who is mother to both the warrior and the princess," said Nike. "What an honor to meet you, Warrior's Mother!"

"You, too," said his mom stiffly. "And you can just call me Grace."

Gregor grinned into the mist. He could tell his mom was thrown by both the friendliness of the bat and how complimentary she was. "So, I don't think I met you before, Nike," he said.

"Oh, no. We did not meet. But I saw you in my homeland when you were fulfilling 'The Prophecy of Gray,'" she said.

"When we went to see Queen Athena?" asked Gregor. That was the only time he had visited the bats' land. There had been hundreds, maybe

thousands hanging from the ceiling of the cavernous place. He could only remember the queen.

"Yes, my mother," said Nike.

"Your mother? Then you must be a princess," said Gregor, a little surprised. She had not introduced herself as Princess Nike.

"I am, yes. But I hope you will not hold it against me." Nike laughed.

When they finally landed, they had to climb off Nike's back so that they could squeeze through the crack in the side of the tube to the tunnel.

"It won't be far now to Regalia," said Gregor, as they all climbed back on Nike.

"Good. The sooner we get this meeting over with, the better," said his mom.

It had taken Gregor about twenty minutes to jog to Regalia after his first fall, but the trip was much shorter on a bat. Before he knew it, Nike was waved through a guarded entrance and there beneath them was Regalia. It was morning, and the city was just stirring to life.

"Oh!" he heard his mom exclaim under her breath. The gorgeous stone city with its ornate towers and intricate carvings could impress even her.

Nike flew them into the High Hall of the palace where Vikus was waiting for them. The old man's face was careworn, and his eyes had lost their brightness. Luxa's disappearance and probable death had taken their toll. But when Vikus saw Gregor, he smiled with relief.

"Gregor the Overlander. I knew you would not forsake us," he said. "And here is Boots as well!"

"Hi, you!" said Boots.

Gregor and Boots slid off Nike's back, revealing their mother. She got off Nike and grabbed Boots before she could run off. "You stay right here with me."

"If my eyes do not deceive me, this must be the woman to whom the Underland owes its very life," said Vikus. He gave a low bow to Gregor's mother. "Welcome, and deepest gratitude, Mother of Our Light."

"You can just call me Grace," said his mom tersely.

"Grace," Vikus said, as if savoring the word. "A fitting name for one who has so aided us. I am Vikus."

"Uh-huh. So, where's this meeting?" said his mom, shifting Boots to her other hip.

"Now that you have landed, the preparations may begin. The delegates' blood must be screened for the plague. Forgive the intrusion, but we must examine your blood as well," said Vikus.

"But we don't have the plague!" said his mom, visibly alarmed at the idea.

"This is my hope. But our doctors have put forth the theory that Ares contracted the plague when he was attacked by mites on the journey to the Labyrinth. As both your children were present when he was bitten, and Gregor was in close contact with him for several days that followed, it is essential that we test their blood," said Vikus. "We must also rule out that the children may have passed it on to you."

It had not crossed Gregor's mind that he and Boots could have been exposed to the plague. Now, he remembered examining Ares's skin with Luxa so they could dab medicine on the spots where the mites had eaten away the bat's flesh. His fingers had been covered in Ares's blood. And, at the time, open sores from a squid-sucker attack had covered his forearm. The bat's blood could have gotten into his wounds.

Warmblood now a bloodborne death ...

His mother's free arm reached for him and pulled him close. "But...if they'd been exposed to the plague, they'd have it by now, right?" she said. "I mean, they'd be showing symptoms, wouldn't they?"

"I cannot say," said Vikus. "Some creatures fall ill within days, others seem to show no symptoms for months. It is an insidious and clever thing."

His mother kept her arm tightly around him as they followed Vikus down a hall and into a brightly lit room. A small woman was leaning over a table filled with medical equipment. There were glass vials of liquids, an oil lamp with a blue flame, and an oddly designed piece of equipment that Gregor guessed was a microscope.

"Doctor Neveeve —" began Vikus, and the woman literally jumped. A glass slide flew from her hand and shattered on the floor.

"Oh," said Dr. Neveeve in a breathy voice. "There goes yet another slide. Do not worry yourselves, it was free of contagion."

"Forgive me for startling you," said Vikus. "The outbreak of 'The Curse of the Warmbloods' has us all on edge. This is Doctor Neveeve, our foremost physician in the study of the plague. Neveeve, may I present Gregor the Overlander, his sister Boots, and their most honorable mother, Grace."

Neveeve's intense, pale-violet eyes darted over them. "Greetings. You cannot imagine how welcome a sight you are."

"They must be cleared for the meeting," said Vikus.

"Yes, yes, let us proceed with all haste," said Neveeve, pulling a pair of skintight gloves over her hands. She pricked each of their fingers with a needle and examined their blood under a microscope. With one glance, she pronounced his mom and Boots plague-free. But when the doctor peered at Gregor's slide, she frowned and adjusted the microscope several times.

"Just say it," Gregor thought. "I've got the plague. I know I do."

To his relief, Neveeve lifted her head and gave them her first smile. "All clear."

Gregor let out his breath in a huff. "Now what?"

"Now if you sit, I will check your scalp for fleas," said Neveeve.

"Fleas? That boy doesn't have fleas," said his mother indignantly.

Gregor couldn't help laughing. "We don't even have a pet."

"I am sorry, but it is essential we do this," said Vikus. "The fleas carry the plague from creature to creature. Neveeve's early recognition of this explains why we have only three cases in Regalia, and hundreds of rats have been stricken."

Suddenly, being checked for fleas wasn't so funny.

When they had all been pronounced flealess, Vikus invited them to rest before the meeting. "It will be at least another hour before all those attending are tested. Come and refresh yourselves."

Vikus led them to a beautiful room. The walls were carved with soft, swirling patterns. Elegant furniture circled a roaring fireplace. There were even potted plants dripping with pink flowers. Underlanders appeared with trays of pretty food and a couple of musicians came in with stringed instruments and asked if Gregor's mom desired music. Gregor figured all the hoopla must have been for her benefit. He and Boots had never received this kind of attention.

"You didn't tell me it was this nice," said his mother.

"It's not, usually. I think somebody's trying to impress you...Mother of Our Light," said Gregor. She rolled her eyes but he could tell she was a little pleased.

Gregor looked at her sitting on the couch, still in her waitress uniform, and thought that if anyone deserved a little star treatment, it was his mom.

He would have liked to stay himself — the music was unlike any he'd ever heard — but there was something he had to do.

"I'm going to run down to the bathroom," he told his mom.

Once he rounded the door, he did run, but not for the bathroom. He took the first flight of stairs and started down it, two steps at a time. The hospital was on one of the lower levels. That must be where they were keeping Ares.

Either he was getting better at navigating the palace, or he was just lucky, because he made it to the hospital quickly. The Underland doctors were surprised to see him, and even more surprised by his request.

"Yes," said one doctor doubtfully. "It is possible to see him. But you will not be able to converse. He is quarantined behind thick walls of glass."

"Okay, well then, I'll just, you know, wave or whatever. I just want him to see I'm here," said Gregor. If Ripred was right and Ares was hanging on only because he thought Gregor was coming, then he had to make contact.

The doctor led him to a long corridor. "There. He is to the passage on your right. You do know...he is very ill."

"I know," said Gregor. "I won't do anything to get him worked up or anything." He knew you were supposed to be quiet around people in hospitals. Before the doctor could change his mind, Gregor hurried down the corridor. He was suddenly excited at the prospect of seeing his friend after all these months. He wanted Ares to know that it would be okay now. He was here. A cure would be found. They would fly together again. His feet picked up speed, and he had to suppress the impulse to run. He whipped around the corner into another hall. On one side was a long glass wall.

Gregor looked through the glass and saw his bat.

Then he leaned over and threw up.

CHAPTER 7

Gregor crouched over as his dinner spewed onto the stone floor, splattering into the glass wall and onto his boots. Another wave of nausea hit him and he retched again. And again.

A cool hand touched the back of his neck, and a woman's sympathetic voice said, "Come, Overlander. Come with me." She led him to a nearby bathroom. He found himself gripping the sides of one of the toilets. A stream of continuous water ran through the basin, immediately washing away its contents. For a minute, Gregor thought he was done, but then the image of Ares filled his brain and he began vomiting again.

Ares had been lying stretched out on his back, his wings awkwardly extended. Large clumps of his glossy black fur were missing. In their place were purple bumps the size of cantaloupes. Several of the bumps had burst and were oozing blood and pus from the ruptures. The bat's tongue, which was coated in white, hung out the side of his mouth. His head was tilted back at an odd angle as he struggled for air. Gregor had never seen anything so frightening in his life.

He got rid of lunch and probably breakfast, too, and then he just heaved for a while, until nothing else came up. His body was bathed in sweat and his limbs were shaky. Finally, he pushed back from the toilet.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," he said. He felt embarrassed and ashamed of his reaction to seeing Ares.

"Do not be. Many people have the same response when they first see a plague victim. My husband, a great soldier, fainted dead away. Others face it stoically, then wake up screaming from nightmares. It is a very fearful thing," said the woman.

"Ares didn't see me, did he?" asked Gregor. It would be awful if his bat had seen him throw up just from looking at him.

"No, he was asleep. Do not punish yourself with thoughts that you have wounded him," said the woman.

"Here, rinse your mouth." She pressed a stone cup into his hand and he rinsed and spat into the toilet.

"I'd be okay if I saw him now. It was just the shock," said Gregor.

"I know this," said the woman.

Gregor looked up and saw her face for the first time. There was something familiar about it but he was sure he didn't know her. "Are you a doctor here?"

"No, I am a visitor like yourself. I come from the Fount. My name is Susannah," said the woman.

"Oh, you're Howard's mom," said Gregor. That's why she looked familiar. She was the mother of one of the guys who had gone with Gregor to find the Bane. That also made her Solovet's and Vikus's daughter. And Luxa's aunt. Was everyone here related, or what?

"Yes, my son speaks very highly of you," said Susannah. "He credits you with saving his life when he was on trial for treason."

"They should have given him a medal or something. He was amazing that whole trip," said Gregor.

"Thank you," said the woman. Then her eyes welled up with tears.

"Are you okay?" said Gregor. Had he said something to upset her?

"As well as one may be under the circumstances," she said. She dampened a towel in a basin and wiped Gregor's face with it. He didn't resist. Howard was one of five children. His mom had probably seen plenty of kids throw up.

"How is Howard? Is he in Regalia, too?" asked Gregor.

Susannah stared at him a moment. "Of course, you do not know. Yes, he is in Regalia. In fact, he is but a few paces from us."

"He's in the hospital? He's not sick, is he?" The truth began to dawn on Gregor. "Oh, no, you don't mean he's...he doesn't have...?"

"The plague, yes," said Susannah. "But he has only recently been diagnosed. The flier, Andromeda, also. So we are very hopeful that you have arrived in time. That the cure may be found and they will not —" She bit her lip.

So Howard was infected. And Andromeda, too. She was the bat who was bonded to Mareth, the soldier who had led the quest to find the Bane. During that trip, Howard's bat, Pandora, had been stripped to the bone by a swarm of mites on an island. Then the mites had attacked Ares, who had barely escaped with his life. Howard had tended Ares's wounds. Andromeda had slept pressed up against him. No wonder Vikus had had Gregor's family's blood tested the second they landed in Regalia. Boots hadn't been in contact with Ares much, but it must be a miracle that Gregor's blood was clear.

"I can't believe I don't have it, too," he mumbled.

"Perhaps, as an Overlander, you have some immunity that Underlanders do not," said Susannah.

"Maybe," said Gregor. His mom was always really careful about them being up-to-date on their vaccinations. But he didn't think he'd had a shot for anything like what Ares had.

He took the damp towel and did his best to clean his boots. "Can I see them? All three of them? If I promise not to throw up?" said Gregor.

"Of course. I am sure the sight of you will be as good as light itself," said Susannah.

She took Gregor back to the corridor lined with glass walls. Someone had already cleaned up the vomit, and the floor and glass were pristine.

Gregor braced himself and took another look at Ares. This time, all he felt was agony for what his bat — his friend — must be suffering. "Oh, geez," he said. "How long can he go on like that?"

"We do not know. But his strength is almost legendary," said Susannah.

Gregor nodded but he wondered if that was a good thing. What if it just meant that Ares would suffer longer than most creatures before he died?

A shudder ran down one of Ares's wings and he opened his eyes. His gaze was unfocused at first, but when it landed on Gregor the bat came to attention. Gregor mustered every ounce of strength he had and gave Ares what he hoped was an encouraging smile. He pressed his right hand onto the glass and saw Ares lift his left claw a few inches. It was as close as they could get to the locking of hand and claw that signified they were bonds.

Ares's eyes drifted shut and Susannah placed her hand on Gregor's arm. "Howard and Andromeda are not nearly so ill. Come," she said.

Gregor followed her farther down the corridor to another glass-enclosed room. Howard and Andromeda were sitting across from each other on the floor with a chessboard between them. Howard had only one visible purple bump about the size of a walnut on his neck. Andromeda's gold-and-black-speckled coat appeared as healthy as ever. Susannah rapped on the glass and the two looked up. The expression on Howard's face when he saw them was so elated that Gregor didn't have to force his smile. Howard and Andromeda hurried to the wall. They couldn't hear each other through the thick glass, but Gregor was sure Howard said, "Gregor! You are here!"

"Yeah, I'm here," said Gregor.

Howard turned his head to listen to Andromeda for a moment, then mouthed to Gregor. "Boots?"

Gregor nodded. "Boots is here, too."

Just then, a door at the back of the room opened. A woman, swathed in protective clothing, entered carrying a tray of medicines. She ordered Howard and Andromeda into their beds.

"Is that Neveeve?" asked Gregor. "She tested my blood."

"Yes, she personally treats all the plague cases," said Susannah.

"Wow. That's not a job for wimps," said Gregor. When he saw Susannah didn't understand, he said, "You've got to be brave to do that."

"Oh, yes. Neveeve is extremely dedicated," said Susannah. "She is determined that we will cure 'The Curse of the Warmbloods.'"

Howard stripped off his shirt and Gregor thought he should give his friends some privacy. And his mom was probably wondering where he was by now. He had to get back before she started getting worried.

As he made his way back through the hospital hallways, Gregor heard a familiar voice as he passed a room. "Overlander!"

Inside, he saw Mareth sitting up on a bed.

"Hey, Mareth!" said Gregor. "Man, it's good to see you!" He didn't add "alive" but that was what he was thinking. The last time he'd seen Mareth, the soldier had been unconscious, bleeding heavily from a bite a sea serpent had given his leg, and a long way from home.

Mareth grabbed something, swung off the side of the bed, and came to meet him. It was only then that Gregor saw that his injured leg had been amputated. All that remained was a few inches of his thigh.

"Your leg." The words were out of his mouth before he could stop them.

"Yes," said Mareth, leaning on his crutch. "I am working hard to be like Temp, and grow a new one."

"Yeah," said Gregor weakly. "That's a neat trick." The cockroach had lost two legs in a squid attack, but Ripred said he had grown them back in the Dead Land.

"They could not save it. The infection spread too deep. But what need have I for a leg when I have Andromeda to ride upon?" said Mareth. As if he had suddenly remembered about his bat, Mareth passed a hand across his eyes.

"She's going to be okay, Mareth," said Gregor. "The meeting's going to start any minute. There's got to be a cure. They'll find it."

"This is what I believe," said Mareth, pulling himself together. "They tested you? Your blood is clear?"

"I'm fine. So is Boots. And I guess you're okay, too, since you're not behind glass," said Gregor.

"Yes, somehow. It does not entirely make sense to me," said Mareth. "How some of us escaped it."

"I know. It's weird," said Gregor.

"Everyone was so afraid you would not come. But I knew you would," said Mareth.

"Of course I came. I mean, it's only for a few hours," said Gregor.

Mareth looked confused. "A few hours? Did Vikus tell you this?" he asked.

"Yeah, he said you guys just needed us for the meeting. Then we can go home," said Gregor. "Someone else is going to find the cure."

"Vikus said this? That you are not to go on a quest to find the cure with the gnawers? You are certain?" said Mareth.

"That's what he said." Gregor thought for a moment, and hesitated. "Well...no, I guess Vikus didn't tell me that himself. He sent Ripred to tell me," said Gregor. "But Ripred wouldn't lie about..."

A terrible realization came over Gregor. Yes, Ripred would. He would lie. If he thought it was the only way to get Gregor and Boots to the Underland, Ripred would lie in a second.

CHAPTER 8

Gregor hurried back up through the palace and ran into Vikus, his mom, and Boots outside the luxury room. He needed to talk to Vikus about this whole cure thing, but he couldn't do it in front of his mom. Maybe Mareth was wrong and Ripred was right. Maybe they were supposed to find the cure in a lab, not on some dangerous quest somewhere. Maybe it was all a misunderstanding.

"Where on earth have you been?" said his mother. "I thought you just went to the bathroom."

"I did but...I threw up," said Gregor. "And it took some time for my stomach to settle."

"You sick?" His mom's hand was instantly on his forehead.

"No, Mom, I feel fine now," said Gregor.

"Well, that stew was pretty rich. And then all this flying around. You never did have a strong stomach," she said. "He gets carsick on long trips, too," she told Vikus. "We have to travel with a plastic bag."

Okay, this was one of those mom-things Gregor had been worried about. His dad would never tell people how the warrior had to travel with a plastic bag. And she didn't even know what she was talking about because flying on bats didn't upset his stomach. Still, this was better than telling her about seeing Ares. "I'm fine, Mom. So, is it time for the meeting?"

"Yes, let us proceed to the arena," said Vikus.

Nike and Euripedes, Vikus's big gray bat, flew them all to the oval-shaped arena used for sports events and military training. The playing field was covered in a soft, springy moss and seating for a large crowd topped the high walls. The arena was on the edge of Regalia and shut off from the city by towering, stone doors. Across the field from the doors were a few tunnels, some flush with the ground, others high in the air, which led away from the city.

When they flew into the arena, the stands were empty. Most of the creatures attending the meeting were down on the field. All three species — the bats, the cockroaches, and the rats — stood in their own clump. There was no interaction between them. It reminded Gregor of the beginning of a track meet, when the teams were assembled around the field warming up, each in a different-colored jersey.

"Ready to make some new friends?" Gregor said to his mom, trying to sound positive.

She simply pressed her lips together in distaste as she stared down at the menagerie of giant Underland creatures. "Tell me again, who's on whose side?"

Gregor shook his head. "It's kind of complicated. The main thing is that most of the humans and rats hate each other. The bats are tight with the humans. The cockroaches just wish everybody would leave them alone. But they love Boots. So, if she shows up, they show up. The prophecy says they need everybody here to find the cure."

Nike and Euripedes dropped them on the field and joined a group of four bats, including Queen Athena, who perched on short, squat stone cylinders.

Ripred and two other rats sat about ten yards away. All three seemed preoccupied with trying to comb some kind of yellow powder out of their coats with their claws.

"What's that in their fur?" his mom asked Vikus, eyeing the rats with revulsion.

"A powder to kill fleas. Just as a precaution. Their blood was clear of plague, but they all had fleas, and we cannot risk the insects entering the city," said Vikus.

Waiting patiently, a little off to one side, were a half-dozen roaches. The leader had a bent antenna.

"Temp!" Boots cried out. "I see Temp!" She wriggled out of Gregor's arms and ran for the roaches.

"Boots!" His mother started after her but Gregor caught her arm and urgently spoke in her ear in a hushed voice.

"No, Mom, don't! That's Temp! She wouldn't be alive without him! The roaches adore her. Don't mess it up!" said Gregor.

"Excuse me?" said his mother, raising her eyebrows.

"I mean, just be polite," said Gregor sheepishly. He never bossed his mom around that way at home. "Please."

His mother looked back at the roaches and hesitated. She flinched as Temp sat back on his hind legs, and Boots ran straight into his six-leg hug.

"Hi, you! Hi, Temp! You waked up!" she said.

"Temp waked up, Temp did," said the roach.

Boots stepped back and surveyed him curiously. Then she began to count his legs. "One — two — three — four — five — six! All there!"

"Tike you, my new legs, like you?" said Temp.

"Ye-es! You give Boots a ride? We go for a ride now?" said Boots.

Temp dropped to his belly, and Boots climbed right up on his back and they took off running around the field.

"Come on and meet the roaches. They're nice," said Gregor.

His mother gave him a look like he was insane but allowed him to lead her over to the insects. Temp ran up with Boots.

"See? This is Mama!" said Boots, sliding off Temp and running over to swing on her mom's hand.

The roaches seemed rattled by the news. Gregor could hear them whispering to one another. "Be she the swatter, be she? Be she the swatter?" They all bowed low to the ground.

"Welcome, Maker of the Princess and Most Fearsome Swatter," said Temp.

"What is it calling me?" Gregor's mom said to him.

"Um, I think he said 'Maker of the Princess and Most Fearsome Swatter,'" said Gregor.

"What's that mean?" said his mom.

"That you're Boots's mom and...let's face it, Mom, you swat a lot of roaches," said Gregor.

"Well, I'm not planning to swat these giant things!" said his mom, scowling at him.

"Hey, I didn't make up the name!" said Gregor.

"All right, listen up, you roaches," said his mom.

The roaches all sank flatter on the ground, as if being swatted by his mom was inevitable. "Yes, Maker of the Princess and Most Fearsome Swatter," Temp could barely hiss out.

"From now on, you just call me Grace. Okay?" she said. Then she turned to the rest of the creatures in the arena. "Everybody here, just call me Grace!"

She took Boots's hand and stomped back across toward the bats, muttering, "Most Fearsome Swatter. Please."

While Vikus introduced his mother to the bats, Gregor crossed to Ripred. "Oh, look who's here! I guess your mommy let you come visit after all," said the rat.

"You better not have lied to me about how long we have to stay, Ripred," said Gregor under his breath. "You better not be planning to take me and Boots on some road trip to find the cure."

"You've read the prophecy. All it says is to bring you from above," said Ripred. "Now you've made an appearance, it's fine with *me* if you go home. Trust me, I could do without another quest with your chatty little sister and her six-legged friends."

"Is that what everybody thinks?" asked Gregor. "That I'm just here for the meeting?"

"Well, you'll have to ask around, won't you? I can hardly answer for what goes on in the crawlers' pea brains." Ripred dug at the powder behind his ear and called out, "Can we get this fiasco started, Vikus? Some of us have lives to live. However briefly."

"But where are the nibblers?" Vikus asked.

"I don't know. Lapblood and Mange were supposed to get word to them," said Ripred, indicating the other rats with two flicks of his tail.

"Well, we didn't," snapped Lapblood. "Why would we?"

"She's right," said Mange. "We didn't spend all that effort driving the nibblers out of our land to join up with them now. If they die of the plague, good riddance."

"Who needs them, anyway?" said Lapblood. "The prophecy doesn't even mention the nibblers." She began to scratch frantically at her shoulder. "What is this poison? Does it kill the fleas or just make them extra hungry?!"

"You had very specific orders!" said Ripred, grinding his back into the moss to relieve the itching.

"Well, if you hadn't noticed, we don't take orders from you!" said Mange.

Ripred sprang to his feet and turned on the two rats. They crouched into defensive positions, waiting for his attack, but he only said, "We'll finish this discussion in the tunnels."

"This is not ideal, but if the nibblers are not to be present, then we lack only Doctor Neveeve and Solovet," said Vikus. "Ah, here they are now."

A bat flew in from Regalia and Neveeve and Solovet climbed off its back.

Solovet called the meeting to order and asked Neveeve to speak about the plague. The doctor hoisted a large leather book off the back of the bat.

She laid it on the moss and knelt before it. The book was only about a foot tall, but it was at least three feet wide and very thick. When Neveeve opened it, Gregor could hear the crackling of parchment.

"I have been scouring the old records in an attempt to find any similarity between this current plague and one in the past," said Neveeve. "Some two and a half centuries ago there was an epidemic markedly like 'The Curse of the Warmbloods.' Another just over eighty years ago. In both cases, a pestilence brought fever, painful breathing, and large violet buboes on the skin. Thousands died in the Underland."

"Lovely. Do they happen to mention a cure?" said Ripred.

Neveeve turned a page in the book and revealed an ink drawing of a plant that had distinctive star-shaped leaves. "This plant. It is called starshade. Only a single field of it exists."

"I've never seen it," said Lapblood. "It must grow in the Overland."

"No, according to the records, it grows in the same place from which the plague first emerged," said Neveeve.

"In the cradle find the cure," said Vikus, quoting from the prophecy.

"On the island with the mites?" asked Gregor. He didn't see how they'd ever get the cure from there. The mites would devour them in seconds.

"No, Gregor. That is a new island and, as Neveeve said, the plague has been cropping up for centuries. The mites may have carried the plague to the island, but it is not the cradle," said Vikus.

"So, where is it?" said Mange.

"It seems the cradle lies on the floor of the valley in...the Vineyard of Eyes," said Neveeve.

There was dead silence. Finally, Lapblood spoke, "We may as well just slit our throats now, as enter the Vineyard."

"Yet you had no trouble driving the nibblers into it," said Queen Athena.

"The nibblers had the whole of the Underland to choose from," said Mange.

"Where? The Dead Land? The Fire Points?" retorted Solovet.

"You're a fine one to talk, Solovet, given the current circumstances," said Lapblood.

"Please!" said Vikus, cutting off their bickering.

"Remember all of our lives are now at stake. This plant, Neveeve, it grows nowhere else?"

"They attempted to transplant it to the fields of Regalia, but it died almost immediately. We have no choice but to harvest great quantities of it from the Vineyard and distill it into a medicine."

"You want us to go into the Vineyard and help you find this cure, but what guarantee do we have that we'll ever see it?" said Lapblood. "We gnawers starve now! At your hand! The plague runs like wildfire through our tunnels! Today we learn you have yellow powder to stop the fleas that spread it! But do you send it?"

"You attacked us," said Solovet in a steely voice. "And now whimper when you must suffer the consequences."

"Whimper?" snarled Lapblood. She and Mange crouched to attack. Solovet's hand flew to the hilt of her sword.

Gregor didn't understand exactly what was going on, but he could tell things were about to get ugly.

Ripred stepped between the seething rats and Solovet.

"Tides turn, Solovet," said Ripred quietly. "Remember this moment when your own pups cry with hunger and the plague stills their hearts. Even now, your grandson lies behind glass in the hospital."

"And what of my granddaughter, Luxa? Where lies she, Ripred?" spat out Solovet.

"I don't know! But you must set it aside, Solovet, or go back and tell your people to make their graves. At this moment, we have great mutual need!" said Ripred.

Gregor never knew how Solovet would have responded, because at that moment the horns began to blow. The warning came from the tunnels leading away from Regalia. A dozen humans on bats appeared and headed across the arena for the tunnels.

"What are they blowing that for? No rats are invading," said Ripred in a puzzled tone.

"There must be some threat, or they would not give the signal," said Solovet.

"But who would be attacking Regalia now?" said Vikus.

The answer came out of the tunnels. It was a bat with a bright orange coat that Gregor had never seen before. Something was wrong with it — its wings beat erratically and it was careening around in a bizarre fashion.

"It is Icarus! But what ails him?" said Nike. As Icarus swooped down over them, Gregor saw the purple bumps oozing fresh blood into his orange

fur, the white tongue wagging from his mouth, the delirious look in his eyes.

"It's the plague!" he cried. "He looks just like Ares does!"

Icarus twisted in the air, his wings fluttering out of sync, and then lost control. A general cry of alarm went up as the bat plummeted straight down at them.

CHAPTER 9

As Icarus hit the ground, Gregor could hear the crack as the bones in his neck broke. He died instantly. There was no movement except the leaking of blood from the purple bumps.

"Do not touch him!" warned Neveeve. But this was unnecessary since almost everybody was instinctively scrambling away from the bat's ravaged body. Gregor backed into a roach, lost his footing, and fell over it onto his rear end. Two bats collided on takeoff. Only his mother, who was within a few feet of the ghastly creature when it landed, hadn't moved. She was clutching Boots in her arms, rooted to the ground in terror. Gregor got to his feet and ran for her.

"Torch the body!" ordered Solovet.

"No!" shouted Ripred, but three torches had already left the hands of the soldiers above. "No!" Ripred was literally gnashing his teeth in frustration.

"Get out of here! Everyone! Run!" he screamed.

When the torches hit Icarus, Gregor understood Ripred's frantic reaction. The flames had only rested on the fur a moment when a wave of small, black specks began to abandon the dead bat's body.

"Fleas!" cried Vikus. "Get you gone!"

Gregor grabbed Boots, caught his mother's arm, and pulled her onto the back of the nearest bat, who happened to be Queen Athena. Probably you weren't supposed to hop on a queen without asking permission, but this was no time for polite small talk. As they rose into the air, Gregor could see the rats and cockroaches disappearing into the tunnels leading to the Underland. All the humans on the ground had been picked up by bats and were airborne.

The fleas were hopping madly away from the burning bat.

"To the royal box!" called Vikus. "No one enters the city!"

Queen Athena swerved in the air and carried them toward a large, curved section of seats high in the arena. It reminded Gregor of the boxes where the rich people sat in Yankee Stadium. This must be where the royal family watched the sporting events.

As soon as they landed, Neveeve made them spread out. "Put as much distance as you can between one another." Gregor moved away from his mother and Queen Athena, but didn't feel like he could set Boots down.

She'd just run off, maybe to the railing of the box, and they were up really high.

His mom started to follow Gregor and Boots but Neveeve waved her back. "No! Move into a space by yourself!"

The doctor opened a pouch at her belt and pulled out what looked like a fancy perfume bottle. It had one of those bulbs on the side so you could spray it. She closed her eyes, pointed the nozzle at herself, and squeezed the bulb. Puffs of yellow powder settled on her skin and clothing. It looked like the same stuff the rats had been scratching from their coats. The flea powder.

Neveeve moved rapidly around the box spraying everyone. "Rub it into your skin, your hair. Cover every inch of your being," she instructed.

When she got to Gregor, he covered Boots's eyes with his hands while he shut his own. He could feel the powder coating his skin. It had a sharp, bitter smell. As Neveeve moved on to his mother, Boots sneezed and gave him a surprised look. "You yellow," she said.

"You, too," Gregor said, working the powder through her hair. "And what letter does yellow begin with?"

"Y!" Boots said. "Y is for yellow!"

"And what else?" said Gregor, trying to distract her as he rubbed the stuff over her skin.

"Y is for yo-yo! Y is for yak!" said Boots. She had never seen a yak, except in her *ABC* book. Neither had Gregor, for that matter. Probably no one would have ever even heard of a yak if it hadn't been about the only animal that began with a Y.

In a matter of minutes, the entire party of six bats and six humans had been treated with the pesticide.

"I think it is safe now to gather," said Neveeve.

Everyone came together in the center of the box. Below on the field, the charred body of the bat lay in a puddle of water. The fire had been extinguished.

"Bat sick. Bat needs juice," said Boots. Whenever she had a cold the first thing she got was a cup of juice.

"He's asleep now. He can have some when he wakes up," said Gregor. He could never manage to work out how to tell Boots someone had died.

"Apple juice." Boots squatted down and began to draw squiggles in the fine coat of yellow powder that covered the floor.

"Give orders to disinfect the entire field," Solovet called out to a guard who hovered on his bat near the box. "Wait!" The guard stayed as she turned to the doctor. "Will that be sufficient, Neveeve?"

"They must also spray the tunnels that lead away from the arena," said Neveeve. "The fleas will not be able to enter Regalia with the stone doors shut, nor jump so high as the seats. But some may already have escaped down the tunnels and into the rest of the Underland. Any who guard there must be recalled and their skin examined for bites."

"Do as she says," Solovet told the guard.

"What of the gnawers and the crawlers?" asked Vikus.

"No flea could penetrate the coat of poison on the gnawers, and they will not bite the crawlers. They are all quite safe," said Neveeve.

"And those of us here assembled?" said Vikus.

"If any flea reached us, which is doubtful, it is now dead. We must each be stripped and checked for bites by physicians in Regalia," said Neveeve.

"We are not..." choked out Gregor's mother. "We are never returning to Regalia!"

"Please, Grace, I know this to be very unexpected and distressing —" began Vikus.

"We're going home! We came to your meeting! That's all you said we had to do! So you tell that bat to take us home now!" said his mother as she pointed wildly at Nike.

"Who told you this? That you were only expected for the meeting?" asked Vikus with concern.

"Ripred," said Gregor. "He said we just had to come for a couple of hours. That you didn't need us to find the cure. Then he sent a swarm of rats to scare us out of the apartment."

Gregor could tell by the look Vikus exchanged with Solovet that this was the first they had heard of any of this.

"I am afraid he was not forthcoming," said Vikus.

"What do you mean?" asked Gregor's mom.

"He means Ripred lied," said Solovet.

"He may in fact have thought their presence was unnecessary for the —" said Vikus weakly.

"He lied!" repeated Solovet. "Do not defend him. He knows perfectly well there will be no quest for the cure without the Overlanders! He

obviously thought there was no other means of bringing them below. I would have done the same, Vikus, if you would not have."

Gregor bet she would have, too. Solovet would not have cared what Gregor or his family wanted. Not at Regalia's expense.

"We will not force them to stay, Solovet!" said Vikus. Gregor had never seen him so angry. "They have been brought here under false pretenses. We will not force them to stay!"

Gregor's mother clutched Vikus's arm as if it were a lifeline. "You'll send us home now, then? We can leave?"

"No!" said Solovet.

"Yes!" said Vikus. "Nike! Prepare to take the Overlanders home!"

"Guards!" barked Solovet.

Gregor was bewildered at the power struggle playing out before them. He had never seen Vikus and Solovet fight like this, and it rattled him. Who could actually make this decision? What would happen if his family tried to leave? What was he supposed to do?

"Wait!" Gregor took his mom's hand. "Look, Mom, I've been to see Ares. He's really bad. He's dying, Mom. I can't leave him like this. So, how about you take Boots back and I stay and try to help? Okay? You take Boots and Lizzie and Grandma to Virginia. Dad will wait for me to come back up. Then we'll come to Virginia, too."

"That might be an acceptable compromise," said Vikus, eyeing his wife.

"We could put it to the council," said Solovet, although she did not sound convinced.

"I can't leave you down here, Gregor," said his mom. "I'm sorry about your friend. I really am. But I can't leave you here."

"Look, Mom, I don't think all three of us are going to be allowed out of here," said Gregor. "Please, take Boots and go home." He squeezed her hand tightly. It took him only a few seconds to register that something was wrong.

His mom was talking back to him now, but the words weren't reaching his brain. He moved his fingers over the skin on the back of her hand. No, he hadn't imagined it. It was there.

"Gregor, are you listening to me?" pleaded his mom.

He wasn't. He was trying to make sense of what his fingers were telling him. And trying to wish it away. But he couldn't.

Gregor slowly lifted his mom's hand into the light of a nearby torch and wiped off the yellow powder. A small red bite was swelling up on her skin.

PART 2

The Jungle

CHAPTER 10

His mom stared at her hand and became very still. As the rest of the group saw the bite, all movement and sound stopped. There was not a whisper, not a rustling of a wing or robe.

Curious, Boots climbed up on a seat to see what everyone was looking at. "You need pink," she said when she saw the bite.

Gregor knew she meant the pink calamine lotion they put on bug bites in the summer.

"I need to go home," his mother whispered.

"We cannot let you," said Vikus with a sad shake of his head. "Not now."

"If the plague were unleashed in the Overland, it could mean the annihilation of the warmbloods there as well," said Solovet.

"We must place you in quarantine at once," said Neveeve.

Solovet touched his mother's shoulder. "We are so deeply sorry this happened." She sighed. "Nike, take her in and report to be inspected for bites."

Gregor was still holding his mom's hand. He couldn't let go. "Mom..."

She gently pried his fingers loose and stepped back from him. "You take your sister home."

Did he nod? Gregor wasn't sure. But his mom got on Nike's back and disappeared.

"We must all be checked for bites immediately," said Neveeve.

Somehow they were all on bats. They did not go through the city, but took some tunnels that opened out over the white seething river that ran by Regalia. At the dock, no one assisted them. The yellow powder was enough to keep people at bay.

They were sent to bathe and then had to stand naked while no less than seven teams of doctors inspected their skin for flea bites in bright light. Boots, who was exceptionally ticklish, giggled through the whole thing. Gregor submitted to the inspection without objecting, but he was almost certain he and Boots had not been bitten.

"You can run away, but the prophecy will find you somehow," he heard his grandma saying.

Oh, it had found him, all right. And dug its teeth into him. Into Boots, too. And it would not let them go until the whole terrifying episode had been played out. Their mom was infected with the plague. Now the warrior...the princess...they had to go try and find the cure.

Gregor wanted to scream out to no one in particular that it had been enough for Ares and Howard and Andromeda to be sick. He would have found a way to go on the quest. But his mother would never have let Boots go to the...what was it? The Vineyard of Eyes? For the prophecy to be fulfilled, his mother had to be taken out of commission. Quarantined. Made a victim. Yes, prophetically speaking, everything was right on schedule.

He felt exhausted by the responsibility that lay ahead. He was so sick of being dragged into the Underland. Of being expected to solve its problems. Of having the rest of his family suffer for causes that did not even really involve them. After he and Boots had been pronounced free of flea bites, they were given new silky Underlander clothes. Gregor managed to talk them into letting him have his boots back, but they had to be inspected for fleas and disinfected first. While they sat on a bench in the hospital waiting to hear about the others, Boots nodded off on his shoulder. No wonder, she'd only had a couple of hours of sleep. Vikus sent for Dulcet, the nanny who had looked after Boots on earlier visits.

Dulcet took the sleeping little girl from Gregor's arms and then touched his shoulder. "I am very sorry to hear about your mother. But do not lose heart. You will find the cure. Of this, I am certain."

Her tone was so kind that Gregor almost broke down and told her about how he *had* to find the cure. How his mom just *had* to live. How his whole family would break apart into splinters if she wasn't there to hold it together. How she could not die because he could not imagine the world without her. And how it would be Gregor's fault...her horrible death...the purple bumps...the struggle for air...because he had wanted to make this trip to the Underland...and she had not.

But all he said was, "Thanks, Dulcet." When everyone who had been at the meeting had been scrupulously checked, a total of three were sent into quarantine: Gregor's mom and two bats named Cassiopeia and Pollux.

Gregor saw Neveeve at the end of the hallway, writing something on a clipboard. He walked over and touched her arm.

"Oh!" she exclaimed. Her arm jerked to the side and the quill pen she'd been writing with left a large blot on her parchment.

"Sorry," said Gregor. Boy, she sure was jumpy. Of course, spending your days treating plague patients was not exactly a vacation.

"Can you tell me where my mom is?" asked Gregor.

"We have her isolated," said Neveeve. "Come, she sleeps, but you can see her."

The doctor led Gregor through the hospital.

"Does she know Boots and I didn't get bitten?" asked Gregor.

"Yes. But she was still highly agitated," said Neveeve, her fingers rubbing her eyelid, which seemed to be twitching. "I gave her a medicine to calm her." Gregor thought Neveeve might benefit from a little of that medicine herself, but he didn't say so. His mom was in a private room on the same hall as Ares, Howard, and Andromeda. Gregor looked through the glass wall and saw that all the yellow powder had been washed off her and she was dressed in fresh white pajamas. She looked small and vulnerable in the hospital bed. It was good she was asleep. If she could speak, she would order Gregor home and he would have to tell her that he and Boots couldn't go back now and she'd go crazy. So he fixed the picture of his mom in his head. What if this was the last time he ever saw her?

He shook the thought from his head and turned to Neveeve. "I need your help. I really need to know everything you know about the plague," he said.

"I am now headed to my laboratory where I study this sickness. Would you like to accompany me?" asked the doctor. "It is outside of Regalia, but it will take some time for them to resume the meeting to discuss the cure."

Nike flew them out of the palace, over the city, and high above the arena. The body of the bat had been removed and the moss of the playing field had a yellow coating of flea powder. They went down a tunnel, picking up a few torches from the holders on the walls. As the tunnel began to fork, Gregor knew he'd been this way before.

"Isn't Ares's cave out this way?" he asked.

"I believe it is. I have never visited it," said Neveeve. "It is said to be well hidden. This is why it took Howard and Andromeda several days to find Ares and bring him into the hospital,"

"He didn't come in because he felt sick?" asked Gregor.

"No, Vikus had not heard from him for weeks. So

Howard and Andromeda flew out to search for his cave. He was so ill already, they had to carry him in,"
said Neveeve.

Gregor thought of Ares, alone and sick in his cave. His few close friends were dead or missing. And Gregor, his bond, was unreachable. "Poor Ares."

"Yes," said Neveeve. "Ares has been greatly persecuted through no fault of his own, and this is the result."

This surprised Gregor because there was not much sympathy for Ares in the Underland. He was deeply mistrusted and most people and bats wanted him dead. He felt a surge of warmth toward Neveeve for her compassionate view of his bond.

"Did you know him well?" asked Gregor.

"Not well. After you left Regalia, Ares would not return to the city, fearing they would imprison him again. On Vikus's instructions, I continued to care for the mite wounds on his back at my lab. Even then, Ares would only come very late at night when I was the only one present."

"I appreciate you doing that," said Gregor.

"As I said, I believe his treatment has been unjust," said Neveeve.

Her laboratory was housed in a series of large connecting caves. Long stone counters were covered with a variety of lab equipment. A stream had been diverted into a narrow channel that ran through the back of one of the caves. A handful of people in gloves moved about their duties. A few bats were there as well, peering into microscopes, consulting with the humans.

Neveeve guided Gregor into a room that was separated from the rest of the lab by a heavy stone door. "This is where I conduct my research," she said, carefully shutting the door behind her.

There were test tubes and beakers and several microscopes. Along one wall were four large glass containers that fitted into stone cubes. They reminded him of water coolers. Gregor moved in to examine one. Little black specks were crawling around inside it. Fleas. His torchlight reflected off a shiny red pool at the bottom of the container. Gregor realized it was blood and gave a little jump backward. His arm caught the adjacent container, causing it to tip sideways, but he managed to catch it. Fortunately, this one was empty.

"Sorry! Man, I'm sorry," said Gregor, steadying the container.

"That was well caught," said Neveeve with a high-pitched laugh. "Thank goodness, as these are made specially for the plague and not easily replaced. It took me several months to receive this one when its predecessor was broken. I am about to use this new one to test out a most promising antidote."

Gregor put the torch in a holder and stuck his hands in his pockets so he wouldn't bump into anything else. All he needed now was to be busting up some experiment that could save everybody's life.

The doctor told him what she knew about the plague. It was bloodborne, not airborne, which meant you couldn't get it if somebody just sneezed on you, only if their blood got in your veins. That was where the fleas came in. They transmitted the disease from warmblood to warmblood.

"In many plagues, the insects would die as well. Not as the warmbloods do, but the germs would multiply in their bodies and kill them. Not so with this one. We believe that no insect has died. No fish or scaled creature, either. That is why it is called 'The Curse of the Warmbloods' and not 'The Curse of the Underland,'" said Neveeve.

"Ripred said you could treat the symptoms in Regalia," said Gregor.

"Yes, we can ease discomfort, lower fever, give medicines to induce sleep, but these do not kill the plague," said Neveeve. "We are attempting to come up with our own cure in the event that your search is not successful. Although almost no one really believes we can do it," said Neveeve with a weak smile. "I have faith that we can, but it will take time."

Time. It was all going to come down to time. "How long do you have after you're bitten?" he asked.

"It varies greatly. Ares, for instance, was the first Underlander to fall ill, but he shows remarkable resistance. It seems the fliers do not sicken as quickly as the humans do. Howard and Andromeda have only become symptomatic in the past few days. But then, we do not know if they contracted the disease from the mites or when they brought Ares into the hospital. Your mother...as a human who has had a flea bite from Icarus, clearly an advanced case..." Neveeve hesitated.

"I need the truth. How long would you give her?" said Gregor.

Neveeve lowered her gaze and massaged her forehead with a trembling hand. "If things go badly...we could lose her in two weeks."

CHAPTER 11

The stone floor was cold. Gregor lay on his side holding a small mirror by the handle. He was trying to read "The Prophecy of Blood" but it wasn't easy.

"You know, I've already got this thing memorized," he said.

"We know, Gregor, but Nerissa and I feel it is important for you to examine the original," said Vikus. "There are clues you may pick up from the way it is written."

So Gregor peered back into the mirror.

The first two prophecies that had involved him had been carved in big letters right in the middle of the walls of the stone room that held all of Sandwich's visions. This third one was almost impossible to decipher.

In the first place, "The Prophecy of Blood" was on the floor, which might have been okay if it wasn't crammed into a corner. Secondly, the letters were very tiny and had a lot of confusing curlicues and junk coming off them. Then, of course, the thing was written backward.

No matter how he twisted and turned his body or positioned the light or squinted to make out the letters, Gregor could never really get a clear shot of it. He seemed to spend more time looking at his own face than at the prophecy. When his mirror arm began to cramp, he finally gave up.

"What's the deal with this thing? It's like Sandwich didn't even want us to be able to read it," said Gregor.

"He did want us to read it, Gregor. Or he never would have written it," said Vikus. The old man knelt down and rubbed his hand over the prophecy. "But Nerissa believes he purposely made it difficult to read."

"Yeah? Why's that, Nerissa?" asked Gregor, sitting up to look at her.

When Luxa had disappeared in the rats' tunnels, Nerissa, as the last living member of the royal family, had been crowned queen. Many people had opposed her coronation because she had visions of the future that made her seem crazy. Others simply doubted if she had the physical strength for the job. At present, she was curled up in a cloak on the floor, leaning against the wall for support. Now that she was queen, she was better dressed and her hair was neatly pinned on top of her head. But she was as bony and tremulous as ever.

"Because the prophecy itself is difficult to read. Its meaning — it is hard to understand," said Nerissa.

"There's only one part of it that really seems confusing to me," said Gregor. The first stanza said there would be a plague. Okay, it was here. The third stanza said to bring Gregor and Boots. Okay, they were here. The fifth stanza said the warmbloods had to find the cure. Okay, they were going to try. The seventh stanza said you do it or you die. Okay, they knew that.

But those words that appeared in the second, fourth, sixth, and eighth stanzas. The repeating stanza. That was the confusing part.

Turn and turn and turn again.

you see the what but not the when.

Remedy and cure entwine,

And so they form a single vine.

"Turn and turn and turn again," said Gregor. "What's that about?"

"Before I burden you with several centuries of scholarly opinion, what is your interpretation of it, Gregor?" said Vikus.

Gregor considered the stanza again, rolling the words around in his mind. "Well, it sounds to me like Sandwich is trying to tell us...we're wrong. Like whatever we think is happening...it's not."

"Yes. Not only wrong now. But as we 'turn and turn,' we are still not seeing the truth," said Nerissa.

"So...if we're wrong...then why are we doing anything?" said Gregor. "Why are we even going to the Vineyard of Eyeballs or whatever it's called?"

"Because the alternative is to do nothing," said Vikus. "And a journey is indicated. We must go to the cradle to find the cure. It seems likely that the 'single vine' would grow in a vineyard, does it not? So we go, and perhaps along the way we will unravel this stanza as well."

"When you say 'we' do you mean 'you and me'? Because you're coming with me this time?" asked Gregor hopefully.

Vikus smiled. "No, Gregor. I confess, I was using a more general 'we.' I cannot go. But if it is any consolation, Solovet is planning to travel with you."

"Well, that's something," said Gregor. He'd rather have Vikus to help unravel the prophecy, but he knew Solovet would be better at fighting. And

if this place were as dangerous as everybody thought, he would need her. "And Ripred. Is he coming?"

"He says he would not miss it for all the world," said Vikus.

Gregor felt his heart lift a little. With both Ripred and Solovet along, they might just make it.

An Underlander knocked on the door and announced that they were needed.

"The rats and crawlers must have returned," said Vikus. "We are going to continue the meeting within the walls of the palace. Come, let us go."

As they started down the hallway Gregor tried to give the hand mirror back to Nerissa. "Keep it," she said. "You may have need of it again." He stuck the mirror in his back pocket absent-mindedly.

The moment they crossed the threshold, he recognized the place. How could he forget it? He took in the stone bleachers that rose up around a stage that sat right in the middle of the circular room. On that stage — that was where he and Ares had made the vows that bonded them together. Now the stage was empty, but the bleachers held clusters of creatures. The human council occupied one section of seats. The bats sat to their right, the roaches to their left, and the rats were milling around the benches directly across the stage from them.

Vikus and Nerissa went to join the humans but Gregor had that odd feeling he'd had in the cafeteria one day when both Angelina and Larry had been sick and missed school. He did not know where to sit. Not with the rats, that was for sure. But he didn't much like the Regalian council, which was probably still thinking about tossing him off a cliff for treason. The bats had made Ares's life miserable by shunning him. Finally, Gregor went over and sat with the roaches. They were the only ones he really felt comfortable with.

Vikus opened the meeting by greeting everyone formally. Then he got right down to business. "So, it seems the journey to the Vineyard of Eyes becomes more urgent with each passing minute. We must begin at once. The proposed members of the quest are currently Gregor and Boots, as the warrior and the princess are called for. Nike will be their flier, also providing us with a backup princess in case we have misinterpreted Boots's role. Solovet and her bond, Ajax, complete the humans and fliers. Ripred, Mange, and Lapblood will represent the gnawers. And as Sandwich specifically mentions the crawlers, Temp has valiantly offered his services."

"We don't really have to drag that crawler along with us, do we?" said Mange.

"I suppose we can always eat him if the supplies run low," said Lapblood.

There was laughter from some of the bats and humans at the comment. They were always making fun of the roaches.

Temp said nothing, but gave a slight tremor of fear at Lapblood's comment.

Gregor locked eyes with the rat. "Or maybe we'll eat you. I've never had rat. But with the right sauce, who knows?"

Only one creature was laughing now. Ripred. "Well, at least the trip isn't going to be dull!"

"At present," hissed Lapblood, "there is no trip. We have yet to be convinced that it is to our advantage."

"The council has agreed to open the fishing grounds to the west," said Vikus. "That should provide the gnawers with enough food."

"And the yellow powder?" asked Mange. "To kill the fleas?"

There was only silence from the humans. Then Gregor thought he heard Vikus sigh.

"No powder, no deal," said Lapblood.

What? Was the whole quest going to fall through because the humans wouldn't send the rats flea powder? Was it really so much to ask? Gregor thought of the purple bumps bursting, oozing out pus and blood....

He sprang to his feet and shouted at the council. "Send them the powder! Geez! Have you seen Ares? Have you seen what the plague does? No matter how much you hate the rats, do you really want them to die like that?"

His question hung in the air a long time before anyone answered.

"You have a very forgiving heart, Gregor the Overlander," said Solovet.

It wasn't true. Maybe Gregor didn't want the rats to die such a gruesome death. He thought of the expression "I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy." But he had not forgiven them for his father, for Tick, for Twitchtip, for Aurora, or for Luxa. He had a whole list of things he would never forgive them for.

"No, I don't," said Gregor bitterly. "But I've got a mom and a bond with the plague. Your hospital is starting to fill up. We need the rats to find the cure. So, what's it going to be, Solovet?"

CHAPTER 12

There was no choice, ultimately. They had to agree I to send the rats the flea powder. Gregor did not think this was much of a concession, given they were all supposed to be on the same side, fighting the plague. But it was obviously a wrenching decision for the humans, who whispered furiously among themselves for several minutes before Solovet announced they had given in. By that point, three people were crying and one had left the meeting in protest.

The way they hated the rats — the degree to which they would sacrifice to have them dead — was beyond anything in Gregor's experience. That guy who had left the meeting, would he really rather see everybody dead than help some rats survive? Apparently, the answer was yes. The next point of contention was the execution of the journey to the Vineyard of Eyes. For the first time, Gregor saw a map of the Underland. Four Underlanders unrolled the enormous scroll flat on the stage and secured the corners with marble pyramids. You could see it clearly even from the bleachers. The map was divided into many sections, each painted a different color and labeled in black. Gregor found Regalia in the north. The gnawers had a region in the south, although part of it had been painted over and had the word "occupied" spread across it. The Waterway took up a large portion of the center of the scroll. To the southwest of Regalia, Gregor picked out the lands belonging to the fliers and the crawlers, but there were many names on the map Gregor didn't recognize.

Gregor's eyes lingered on the portion of the map labeled "occupied." He could see a large river curving through it. By the different paint colors, he could tell it had belonged to the rats, but now the humans controlled it. A river that size would supply a lot of fish. This must be the river that Ripred had talked about when he said the humans were trying to starve out the rats. No river, no fish. But now the humans had agreed to give back the fishing grounds so that the rats would go on the quest. Solovet came to the stage with a pointer and drew everyone's attention to a large triangle of green that extended from the rats' current territory halfway up the eastern side of the Waterway. "By our best estimates, the Vineyard lies in this general area." She tapped a spot that was so deep in the jungle it was almost off the map.

"It is very near the Firelands, but any entry from the east would be blocked by the cutters."

"Who are the cutters?" Gregor asked Temp. The roach consulted with a few of his friends in clicking sounds.

"Ants, some call them we think, ants," said Temp.

"Why would the ants block our way?" asked Gregor.

"Hate warmbloods, the cutters do, hate warmbloods," said Temp.

Gregor would have liked to ask more about the ants, but he didn't want to miss what was going on in the meeting.

"That jungle goes on for days," said Mange. "How are we supposed to find the Vineyard in a sea of vines?"

Nerissa cleared her throat and spoke for the first time. "I have arranged a guide for you."

"You...have?" said Ripred, and looked to Vikus for confirmation. But the old man looked as surprised as Ripred sounded.

"When did you do this, Nerissa?" asked Vikus.

"Quite a long time ago. But I have every confidence he will be there," said Nerissa. "I have seen him with the Overlander in a vision."

Uh-oh. Vision talk was never good. While everybody seemed to take Sandwich's prophecies very seriously, Nerissa's visions were not given much respect.

If the humans refrained from doubting her to her face, the rats did not.

"A vision?" said Lapblood, over-enunciating as if she were speaking to a very small child. "I thought I had a vision once but it was only some very bad mushrooms. Have they been feeding you mushrooms lately, Your Majesty?"

"Nerissa has no taste for mushrooms, and while her visions may not always be complete, we have gained much of value from them," said Vikus sharply.

"Who is this guide?" said Solovet.

"I cannot tell you. On my word. Only that you are to meet him some eight hours hence at the Arch of Tantalus," said Nerissa.

"Are we? Now don't get me wrong, my dear, I love the Arch of Tantalus. Always a bone or two to gnaw on there," said Ripred. "But what if you actually dreamed up this guide?"

"If I dreamed up this guide, then you will be none the worse than you are at present," said Nerissa. "The Arch of Tantalus is as good a place to

enter the jungle as any."

"Yes, if you ignore the piles of skeletons that seem to collect in the vicinity, it's top-notch!" said Ripred.

Throughout the room came murmurs of agreement.

"It is where your guide will be awaiting you, Ripred," said Nerissa. "Whether or not you choose to meet him is your own doing."

Gregor had to give Nerissa credit. It couldn't be easy to stand up to the rats' mockery, especially when none of the humans was backing her up except Vikus. Maybe Gregor was wrong, and there was a queen inside her after all. Besides, she had saved his life at the trial after "The Prophecy of Bane" mess. He owed her.

"Well, that's where I'm going," said Gregor loudly. "To the Arch of Tantalus. Nerissa's word is good enough for me."

"That's that, then," said Ripred. But he shot Gregor a look that seemed to add, "You idiot." The rats, who were making the journey to the jungle on foot, had to leave immediately to make the rendezvous in eight hours. It would take the bats less time to cover the same distance, so Gregor found himself with a few hours to prepare.

Gregor went back up to the luxury room, since no other room had been set up for him, and asked an Underlander for something to write a letter on. He was provided with three fresh scrolls, a bottle of ink, and a quill pen. Getting the hang of the quill pen and bottle of ink took some doing. In fact, the first two scrolls turned into practice sheets, and when he finally did get around to his letter, it was so full of ink blots and smears that he could only hope it was legible.

As for the contents...well, he had agonized over what to write, but this was all he managed:

Dear Mom,

I'm doing what I think you would do if I were the one with the plague. Trying to find the cure. Please don't be mad.

I love you,

Gregor He had initially thought about writing to his dad as well, but somehow the short note to his mom had drained him. Besides, it would take pages to explain how all this disaster had fallen on his family. He would ask Vikus to write and leave the scroll in the grate in the laundry room.

Mareth came to the doorway. He had a pack slung over the arm that was not using his crutch. His face was flushed and his breathing audible. The

exertion of moving around the palace had taken its toll on him.

"Hey, Mareth. Here, sit down," said Gregor. He made a space on the couch for the soldier.

"Perhaps for just a moment," said Mareth. He sat down gratefully on the couch, leaning his crutch against the arm. "I am supposed to be gaining strength every day by moving around the palace. But the stairs are still a challenge for me."

Gregor felt a twinge of sadness as he remembered training with Mareth. How fast he could run, how strong he was. That was before they had gone to find the Bane and Mareth had lost his leg. He wondered what Mareth would do now. He could probably still fly on Andromeda, if she survived the plague, but surely he couldn't be a soldier anymore.

"What's in the pack?" asked Gregor.

"Oh, I have taken the liberty of choosing some supplies from the museum for you. You may go yourself as well, of course. But having been with you on the last two quests, I have some idea of what you need," said Mareth.

Gregor opened the pack and found several flashlights and a bunch of batteries. "Yep, this is exactly what I'd have picked out myself."

"Here in the side, I placed a roll of this gray sticking strip," said Mareth. He pulled a brand-new roll of duct tape from the side pocket. "Howard said you used this both for securing bandages and making the raft after I had lost consciousness."

"Great. Yeah, that's duct tape. It really came in handy," said Gregor. He looked in the other side pocket and found a quart bottle of water with a classy label. "Water's always good to have."

"It says it comes from glaciers," said Mareth, tapping the label. "What exactly are glaciers?"

"They're, like, these gigantic pieces of ice," said Gregor.

"I have heard of ice. Water that is hard as stone. So, this glacier water...does it have special benefits?" asked Mareth. What did Gregor know? His family drank water from the tap. His mom made them let it run for a full minute in case there was any lead from the pipes in it. They sure didn't go out and spend four bucks on a bottle of glacier water! Gregor ran his thumb over the price tag on the bottle uncertainly. "Urn, I don't know. I mean, I think it's just water," said Gregor. But Mareth looked a little disappointed so he added, "But I bet it's really clean, because it was frozen a

while ago, before there was so much pollution. Yeah, look right here on the label, 'extra pure.'"

"Ah," said Mareth, gratified. "Pure water is not always easy to find, especially where you are going. I brought one more thing, although I am not sure exactly what it is. But it has a sense of happiness about it. I thought carrying it might remind you of home."

Mareth pulled a packet of bubble gum from the pocket. The paper was bright pink and had cartoon pictures of pop-eyed kids blowing giant bubbles.

Gregor laughed. "All right, bubble gum. My sister Lizzie loves this stuff. You know, it does remind me of home. Thanks, Mareth."

Underlanders showed up with trays of food and began to place them on the table in front of the couch. Mareth rose to go.

"Don't go. There's tons of food. Stay and eat with me," Gregor said.

Mareth hesitated. Gregor was pretty sure he was worried about breaking some kind of rule. Soldiers probably never ate in the luxury room.

"Come on, Mareth. You must be hungry. Everybody knows that hospital food is lousy," said Gregor. Actually, when Gregor would go to visit his friend Larry in the hospital when he had bad asthma attacks, the food usually looked pretty decent to him. But the patients were always complaining about it. Lying around a hospital, especially if you felt bad, probably gave you a lot of opportunity to dislike the food.

Mareth grinned. "It is somewhat bland," he admitted. "Although one has only to think of eating raw fish on our last journey to appreciate a simple meal."

"So stay. I don't want to eat alone," said Gregor. "Please."

Mareth sat back on the couch and put his crutch aside. "This is quite a feast."

It was. It ranked right up there with the food that had been prepared for Nerissa's coronation. There was a savory egg-and-cheese pie, stuffed mushrooms, steak, tiny raw vegetables with a dip, and a dish Gregor had come across a few times before, shrimp in cream sauce.

Gregor pointed to the shrimp. "That's Ripred's favorite. Last time I was here he stuck his whole face in a pot of it and scarfed it down."

"I do not blame him," said Mareth, taking a small serving of shrimp.

"Shoot, you can eat more than that," said Gregor, dumping another large ladle of the stuff on Mareth's plate. He took a piece of egg-and-cheese pie

for himself. His stomach was still rocky and acidic from throwing up, but he knew he had to eat if he were heading out on the road. It helped that the pie tasted amazing.

"Hey, Mareth, what was the deal with you guys starving out the rats?" he said.

Mareth took a few moments before he answered. "It was Solovet's way to show them that whenever they attack us, there will be consequences."

"But that means the pups are starving to death, too. Not just the big rats," said Gregor. "Doesn't that bother you?"

"Of course it bothers me!" Mareth shook his head and sighed. "It is so hard for you to know what it is like for us here, Gregor. We are raised in a world where one must kill or be killed. Sometimes I try to imagine what it would be like if we did not always have to devote ourselves to the possibility of war. Who would we be? What would we do?"

"Well, what would you do?" asked Gregor.

"I do not know...to live without war. It seems like...a fairy story," said Mareth. "Do you have those in the Overland?"

"Fairy tales, yeah," said Gregor.

"It seems like that," said Mareth.

When the Underlander came back to clear away the dishes at the end of the meal, Gregor pointed to the rest of the shrimp. "Can I take that with me?"

The Underlander looked confused. "Take it with you...to where?"

"On the trip. Can you stick it in a bag or something?" Gregor asked.

The Underlander stood holding the dish, staring down into the creamy sauce. "Stick it in a bag?" Doggie bags must be a new idea down here.

"Perhaps you could put it in a wineskin, Lucent, and then it would not leak out," Mareth said helpfully. "The seals are airtight."

"Oh, yes," said Lucent, relieved. "A wineskin."

Gregor walked Mareth back to the hospital and asked him to make sure his mom got the letter. A doctor told him he was wanted on the dock. And when he arrived, he saw that everyone was waiting on him to leave.

Vikus, Solovet, and two male guards were mounted on bats.

"I thought you weren't coming," Gregor said to Vikus.

"For safety's sake, the guards and I will escort you as far as the Arch of Tantalus. Then only the designated party will enter the jungle," said Vikus.

Nike, who was without a rider, was grooming her black-and-white-striped fur. Dulcet stood next to her, holding a sleeping Boots in her arms. Temp sat at her feet. Gregor almost said, "Where's Ares?" before reality clicked in.

Gregor crossed over to Nike. "So, I guess we're flying together this trip?" he asked.

"If you have no objections," said Nike. "I am not as strong or large as Ares, but I have a certain agility."

"You're perfect," said Gregor. She didn't have to sell herself to him. No one could replace Ares, but Nike seemed like a good bat. Suddenly, Gregor felt exhausted. He hadn't slept at all Saturday night; it must have been Sunday evening by now. "Hey, Nike, is it okay if I sleep for a while?"

"Certainly," said Nike. Gregor slid the pack on his back for safekeeping and lay on his side on Nike's back. The wineskin of shrimp in cream sauce didn't make a bad pillow. He reached out his arms and Dulcet settled Boots down next to him. Temp scampered up by their feet.

"If we're still flying, wake me up if Boots wakes up, okay, Temp?" Gregor said.

"Wake you, I will; if wake she, wake you," said Temp, which Gregor took to mean "yes."

"Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander," said Dulcet.

"Fly you high, Dulcet," said Gregor and, as Nike lifted into the air, he locked his arms around Boots and fell asleep.

When he awoke, he was lying on stone. The wineskin was still under his head. A blanket had been spread over him although he didn't really need it; the air was warm. His arms were empty but he could hear Boots chattering away to Temp.

Gregor could smell food cooking, too. He rolled over and saw a fire with several large fish grilling on it. The bats were clustered together, sleeping. The humans and rats were spread out in small groups, talking. Boots was riding around on Temp, playing some simple game where she'd throw a ball and they'd run after it.

They were in a big clearing with a dense jungle looming up all around. Gregor got a flashlight from his pack and shone it through the trees. No, they weren't trees. They were vines. Thick, ropy vines that wove in and out of one another and towered high above his head. From them issued a

humming sound that was vaguely mechanical. There were clicks and whirrs and taps. The whole jungle buzzed with life.

Gregor sat up and saw a stack of stark white bones piled a few feet from his head. At first, he thought this was some kind of sick joke on Ripred's part, but as he moved the flashlight beam around he realized there were skeletons everywhere. They must have reached the Arch of Tantalus. Yes, there, at the edge of the jungle, Gregor spotted a pile of boulders whose shape suggested an arch. The rocks looked unstable, as if they might easily fall on the head of anyone foolish enough to pass through them. No wonder nobody had wanted to come here. Gregor hoped Nerissa knew what she was talking about.

"The whole thing is ridiculous," he heard Lapblood snarl. "We're just sitting here asking to get eaten, and for what? To humor some lunatic girl's fancy."

"She is not a lunatic," said Vikus.

"Well, you have to at least credit her with a certain instability. Remember when she told you I was plotting to take over the Fount with an army of lobsters?" said Ripred.

"You did try and take over the Fount with an army of lobsters," said Vikus.

"Yes, yes, but it was several years before Nerissa was even born. The point is, she flip-flops in and out of time like a fish in the shallows. Who's to say that this guide, whoever he may be, didn't show up three days ago? Or three years ago for that matter?" said Ripred.

"They are right, Vikus. We invite trouble stopping in this place," said Solovet. "And how, in your mind, did Nerissa arrange a guide for us? She scarcely sees a soul." Gregor wondered what was up with Vikus and Solovet. They really weren't seeing eye to eye.

"Only a few more minutes," said Vikus firmly. "Then we will part ways."

"I throw up to sky!" Boots squealed.

Gregor turned and saw her wing the ball high into the air. "Well, that's the last we'll see of that ball," he thought. He caught it in his flashlight beam as it flew into the jungle.

He was right. The ball disappeared. But not in the twisted vines, as he had anticipated. Instead, it landed squarely in the mouth of a colossal lizard.

CHAPTER 13

All he could really see was the creature's head, a scaly iridescent blue-green face fifteen feet above him. It swallowed and Gregor caught a glimpse of rippling neck muscles.

"My ball!" said Boots.

Temp was already chasing after the ball but he put on the brakes when he became aware of the enormous reptile in the jungle.

Boots was not so easily deterred. She slid from the cockroach's back and ran forward, pointing at the lizard. "You eated my ball!"

"No, Boots!" Gregor cried. He scrambled to his feet and tripped over a skeleton. "No!"

"You eated my ball!" repeated Boots. She smacked her hands into the vines at the edge of the clearing, sending a vibration through the jungle. The lizard dipped its head in her direction.

Temp opened his wings and flew straight at the lizard's face. But the cockroaches rarely used their wings, and he ended up hopelessly tangled in the vines several feet from his target.

Gregor tried desperately to free his feet from something's rib cage. "Boots! Get back!" He could see the other members of the party springing into rescue mode, but how could they reach her in time?

"You give Temp my ball!" Boots howled at the lizard. "Yooooouuuuu!"

The lizard glared at Boots and opened its jaw wide. A frightful hiss issued from its mouth as a rainbow-colored ruff shot out around its neck, making its head look five times bigger.

"Oh!" said Boots in surprise. Her own arms shot up over her head as if she had a ruff as well. "Oh!"

For a moment, the towering lizard and the tiny girl were mirror images of each other. Mouths open, ruffs up, eyes wide.

And then someone started laughing. The sound came from the direction of the lizard, and seemed to be coming from its mouth. But it was a distinctly human laugh, so Gregor knew it must have some other source.

The blue-green lizard's tail flopped out of the jungle, its tip resting on the ground near Boots. The vines rustled and someone slid down the tail. A pale, violet-eyed Underlander landed easily on his feet next to Boots. He was still laughing as he bent on one knee next to her.

"So, are you a hisser, too?" he asked.

"No, I'm Boots," she replied, dropping her arms. "Who you?"

"I am Hamnet. And this is my friend, Frill," said Hamnet. He indicated the lizard, whose ruff was slowly folding down.

Boots considered Frill for a moment. " *I* is for ig-ig-aguana," she said. She meant "iguana." It was another one of those animals like a yak. If the *ABC* books didn't have an ibex for the letter *I*, they were sure to have an iguana.

"Yes, I suppose it is," said Hamnet. "Whatever an ig-ig-aguana is."

"It eated my ball," said Boots in an injured tone.

"She did not mean to. Let us see if we can retrieve it. Frill, any way to have the ball back?" asked Hamnet. The lizard's neck convulsed and the ball shot out of its mouth and straight down into Hamnet's hand. He wiped it on his shirt and Gregor noticed it was not the woven fabric generally worn by the Underlanders. Hamnet's clothes seemed to be made of reptile skin.

"Good as new, if you do not mind a little hisser spit," said Hamnet. He held out the ball to Boots.

What was that thing called? When you thought something was happening that had happened before? Déjà vu? Gregor was experiencing a very big one now. He flashed back to Luxa, down on one knee, holding out a ball to Boots in the arena, that very same half smile on her face...the first time they had met. The similarity was so striking Gregor almost said her name. Who was he? Her dad? No, her dad was dead. But they must have been related. And what was he doing here in the middle of the jungle? Could this guy with the lizard be their guide?

Gregor looked over to the rest of the party for an explanation and found another puzzling scene. The humans were all standing like statues, as if they had seen a ghost. Vikus had his arm around Solovet, and for the first time, Gregor thought they actually looked like a married couple. Boots reached happily for her ball. Gregor remembered how Luxa's fingers had held that first ball tightly, challenging Boots to take it away. "You will have to be stronger or smarter than I am." But Hamnet's fingers opened readily as Boots took the ball.

"*B* is for ball," she said with a grin.

"And for bright. Like you," said Hamnet, and gently poked her in the stomach. She giggled and looked up at Temp, who was still struggling to

get free from the vines.

"Temp! You come down! Ball is back!" called Boots.

"Ohhhh..." Temp gave a moan. Hamnet reached up and untangled the vines from Temp's wings. He set the crawler on the ground.

"And what bold crawler is it who flies in the face of a hisser?" asked Hamnet.

"I be Temp, I be," said Temp, rearranging his wings so that they lay flat against his body. Boots scampered up on his back and tossed the ball. Off they ran, as if no stranger, no giant lizard had appeared out of the blue.

Hamnet turned back and surveyed the group. The half smile still played on his lips. There was a long silence.

"Oh, look. It's Hamnet. He's not dead," said Ripred finally. The rat picked up what appeared to be a human skull and started to gnaw on it.

"The skull is a nice touch, Ripred," said Hamnet.

"I thought so. How've you been?" said Ripred.

"Remarkably well, all things considered," said Hamnet. He looked back over his shoulder at the lizard. "It is safe. You may come down."

The leaves stirred and a small boy slid off the end of the lizard's tail. He did not land so easily as Hamnet had, but had to take a few hops to keep from falling over. Something was wrong about the boy. "No, not wrong, just different," Gregor thought. Then it struck him. The kid had that super-pale Underlander skin, but his head was covered with jet-black curls, and his eyes were the green of a lime lollipop. Who was he? He didn't look like he came from either the Underland or Gregor's world.

The boy intertwined his fingers in Hamnet's and took in the group one by one with those strange green eyes. "This is my son, Hazard," Hamnet said.

"Not only alive but with a Halflander child," said Ripred. "You do know how to make an entrance."

Halflander. Did that mean half Overlander and half Underlander? That would explain how he didn't seem to come from either place.

Vikus slowly released Solovet and crossed over to the newcomers. He knelt down in front of the boy and took his free hand. "Greetings, Hazard. I am your grandfather, Vikus."

"My grandfather lives in New York City," said Hazard simply. "My mother was going to take me to see him, but she died." His accent was

somewhere between Gregor's own and the clipped formal speech of the Underlanders.

"You have two grandfathers. I am your father's father," said Vikus.

Hazard looked up at Hamnet questioningly. Hamnet gave a small, noncommittal nod. "I didn't know I had two," said Hazard. "Where do you live?"

"I live in Regalia," said Vikus.

"I don't know where that is," said the boy. "Are we going to visit you?"

"You...are always...welcome...." Vikus had to let go of the boy's hand because he was starting to cry now. He walked back to Solovet and stayed facing away from Hamnet and Hazard, his face buried in a handkerchief. Gregor had seen him cry a couple times before — but this time he didn't understand what was going on. If Hamnet was Vikus's son, why had Gregor never even heard his name? Where had he met an Overlander woman and had a son with her? What was he doing way out here in the middle of nowhere? How come Nerissa had known about him, but everybody else had...what? Thought he was dead? It occurred to him that maybe Hamnet had been banished, and that's why the whole thing was such a big secret. People only got banished for really terrible things. Of course, since Ares was almost constantly about to be banished and Gregor had been on trial for his life a few short months ago, he couldn't make any snap judgments about that.

"Why come you here, Hamnet?" said Solovet hoarsely. "You have done well enough without us for ten years. Ran off and cared so little for us you let us believe you dead. Why come you here now?"

Ran off? Gregor didn't know anyone "ran off" from Regalia. It was generally considered to be a death sentence to be outside the city's protection. But here was someone who had run off and appeared to be doing okay. Why had he left? Gregor was dying to know, but this seemed like a really bad time to ask. In fact, it was sort of embarrassing being here at all, during such a personal moment.

"I am here because I promised I would be," said Hamnet. "Ten years ago when I was leaving Regalia, a little girl crept after me and made me swear to be at this spot at this time. She told me I would be in the company of a hisser and a Halflander child. Thinking she was mad, I agreed only to quiet her. But ten years later, still alive and indeed finding myself in the

company of a hisser and a Halflander child, I thought she might have true vision. Where is Nerissa? Does she still live?" said Hamnet.

"Not only lives, but reigns, Hamnet," said Ripred.

"Reigns?" said Hamnet. "But what of..."

"Your sister, Judith, and her husband were killed by rats. Your niece, Luxa, vanished battling in the Labyrinth some months ago. She is presumed dead," said Solovet. "But you have lost your right to mourn them, Hamnet. Your twin, Judith; her husband; your niece — you forsook them when you turned your back on us."

Whoa. Now Gregor really didn't want to be here. There was a whole lot of bad family stuff going on.

"You do not command me, Mother," said Hamnet. "Not what I do, not what I think, and never what I mourn."

"So, are you our guide?" broke in Lapblood, impatiently whipping a pile of bones aside with her tail.

"I do not know. Am I?" said Hamnet.

"According to your crazy queen," Mange said. "She said you're going to get us to the Vineyard of Eyes."

"Did she? And what business could a mixed pack like yourselves have there?" said Hamnet.

"'The Prophecy of Blood' has reared its ugly head," said Ripred. "Supposedly the Vineyard is the cradle." His teeth broke through the top of the skull he was gnawing on and protruded through the eye sockets.

"'The Prophecy of Blood'...well, I have been gone a long time. So, where's your warrior?" asked Hamnet.

"Over there, with his boots in the bones," said Ripred.

Gregor, who was still trying to quietly work his feet out of the rib cage, stopped under Hamnet's gaze. Leave it to Ripred to introduce him when he looked like a complete fool.

"That is the warrior? Are you sure?" asked Hamnet.

"Quite sure. Been through two prophecies already. Don't worry, he's a lot more competent than he seems. A bit cocky, though. He's even spreading rumors that he's a rager," said Ripred.

"A warrior and a rager. My mother's dream come true," said Hamnet, eyeing Gregor with positive loathing.

Gregor kicked angrily at the rib cage and finally managed to get his feet free. He hated Ripred for bringing up the rager thing. What was it Twitchtip

had said a rager was...a natural-born killer? Who wanted to be that? Not Gregor! And he certainly wasn't going around talking it up!

"Well, in the jungle, being a rager will only triple your difficulties," said Hamnet. "I hope you have gotten your 'powers' under control." He said this last part sarcastically.

"Yeah? Well, I hope you know where you're going, because I don't have a lot of time," Gregor shot back. He really didn't need this right now.

"I do not remember agreeing to take you anywhere," said Hamnet.

"And I don't remember asking you to," said Gregor. Man! He felt like he'd spent about half this trip mouthing off to somebody, but everybody just kept messing with him.

"Then it's settled. We have no use for each other," said Hamnet. "Come, Hazard." He began to lead the child back toward the lizard.

Mange gave a growl of fury and turned on Solovet. "You're worthless! All of you! You drag us out to this ridiculous spot and for what? Your own son will not help you find a cure for this plague!"

"We do not need his help," said Solovet dismissively.

"You don't think you need anyone's help. It would serve you right if we all left you here to rot in the jungle, Solovet," said Lapblood.

"Go, then. Return to your caves. We will find the cure without you," said Solovet. "But do not come whining to our doors that your pups are dying!"

"That's a promise. And here's another. They will not die alone!" hissed Mange and he crouched to attack.

The next moment was a blur. The guard nearest Solovet drew his blade as the second guard jumped on a bat and shot in the air. Lapblood sprang into place beside Mange.

Gregor knew that in a matter of seconds somebody was going to be dead.

Suddenly, the guard on the ground flipped onto his back, and Hamnet stood in place, the guard's sword in his hand. As Mange lunged, Hamnet threw the sword so that the tip of the blade plunged into a crack in the stone, directly in the rat's path. Mange sheared off all his whiskers on one side of his face as he veered sideways to avoid running straight into the blade. Then he plowed into Lapblood, knocking her off balance. The two rats slammed into a heap. As the guard on the bat swept down at the rats, Hamnet leaped in the air, grabbing his sword arm, and yanked him to the

ground. The guard landed on his stomach with a grunt and his sword blade snapped in two on the stone. It all happened so fast. Nobody knew what had hit them. The rats and the guards slowly sat up, looking dazed.

Gregor's mouth fell open. He wasn't sure exactly how, but Hamnet had stopped the fight and no one had lost anything but some whiskers. Gregor looked over at Ripred, who was still crunching on his skull, unimpressed by the scene.

"I knew he'd take care of it," Ripred said with a shrug, and popped the rest of the skull in his mouth.

Hamnet plucked the sword from the crack and examined it. "Nothing ever changes, does it?"

"You changed," said Solovet softly. "Or why does that gnawer live?"

Hamnet placed the lower end of the blade across his wrist and offered her the hilt of the sword. "Why do you, for that matter?" he said.

"Because I never cease fighting," said Solovet, taking the sword.

"Stop," said Vikus. "Stop this, please." He mopped his face with the handkerchief and turned to his son. "Hamnet, the plague is upon us. Our hospital fills with victims. The gnawers are nearing an epidemic. We must get to the Vineyard of Eyes. Can you not do this one thing for us?"

Hamnet, his head already shaking, was on the verge of replying when Hazard tugged on his hand. "You know where that is. The Vineyard of Eyes."

"Hazard, you do not understand the —" Hamnet began.

"We could take them. I could talk to the bats. And the crawler," Hazard said. "Is he really your father? Like you're my father?"

The question pulled Hamnet up short. He just stood there, holding Hazard's hand, his face pained.

"Is he?" insisted Hazard.

"Yes, yes, he is," said Hamnet. "All right. All right, then. Who am I taking? Not this entire mob."

"No, just a handful. We three rats, the two Overlanders, the crawler, a couple fliers, and your mother," said Ripred.

"Not my mother, nor her flier," said Hamnet flatly.

"We might actually need her, boy, if we run into any trouble," said Ripred.

"No! Not if you want my help!" said Hamnet. Now he turned to Solovet and addressed her directly. "Not if you want my help."

"Is that lady your mother?" asked Hazard, wide-eyed.

"Clear out! The rest of you clear out, you have drawn half the jungle here as it is!" shouted Hamnet, waving his arms as if to brush them aside. "Kill that fire and be on your way!"

The human guards looked to Solovet, who gave them a nod. The fire was quenched; the guards and Solovet mounted their bats. Vikus was about to follow suit when he suddenly moved to Hamnet and locked him in an embrace. Hamnet's arms stuck out awkwardly, not returning the gesture but not resisting it.

"You may come home at any time. Know this. There are many ways to occupy yourself. You would not have to fight!" said Vikus.

"Vikus, I cannot —" stammered Hamnet.

"You can! Only think about it. Think of the child. If something should happen to you." Vikus pulled back, almost shaking Hamnet by his shoulders. "What do you do here that you could not do there?"

"I do no harm," said Hamnet. "I do no more harm."

Vikus slowly released Hamnet and nodded. He crossed and mounted his bat. "Fly you high," he said to no one in particular.

Solovet gave a signal and the party of bats and humans left.

"Bye! Bye, you!" called Boots, waving good-bye.

"Glad that's over," said Ripred. "Always some big scene with your family. You're miserable to have dinner with."

"I know," said Hamnet. "Is Susannah dead, too?"

"No, she's fine. Whole castle of children now. The Overlander knows one of them," said Ripred. "What's his name?"

"Howard," said Gregor. He was a little overwhelmed by everything he had just witnessed.

"I know Howard. He was about Hazard's age when I left," said Hamnet. "So how is he, Rager?" The last word was heavy with disdain.

The admiration Gregor had felt when Hamnet stopped the violence faded. "He's in quarantine," said Gregor. "But I'll tell him you said 'hi' if I get back. You know, if he's still alive."

Ripred's tail smacked Gregor on the back of the head. Not hard enough to knock him over, but hard enough to hurt. "Watch it," the rat said.

Gregor rubbed his head and scowled at Ripred, but he shut up. After all, he really didn't know what was up with Hamnet. He obviously didn't get along with Solovet. She obviously was mad he'd left Regalia. But maybe he

had a good reason for leaving. Maybe Gregor should find out what had happened. Or maybe — now here was an idea — maybe he should just mind his own business and get on with finding the cure.

Hamnet called them all together. They made three distinct groups. Gregor, Boots, Temp, and Nike, that was one group. Hamnet, Hazard, and Frill were another. The rats were the third.

"So, who's in charge of this thing, anyway?" asked Gregor. Hamnet was their guide, but it was hard to imagine anyone bossing Ripred around.

"Not you, and that's all you need to know," said Ripred, which made Hamnet and the other rats laugh. "You had something to say, Hamnet?"

"Thank you, Ripred. Now before we enter the jungle, let me make one thing clear. It is not a place for swords and claws. Eat only what you carry. Take care your flame singes nothing. Crush no berry, bruise no leaf, tread as gently as possible on the roots," said Hamnet.

"What? I can't even eat a vine?" said Mange.

"You can," said Hamnet. "If you wish to risk your life."

"They're just plants," said Lapblood.

"Some are just plants. But the ones that are harmless mimic the ones that are poisonous or constrictive or hungry," said Hamnet. "Look like them, smell like them, act like them. Can you tell the difference between what you can eat and what can eat you?"

"They can't really eat us," said Gregor uneasily. "Can they?"

Hamnet just gave him that half smile. "Ask the skeletons."

CHAPTER 14

While Gregor was wondering if he had enough nerve to walk into a jungle full of deadly plants, Hamnet organized the more mundane aspects of the trip. Light was the first order of business. Instead of the usual open-flame torches, the Regalians had provided glass lanterns with handles. They were half-filled with a pale, slightly sweet-smelling oil and had wicks. Unless one of them broke on the ground, the fire inside would not damage the plants.

Gregor's flashlight batteries died just as he was getting his lantern lit. Much to his surprise, he could still see! Not very well, not as if he were in daylight. But well enough to make out the silhouettes of the individual vines around him. Although the campfire had been extinguished, his flashlight was off, and the lanterns were unlit, the entire jungle was visible. He set the lanterns down and went to investigate. What was the source of light? It seemed to emanate from the ground itself. It grew fainter higher up, then dissolved into blackness about twelve feet in the air.

He moved to a spot where the light seemed strongest and found a narrow but deep stream. Along the bed, flashes of light came and went. He had seen something like this before in the crawlers' land — a stream with small volcanic eruptions on the bottom — but the bursts weren't as large or explosive as the ones before him. Gregor dipped his fingers in the stream and felt the warm water roll over them.

"There are hundreds of those streams crisscrossing the jungle," he heard Ripred say behind him. "Don't step in them, don't drink from them, and try not to use your fingers for bait."

Gregor jerked his hand out of the water as a set of spiky teeth snapped together in the space his fingers had just occupied. "What was that?" he asked, stepping back from the stream.

"Something that thinks you're yummy," said Ripred.

"Is that why we can't drink from them? It's too dangerous to get water?" asked Gregor.

"No, the water's tainted. Drink it and you die," said Ripred.

Gregor immediately went back and explained to Temp how scary the streams were so the cockroach would know to keep Boots clear of them. "Stream bad," agreed Temp.

But when Gregor told Boots to stay out of the water, she looked around eagerly and took off for the stream squealing, "Water? We go swimming?"

He chased after her and caught her by the arm. "No! No swimming! Bad water, Boots! You-don't-touch-water!" He said this so sharply that the sides of her mouth pointed down and her eyes filled with tears. "Hey, hey, it's okay. Don't cry." He hugged her. "Just stay away from the water here, okay? It's...it's too hot," he said. "Like in the bath?"

This seemed to make more sense to her. When the oil heater worked in their building, sometimes scalding water came from the tap.

"Ow?" she said.

"Right. Ow." He picked her up and carried her back to the others. "You going to ride Temp?" said Gregor.

"Ye-es!" said Boots. She wiggled out of Gregor's arms and onto the cockroach's back. "You don't touch water, Temp!"

That made Gregor feel a little better. "Or plants!" he added.

"Or plants!" Boots told Temp severely.

The humans had also left behind several packs of supplies. One contained first aid supplies and fuel for Gregor to carry. Three larger packs of food were designed for the rats to haul. They had straps for the rodents' forelegs and a belt that fastened under their bellies. Nike was in charge of several heavy leather water bags.

Gregor surveyed the dense tangle of vines doubtfully. "How are you going to get along in there, Nike?" She would not be able to fly much, and travel on foot was very taxing on the bats.

"Up higher, there are places where the foliage is not so heavy," said Nike. "I will fly above the vines when I must, and join the party when I can. Will you and your sister ride?"

Gregor didn't think it would be fair to ask her to carry him and Boots along with all the water bags. Besides, Temp wouldn't want to be left on the ground without them. "We'll just walk," he said. He lit a lamp and prepared to travel. As a backup to the lamp, he hung a flashlight from a belt loop at his waist. The big pack with the first aid supplies and oil went on his back. The smaller backpack that Mareth had filled with flashlights and stuff, he wore on his chest. It also contained some items Dulcet had included for Boots — a change of clothes, a blanket, some toys, some cookies, a hairbrush. Gregor took the mirror Nerissa had given him from his pocket and put it in the backpack, too. He didn't even have a copy of the prophecy

with him, but Boots liked to play with mirrors, and she might need a distraction. He slung the wineskin full of shrimp and cream sauce around his neck. Initially, he'd asked for the shrimp as a treat for Ripred. He still intended to give it to the rat, but now he thought it might make a good bargaining tool. It would be nice to pull out the rat's favorite dish if he needed a favor in the jungle.

Gregor thought he was done when he felt Temp nudging him. He turned to see the cockroach holding a sheathed sword in his mouth. "Not this, forget, not this," said Temp.

Where had that come from? Gregor hadn't even seen it until this moment. Solovet must have left it for him. He clumsily buckled the wide leather belt around his hips and tried to slide the sword around to the most accessible position. Somehow he ended up with it on his right hip, the tip angled forward. That seemed wrong. He finally wriggled it around to his left hip with the tip pointing behind him. Now he could grab the hilt and pull the blade out with his right hand easily.

"Worked that out, have you, Warrior?"

Gregor looked up to find Hamnet watching him. He wasn't wearing a sword, just a short knife in a sheath on his leg.

"Guess I'll find out if I have to use it," said Gregor, hitching up the belt like he knew what he was doing. The sword banged awkwardly against his leg.

"How old are you, anyway?" said Hamnet.

Gregor thought of saying thirteen or fourteen. He was tall even if he was on the skinny side. If he were older, maybe Hamnet would treat him with more respect. No, probably not.

"Eleven," said Gregor.

"Eleven," said Hamnet, and the expression on his face changed. He looked almost sad.

"I'll be twelve real soon," said Gregor. He said that as if it had some significance, but what did it mean, really? The only thing he could think of was he'd have to start paying full price at the movies. And that wasn't a very warrior-like thought. "Why?"

"I was just thinking, it did not take long for my mother to get her claws into you," said Hamnet.

Gregor felt himself bristling again. "Look, I don't know what's going on with you and Solovet. But I'm not here for your mother. I'm here for mine.

She's got the plague." Mentioning his mom made him feel upset. To his surprise, he felt his eyes filling with tears. Blinking them back, he looked down and adjusted his belt again. He did not want Hamnet to see. "So, maybe you could just back off, okay?" he said gruffly.

There was a pause. "I will back off, if you keep that sword in your belt," said Hamnet. "Agreed?"

Gregor nodded. He took another few moments to compose himself. When he looked up, Hamnet had moved away to fix a strap on Ripred's shoulder. Gregor actually felt a little better. He did not want to head into the jungle at odds with Hamnet. It was enough to have three rats picking on him. And he had no plans to draw his sword, anyway. It wasn't until everyone was loaded up that Frill slid out of her spot in the vines to join them in the open circle. She wasn't fifteen feet tall, as she had seemed at first. In fact, she just about looked Gregor in the eye. He realized she must have been standing up on her hind legs. Even on all fours, she was still an impressive creature. Twenty feet long from nose to tail, with that shimmery blue-green skin covering every inch of her. The ruff had had several other colors in it, but you couldn't see it much now that it had folded down. Frill had wonderful feet, too, each with five long toes that could wrap around anything.

"You've got a good-looking lizard," Gregor said to Hazard. The boy looked up at him with surprise.

"Thaaaaank yoooouuuuu," said Frill in a long breathy hiss.

Gregor should have known better than to treat Frill like she was some kind of pet. He had made the same mistake with the bats on his first visit. Frill was no more a pet than Ares was. She knew what was being said. Hadn't she spit back the ball when Hamnet had asked her to?

"Sorry," said Gregor. "I didn't know you could..."

"Thiiiiink?" hissed Frill. Hazard turned to Frill and made a long, freaky series of hissing sounds. Frill hissed back unintelligibly, and the two laughed. Gregor had never seen a human speak anything but English in the Underland.

Frill dipped her head and Hazard hung a large, reptile-skin pack around her neck. They continued hissing back and forth as Hazard adjusted the pack under Frill's ruff.

"What's he doing?" Ripred asked Hamnet with a frown. "Can he speak to that hisser?"

"Hazard can speak to anything. Well, at least he will try, if it will give him a chance," said Hamnet with a gleam of pride. "Go ahead, squeak at him."

"What?" said Ripred.

"Greet him in Rat," said Hamnet.

Ripred eyed the little boy and then let out a high-pitched squeak. Almost immediately, Hazard parroted back a sound that was indistinguishable from Ripred's own.

"What's that mean? Does that mean hello? I've talked to mice sometimes, but they say hello like this...." Hazard let out an even higher-pitched squeak that caused all three rats to grimace.

"Well, it's about time one of you made a little effort to communicate outside your own tongue," said Ripred. "Gets a little tedious for the rest of us, having to learn Human if we want to talk with you. Can you do it, too?"

"I can get by in Hisser," said Hamnet. "A word here and there of other creatures. I do not have Hazard's ear."

"You learned too late. See, this one, start her off now, and she'll be fluent in Crawler by the end of the trip," said Ripred, poking Boots with the tip of his tail. "Even the warrior — no, forget the warrior. He's been trying to master basic echolocation for months with no result. Just keep knocking your head against that one, okay, boy? Don't want to overload your massive brain with too many tasks at once."

Gregor said nothing but decided he would dump the shrimp in the stream before Ripred would get one bite. Stupid rat.

"So, shall we get going?" said Ripred.

"Yes, we have lingered here too long," said Hamnet. "Frill will lead and I will go last. We will take the path that begins at the Arch of Tantalus, but eventually the jungle overcomes it. Remember, step lightly and hurt nothing. And keep a close eye on your provisions. The fliers did not name the Arch of Tantalus frivolously."

"What's Tantalus?" Gregor asked Nike, as he adjusted the water bags on her back.

"He was a who. An Overlander from long ago. He had committed a great crime. As punishment, he had to stand in a pool of water beneath a tree of luscious fruit. He had great thirst and hunger. But when he bent to drink, the water receded. When he reached for the fruit, the branches rose out of his reach."

"Is that how he died?" asked Gregor.

"He was already dead," said Nike. "The punishment was for eternity."

Gregor was trying to wrap his mind around that and exactly what it had to do with going into the jungle as the party began to move through the archway. Frill went first, with Hazard perched on her back. Mange and Lapblood went next. Gregor fell into step with Temp and Boots. Ripred brought up the rear with Hamnet. Nike disappeared up into the vines above.

Everything changed the instant he was through the Arch of Tantalus, as if he had stepped through some portal into another dimension. The ground beneath his feet turned from stone to moss. The air became thick and pungent with the smell of decaying plants. He couldn't prove it, but he would've sworn the temperature rose twenty degrees. And the jungle sounds, which had seemed a healthy distance away, now clamored in his ears.

Within a few minutes his skin was damp with sweat and he was thinking of chopping his pants off into shorts. The straps of the packs cut into his shoulders. His nose began to run in the warm, moist air. He had never been hot in the Underland, and only cold when he was wet. Usually the temperature was comfortable if you wore short sleeves.

The smooth carpet of moss transformed into a tricky web of roots. They popped up at various heights, and the flickering light of the streams made it difficult to judge how high to lift his foot. Gregor had pretty big feet, too, for an eleven-year-old. His parents always laughed about that and told him he'd grow into them. But they felt clunky in the hiking boots Mrs. Cormaci had given him. The boots were hand-me-downs from one of her grown-up sons and a size too large — he had toilet paper stuffed in the toes to make them fit right — so he had that extra half inch to deal with. Everyone else seemed to walk so easily — Frill, the rats, Temp with his delicate roach feet. Gregor glanced over his shoulder to see how Hamnet walked, and he tripped over a root, smacking into Mange.

"Why don't you take those ridiculous things off your feet?" snapped Mange.

But Gregor didn't dare. Who knew what kind of creature might be lying in wait? He thought of fangs and stingers, thorns and spikes, and kept his shoes on.

Boots, riding comfortably on Temp's back, was having a fine time teaching him "The Alphabet Song." The roach held his own up to about the

letter *L* , but that whole *L-M-N-O-P* run kept throwing him off track. In all fairness, this part of the song was fast and easy to garble, anyway.

"Elenemopee!" sang Boots, as if it were one long letter.

"Elenemopeeo," sang Temp, off-key as usual.

For a while, Hazard just perched up on Frill, watching Boots and Temp with great absorption. Finally, he slid off Frill's back and ran back to them.

"What are you singing?"

"I sing *A-B-C*," said Boots. "Who you?"

"I'm Hazard," said the boy, skipping lightly over a root. "Will you teach me that song?"

Would she? Boots loved to teach anything! Soon there were three voices weaving through the song. Gregor thought it was going to drive the rats crazy, but Mange and Lapblood were whispering intently between themselves, and Ripred was filling Hamnet in on what had happened in his ten-year absence. No, the one who was feeling a little crazy was Gregor, as the three conversations joined the jungle chatter already assaulting his ears. He would've liked a quiet moment to think, to catch up his brain to where his body was, to examine "The Prophecy of Blood" in light of everything that had happened, but he wasn't going to get it anytime soon.

By the time Hamnet called a break, Gregor's clothes were soaked with sweat. Inside his boots, his socks felt squishy. A sharp pain jabbed between his shoulder blades from the heavy packs. He could've drunk the glacier water in three big gulps, but he'd decided to save the fancy bottle Mareth had put in his pack. He wanted to have some water with him, in case Boots needed it or he got separated from the group.

For their resting spot, Hamnet had chosen a small clearing lined on one side by a strip of mossy rocks. Gregor could hear the gurgle of water nearby, but no stream was visible through the vines. The rats dumped the packs of food by the rocks and stretched out. After carefully examining a spot, Gregor unloaded his stuff and sank onto the ground across from them. Nike swished down from the trees and shook off her water bags next to him. Hamnet opened one and went around, letting everyone drink their fill.

Hazard helped Hamnet pass out bread, meat, and some raw carrotlike vegetable. Gregor was not all that hungry, probably because of the heat, but he ate what was given to him. Boots munched down all her food and some of Temp's bread, which was standard. The cockroach always let her have

whatever she wanted. Then Boots and Temp and Hazard began to play on the rocks.

" *R* is for rock," said Boots and soon a chorus of "The Alphabet Song" was in progress.

Lapblood and Mange, who were gnawing on bones they'd brought from the Arch of Tantalus, winced at the singing.

"They're off again!" said Lapblood.

"It'd be one thing if they could stay on key, but that's just painful," said Mange.

"It's no worse than listening to you guys gnaw on stuff," said Gregor.

"There must be some way to muzzle them," said Lapblood.

"None I can think of," said Gregor.

"Well, I'll think of one, if they keep on like this!" said Mange.

"You rats...you've got a problem with little kids, don't you?" said Gregor. Ripred had never taken to Boots and had been openly hostile to the baby Bane. "Bet you don't even like your own pups."

What? What had he said? Something really bad by the way Mange's and Lapblood's eyes were burning into him. Were they actually going to attack him? As tense as everyone had been today, it wasn't hard to imagine.

"Speaking of needing a muzzle," said Ripred pointedly to Gregor. "Not making many friends with that mouth of yours, are you?"

Gregor had not taken his eyes off Mange and Lapblood. He could see the muscles in their forelegs tightening. His fingers instinctively found the hilt of his sword.

"Overlander," said Hamnet. Gregor remembered his agreement with Hamnet and slowly released his sword. "That is better. Remember where you are, all of you. And that you need each other, Warmbloods."

The sounds of the jungle took over as everyone remembered, but no one relaxed.

Then a little voice piped up, " *F* is for fog! Oh, Grego! *F* is for fog!"

Gregor didn't want to look away from the rats, but something was wrong. There was no fog in the jungle. What was she talking about?

When he turned his head, Gregor felt a whole new coat of sweat break out over the one that had never dried from the hike. Boots was sitting up on the highest of the rocks, clapping her hands in delight. Temp and Hazard were frozen in the act of climbing after her. Dotting the rocks like brightly colored jewels were about fifty little frogs. Green and black, sunset orange,

grape-soda purple. Poison arrow frogs. Gregor recognized them from the Central Park Zoo. Only there, you had to view them from behind a thick pane of glass.

There was a good reason for that. If you touched one of them, you could die.

CHAPTER 15

As if to illustrate Gregor's worst fear, a hapless lizard slithered onto the rocks. Not a big lizard, like Frill, just a foot-long one like you might see in the Overland. It shot out its tongue toward one of the frogs. The instant it made contact with the orange frog skin, the lizard went stiff as a board. Paralyzed by poison. Dead.

"Don't touch, Boots! Don't touch!" cried Gregor. Oh, this was bad. Really bad. Gregor had once bought her a tube filled with plastic poison arrow frogs that looked very much like the ones around her. She spent hours lining them up on the arm of the couch. The frog set was one of her favorite toys.

Boots giggled and clasped her hands together. But she was so excited that her little feet drummed on the mossy rock. " *F* is for fog! I see red, I see yellow, I see blue!" The frogs were hopping around, not wildly, but still, it was only a matter of time before one landed on Boots, Hazard, or Temp.

"Hazard, can you jump clear?" said Hamnet in a ragged voice.

The boy flexed his legs and sprang out over the packs of foods. He landed unevenly and tumbled into Ripred, but the rat didn't even seem to notice.

"You can't help her up there, Crawler. Clear out of the way so the rest of us stand a chance," said Ripred.

Temp hesitated, as if trying to take in what Ripred had said. Gregor knew Temp would sacrifice his life for Boots, but how could he protect her from that tiny army of amphibians?

"He's right, Temp, just get out of there," said Gregor.

Gregor's words seemed to decide him. Temp spread his wings and flew off the rock onto the path. Now it was just Boots, sitting happily among the frogs.

"Rib-bit! Rib-bit! Fog says rib-bit!" she said. "And tongue goes like this!" Boots's tongue darted in and out of her mouth and she imitated a frog catching flies. Gregor had shown her that. "Rib-bit!"

A red-and-black spotted frog leaped into the air and landed right by her hip.

"Ooh!" said Boots. "Red fog says 'hi!'"

"Don't touch it, Boots! Do not touch!" ordered Gregor. He was slowly moving in toward her.

Another frog, a salmon-pink color, hopped over her shoe. "Hop! Hop!" Unable to contain herself, Boots scooted her feet under her and assumed the classic frog position, knees bent, hands between her feet. "Hop! Hop! I am frog, too!" She bounced up and down. The vibration of her movement seemed to stir up the creatures. They began to spring around with more energy. "Hop! Hop!"

"No, Boots...no hopping!" pleaded Gregor.

He was at the base of the food packs now. The frogs had spread out from the rocks onto the packs. Two orange frogs and a green one were within inches of his stomach. Boots was about a foot above him, five feet away. His arms reached out for her. "Just jump out to me. Like at the swimming pool? You jump, and I'll catch you. Okay?"

"Ye-es!" Boots agreed. She straightened her legs and bent her knees to jump into Gregor's arms, but at that moment, a particularly dazzling sapphire-blue frog leaped right for her arm.

The next few moments seemed to happen in slow motion. The sapphire frog sailing at Boots's arm, Lapblood's body twisting into the air, her tail catching Boots on the behind and catapulting her up over Gregor's head, Hamnet's voice as he caught her, the frog landing, leaping again directly for Lapblood's face, Gregor's arm in motion, his sword skewering the sapphire skin inches from Lapblood's ear.

"Get back!" Ripred's sharp command reached his brain. "Get out of there!"

The whole party staggered backward as the frogs began to invade the path.

"Stay together!" he heard Hamnet's voice, but it was too chaotic. Everyone was crashing into the jungle, forgetting about the path as they fled the tiny, fatal frogs.

Gregor was some twenty yards into the vines before he realized he was stampeding over the plants like a buffalo. He looked around the gloomy jungle and could spot no one. "Hey!" he yelled.

"Stay where you are!" he heard Ripred call. "Everyone hold your position!"

It took fifteen minutes for Hamnet and Ripred to reassemble the group.

Gregor could hear Boots and Hamnet talking about the "fogs," so he knew she was okay. He stood very still, holding the dead frog out in front of him on his sword. His blood was still buzzing in his veins. His vision was oddly fragmented. It had happened again. The rager thing. Somehow, he had drawn his sword and stabbed this frog with deadly accuracy without even thinking about it. He couldn't have stopped himself if he had tried, because he didn't even know what he was doing. His "powers," as Hamnet had called them, were not under control. And he had no idea how to master them.

When Ripred's nose scooted aside the vines, Gregor had still not moved a muscle. "I need help, Ripred," he said weakly.

"You seem to be managing yourself all right," said the rat.

"I can't control it," said Gregor. "Being a rager!" His arm jerked up, and Ripred jumped out of the way of the frog on the tip of his sword.

"Whoa! Watch where you're swinging that thing!" said the rat. "Get rid of it. Go on, wipe it on that rock over there." Gregor dragged the tip of his sword along the rock and scraped off the tiny carcass of the frog. "And rinse it in the water," said Ripred so Gregor held the point in a nearby stream. "Now sheath your blade but remember its touch may still have poison on it. So, don't be pulling it out without thinking," Ripred said.

Gregor stuck the sword back in its sheath. "How do I know when I'll pull it out? I don't plan these things!" he said, agitated.

"I know, I know. Look, just calm down. Ragers feel insane at first. I did myself. The more it happens, the more you'll get used to it," said Ripred.

"But I don't know when it happens!" Gregor almost screamed. Wasn't the rat even listening to him?

"Yes, you do. You can feel it in your blood, your eyesight alters, your focus sharpens to exclude anything of unimportance. You're aware of these things?" said Ripred.

Gregor nodded. "Sometimes. When Ares and I were fighting rats in the maze, I knew it was happening."

"All right, good. That's good. That's a start. Now when you're in danger, when you feel you might be attacked, pay attention. Eventually, you'll be able to turn it on and off. But it takes time," said Ripred.

"How long did it take you?" asked Gregor.

"It's different. I battled so frequently. I had more opportunity to master it quickly," said Ripred.

"How long?" repeated Gregor.

"A few years," said the rat.

A few years! When Ripred probably fought almost every day! Gregor shook his head, already feeling defeated.

"It's not that bad, Gregor. Believe me, at times you'll see it as a gift," said Ripred.

"I don't want this gift, Ripred," said Gregor.

"Well, it's yours," said Ripred. "Come on now, before your sister makes any more friends."

As Gregor followed Ripred back through the jungle, it struck him how nice the rat had been. Usually, he was needling Gregor or knocking him around. But Ripred seemed to know when he could push him and when he genuinely needed help. Like the time Gregor had cried after Tick died. Or when he had tried to tell him about how he had lost Boots to the serpents. And here, now.

They rejoined the group some distance up the path from the frog incident. Gregor felt embarrassed, like everybody was staring at him. He particularly didn't want to meet Hamnet's eyes.

"Don't jump down his throat, Hamnet. He couldn't help it," said Ripred.

"I could see that, but it is not reassuring," said Hamnet.

"Well, at least Lapblood's still alive to fight," said Ripred.

Gregor knew he should probably thank Lapblood for saving Boots's life, but the rats were so hostile, he let it lie.

Boots was still geared up about her encounter with the frogs, hopping around and making "rib-bit" sounds.

"She says you have the same kind of frogs at home. She says they sleep in her bed," said Hazard to Gregor.

"They're fake, Hazard. They're just toys," said Gregor.

"Strange playthings you choose in the Overland," Hamnet commented.

It must seem strange to them. Making a toy out of something so deadly. Encouraging a little kid to want to pick one up. But then again, poison arrow frogs weren't exactly hopping down Broadway.

"What'd we lose?" said Ripred.

"All the food, I'm afraid," said Hamnet. "The frogs swarmed the packs, and now they're too dangerous to touch, let alone risk eating from. Nike got the water, though. And Frill saved your packs." Hamnet dropped Gregor's two backpacks and the wineskin on the ground at his feet. "Any food?"

"Just some cookies for Boots. Oh, and this," said Gregor, holding up the wineskin. "It's shrimp in cream sauce. I brought it for Ripred."

"Now who's my favorite little rager?" said Ripred, running his twitching nose up the bag. "Did you really bring this for me?"

"Sorry, Ripred. You know it goes to the pups," said Hamnet, swinging the wineskin over his shoulder.

Ripred sighed. "First that greedy Bane and now these brats. They'll be the death of me, pups."

"Oh, you will live." Hamnet laughed. "Long after the rest of us."

They lined up again and continued down the path. Gregor tried to stress the importance of avoiding pretty frogs to Boots, but she didn't really seem to be getting it. In fact, she started snoozing on Temp's shell right in the middle of Gregor's lecture so he had no choice but to let it go.

There was not much discussion after that. The heat was becoming more oppressive and the loss of the food was troubling. They marched forward until Gregor's feet were so heavy he seemed to be tripping over every root. Then at last Hamnet called for them to set up camp.

They all gathered in a circle around a lantern. Everyone got a generous drink of water, but there was only food for the "pups." Gregor gave Hamnet the cookies, and he gave a few each to Boots and Hazard. Then, to Gregor's surprise, Hamnet held two out to him.

"No, no, thanks," said Gregor.

"You are only eleven, boy, you still qualify as a pup yourself," said Hamnet.

"No, give it to them," said Gregor. He didn't feel like a pup. Somehow having the responsibility of saving his mother, Ares, and every warmblood in the Underland knocked that feeling right out of him.

When Hamnet unscrewed the top to the wineskin, the mouthwatering aroma of shrimp in cream sauce made Gregor gulp.

"Do you think it wise giving that to the pups?" said Ripred. "Cream has a bad reputation for spoiling in the heat."

"The only thing spoiled is you. You can smell perfectly well that it's fine," said Lapblood.

"You can never be too careful," said Ripred as he grumpily watched Boots and Hazard dipping their cookies in the sauce.

When the kids had eaten, everyone settled down to sleep. Frill volunteered for the first watch. Gregor spread a blanket on the ground and

lay down with Boots. She snuggled up on his arm and drifted off. He had to wait until she was asleep so he could free his arm from under her sweaty head of curls. Man, it was hot!

He was exhausted, but the jungle sounds made it difficult to sleep. Plus the heat. Plus the fact that he'd had another rager experience. All of which seemed inconsequential when his mind rolled around to the images of the hospital. His mom lying in that white bed, Ares's heaving chest, the hope in Howard's eyes when he'd seen Gregor's face.

So he was still awake, staring into the dimly lit vines, when they began talking. Lapblood and Mange.

"Do you think there's any chance they're still alive?" whispered Lapblood. "Not the two little ones. I know they were dying when we left. But Flyfur and Sixclaw?"

"Yes, yes, I do," said Mange soothingly. "The yellow powder is on its way and they had no signs of the plague when we left. And you know Makemince will manage to feed them somehow."

"The two little ones...do you think they suffered much?" said Lapblood. "I can't bear to think of them, calling me, and no one answering. My pups."

"No, I'm sure they went quickly," said Mange in a choked voice. "But we can't think of that. We have to think of Flyfur and Sixclaw. They still have a chance."

"Yes. Yes, I know. I will," said Lapblood. "I am."

"Now go to sleep, Lapblood," said Mange. "Please."

It was quiet then, but now Gregor knew he was not the only one awake. He knew someone else was lying across the lantern, staring into the jungle, and wondering how long someone they loved had to live.

CHAPTER 16

Gregor dozed in and out of sleep until Hamnet woke him up to continue the next leg of the journey. As he rolled up his blanket, his mind went back to the conversation he'd overheard between Lapblood and Mange. So, two of their pups were dead and two might well be dead soon. He thought of the crack he'd made about rats not even liking their own pups, and his face turned hot with shame. Especially since Lapblood had risked her life for Boots. Whether she had done it because she thought Boots was necessary to find the cure or done it simply to save the little girl, he didn't know but the result was the same. Maybe he could talk to Lapblood privately....No. His dad said if you did something wrong to someone in public, you ought to admit it in public, too.

"Hey, Lapblood," he called. It was hard to apologize. Especially to a rat. He started with the easy part first. "I just wanted to say...thanks for getting Boots away from those frogs yesterday."

"Forget it," said Lapblood.

She had not thanked him back for saving her from the blue frog, but maybe she thought he just owed her that as a matter of course. He forced himself to continue. "And what I said...that thing about rats not liking their own pups..." Everybody had stopped what they were doing to listen to him now. "I'm sorry. That was stupid." He crammed the blanket roll in his pack.

Lapblood didn't respond. Neither did Mange. Oh, well. He had said it, anyway.

While Hamnet fed Boots and Hazard, the rats and Nike groomed themselves. Even Temp seemed to be tidying himself up with his legs. Gregor wiped Boots down with a damp cloth and ran her brush through her hair. His mom would want him to keep her neat. He wasn't much concerned with his own appearance, but he wished there were a safe stream to wash in, just so he didn't feel so hot and sticky. At least he didn't have fur.

When it was his turn to drink, Gregor lifted the water bag and gulped down as much as his stomach could hold. It helped to fill the hollow, empty feeling.

They fell into their lineup and headed deeper into the jungle. The path was noticeably narrower, so much so that he could not walk beside Temp.

Frill offered to carry Boots and Temp along with Hazard, and Gregor agreed, figuring they could entertain one another.

He was a little concerned they'd take off on another marathon *A-B-C* sing-along, but Hazard came up with another diversion. Learning to speak Cockroach. Hazard had only exchanged a few sets of clicks with Temp when Boots tugged on his arm. "Me, too! I can talk like beeg bug, too!" she insisted. The three settled down on Frill's back and were occupied for hours with the game. It was just as Ripred had predicted. Boots learned the clicks and absorbed their meaning quickly. And Hazard was an amazing mimic. As for Temp, after his initial shyness, it turned out he was a natural teacher. He was endlessly patient and never critical. By the time they broke for lunch, the three were conversing in a strange mixture of English and Cockroach without thinking anything of it.

At lunch, the water did little to affect the gnawing hunger that had settled in Gregor's stomach. He hadn't eaten in a day, and they'd been hiking for most of that time. When he was digging through the backpack for a toy top Dulcet had packed for Boots, he made a welcome discovery. "Hey, the bubble gum!" he said. He held up the bright pink package to the others.

"I want bubba gum!" said Boots, hanging on his arm.

"No, Boots. You're too little," said Gregor. His mom wouldn't let them give her gum because she might choke on it. "But, here, you can have the paper." He carefully shook out the gum and gave her the shiny pink wrapper, which she ran to show her friends.

"Is that food?" asked Mange.

"Not food exactly. You chew it, but you don't swallow it," said Gregor.

"What's the point in that?" said Lapblood.

What was the point in bubble gum? "I don't know...it tastes good. You want some or not?" said Gregor.

There were five individually wrapped squares of gum. The kids had just eaten, and Temp could go a month without food. Nike and Frill were managing to catch enough bugs as they traveled, so that just left Gregor, Hamnet, and the rats.

"Okay, perfect, that's one piece each," said Gregor. He tossed the rats and Hamnet each a square. "Remember, chew it. Don't swallow it."

He peeled the waxed paper off his gum and stuffed it in his mouth. The burst of sugar was fantastic. He saw the others watching him. "Go on! Try it!"

Hamnet slowly opened his piece and sniffed it. He tentatively put it in his mouth and chewed. A perplexed look crossed his face. "It is very sweet...and it does not diminish when you chew it."

"No, it's gum. You can chew the same piece for days. Years probably!" said Gregor.

One by one, without bothering to remove the paper, the rats took the gum into their mouths. Gregor had to bite his lip not to laugh as they snapped their jaws open and shut, trying to make sense of the stuff.

Ripred made a slight gagging sound. "Uh. I swallowed mine."

"It's okay, it won't hurt you," said Gregor.

"I don't know where mine went," said Mange, running his tongue around his mouth. "Just gone." He opened his jaws wide and Gregor could see the wad of gum wedged up between two of his long teeth.

Lapblood seemed to be the only rat capable of sustained gum chewing. "It's not bad. Not as good as gnawing, but it gives you something to do with your teeth."

"Why is it called bubble gum?" asked Hamnet, taking his piece out of his mouth to examine it.

"Because of this." Gregor blew a bubble and popped it with a loud crack. Everyone jumped.

"Don't do that! We're edgy enough in here as it is!" said Ripred.

"Hey, just answering a question," said Gregor.

His craving for food got worse as they walked along. While the sugar from the bubble gum had given him a brief lift, it had also stirred up the juices in his stomach, making him more aware of his hunger than ever. He wanted cold, icy foods...Popsicles, watermelon, ice cream. And salt...he was losing enough of it sweating.

He had not taken his boots off the whole trip and his socks were sodden. Unfortunately, he had neglected to pack any extra clothes, even socks, so he couldn't change them. And he couldn't borrow any from Hamnet, since he and Hazard didn't wear socks, just shoes made of reptile skin like the rest of their clothes.

The lack of food combined with the heat was beginning to drain his energy. Hamnet had taken over the wineskin of shrimp, but Gregor still had the big pack of fuel and medical supplies and his backpack. His knees were buckling every few yards when he felt a hand on his shoulder.

"I will take the pack, Gregor," said Hamnet.

Gregor let him slide it off his back without objecting. He wished he had the strength not to accept, but frankly, he was just glad for the help.

"Thanks," he muttered.

Hamnet stayed directly behind him and left Ripred at the back of the line. "Ripred tells me you caused quite an upheaval by not killing the Bane."

"I guess I did. But it was just a baby," said Gregor warily. Most of the humans were pretty mad at him about that.

"It was a good decision. Else the rats would never have agreed to this journey. Plague or no plague," said Hamnet.

Gregor had never thought of that, but it was hard to imagine the rats traveling with the Bane's killer. It felt good, too, to have Hamnet approve of his choice, especially when so few others did. "It didn't win me a lot of points with the Regalians. Now everybody hates me. Rats and humans." Hamnet laughed. "Not everybody. Ripred clearly adores you."

"Oh, yeah, I'm a big favorite of his," said Gregor. "Probably wondering right now how I'll taste for dinner."

"Might be, if you were something besides skin and bones," called Ripred.

Gregor blew a bubble and gave it a loud pop.

"Cut that out!" snarled Ripred.

"Sorry," said Gregor, but he was grinning. This bubble gum was coming in handy.

Hours later, when they came upon a small clearing that would allow them to camp safely, the grin had been completely wiped off Gregor's face. His feet had been rising and falling out of habit, but he had lost the sensation of walking miles ago. Utterly exhausted, he lay right down on the ground without bothering to put down a blanket or even remove his backpack or sword belt. The air was so hot and steamy he was having trouble breathing. He wondered if there was enough oxygen, then he wondered if there was too much oxygen. Something was wrong, because his mind felt gluey and confused.

As Hamnet fed the last of the cookies and shrimp to Boots and Hazard, Ripred went over to him. "We've got to get some food, Hamnet. Not just for the pups, although the little one will be squawking her head off in a few hours if we can't feed her. But for the rest of us, too. Look at the warrior."

Gregor thought about raising his head to tell them he was okay, but he became preoccupied with the pattern on a small, green leaf and couldn't take his eyes off it. Possibly he had stopped breathing entirely and the heavy air was just drifting in and out of his lungs whenever it felt like it.

"Yes, you and I will forage. I do not see any choice," said Hamnet. He lifted Gregor's head and held the water bag to his lips, urging him to drink more than he really wanted. "Try and rest, Gregor. We will be back soon. And drink as much water as you can." Hamnet laid his hand on Gregor's forehead for a moment, and Gregor felt oddly comforted. It was something his mom or dad might do. It was almost like having a parent around.

The water revived him a little. After a while he sat up. Hamnet and Ripred were gone. Boots and Hazard had fallen asleep in the curve of Frill's tail. Temp stood next to them, cleaning himself. Nike was in a deep slumber a few feet from Gregor — he hadn't even known she had landed. Most of the water bags were still on her back — like Gregor she must have been too tired to care. Across the lantern, Gregor saw that Mange and Lapblood were stirring. They looked haggard. They'd probably been near starvation even before they came on the trip. At least Gregor had been eating regularly.

"You guys want some more water?" asked Gregor. He had noticed the rats, even Ripred, had to rely on Hamnet to open the tops of the water bags to drink. Gregor picked up the bag Hamnet had left by his side and removed the stopper. He went over and kneeled next to Mange. "Come on, Hamnet said we should drink a lot."

Mange allowed him to pour the water into his mouth. Then Gregor did the same for Lapblood, being careful not to wash her bubble gum down her throat. Where was his gum? His tongue found it tucked up between his molars and his cheek and he began to chew it again.

"Water's all very well, but if we do not have food soon, none of us will be reaching the Vineyard of Eyes," said Lapblood.

"I can't believe that everything in this jungle is inedible," said Mange.

"I don't think it is," said Gregor. "Probably some of it's fine, but Hamnet didn't think we would be able to tell the good stuff from the bad."

"Hamnet," spat out Mange. "What does he know? He's human! Of course his nose can't tell the difference between what's poisonous and what's safe. My nose can, though. Even now I can smell a potential meal. I don't know what it is, but believe me, we can eat it."

Gregor sniffed the swampy air. "I don't smell anything."

"I do," said Lapblood. "Something sweet."

"Yes, that's it," said Mange. "I'm going to find it. Anyone else coming?"

"I'll come," said Lapblood. "Better than lying here dying of hunger."

"I don't know, I don't think Hamnet would want us looking around the jungle for food," said Gregor doubtfully.

"Why not? Isn't that exactly what he and Ripred are doing now? The more of us look, the more likely we are to find something," said Mange.

"Don't come if you don't want to, but don't expect us to share what we find. Not even with your sister."

Gregor thought about Boots waking up hungry, not understanding about there being no food and why she couldn't eat, especially if the rats were. She would start to cry and then what would he do?

"Hamnet said something about the plants attacking us," said Gregor.

"We've been trampling through this jungle for days," said Mange. "Your sister beat the vines with her hands when she wanted her ball, you've been snapping every other root with those boots, all of us caused damage when we ran from the frogs. Have you even seen one plant make any kind of move to stop us?"

"No, I haven't," Gregor admitted. "Okay, I'm in." He took another pull on the water and stood up. He took off his backpack to let his shirt dry out. "Hey, Temp, we're going to look for some food. Mange and Lapblood smell something."

"Not go, I would, not go," said Temp, shifting uncomfortably.

"Don't worry, we'll be back soon," said Gregor. "Just give a yell if you need us." He did not intend to get very far from the campsite. Even with Frill and Temp on guard, he wanted to be close to Boots in case there was any danger. But the biggest danger right now was starvation. Following his nose, Mange led the way into the jungle. Lapblood went next and Gregor last. He wished he had some bread crumbs or something to leave a trail. Of course, if he had bread crumbs, he wouldn't be looking for food. Just sitting around eating bread crumbs. Whatever.

They were moving farther away from the campsite than he wanted to go, but since Mange was walking in a fairly straight line, Gregor hoped they could get back okay. After a few minutes, he was heartened by a whiff of something sweet. "Hey, I can smell it, too!"

"About time," said Mange. "We're nearly on top of it."

They came out into a small glade. The air was permeated with a strong, sweet odor that reminded Gregor of ripe peaches. He shone his flashlight around the grove of plants. These were different than the vines that lined the path. There were long leafy stems curling high above their heads, but these plants also had big graceful yellow pods dangling horizontally from the greenery. They were at least six feet across and tilted up at the edges like huge, sunny smiles. Along the upper lips of the pods hung round, rosy fruit. Without further examination, Gregor knew that they were the source of the delicious smell. A thin stream of drool slid out of the corner of his mouth and ran down his chin. Out of some vague sense of manners, his hand reached up to wipe away the spit before he grabbed one.

That same moment, Mange leaned his front paws on the lower lip of a pod and raised his head toward the delectable fruit. The instant his muzzle brushed the rosy skin of one of the spheres, the pod lunged forward, engulfed the rat, and snapped shut.

All that was visible of Mange, poking out from between the yellow lips, was the tip of his tail.

CHAPTER 17

Lapblood gave a screech and leaped for the pod that had trapped Mange. When she was in midair, a long vine whipped out from another plant and wrapped around her waist. Her claws slashed at the vine, severing it, and the entire grove of plants went wild.

Gregor felt bewildered as the jungle sprang into action. His fingers fumbled with the hilt of his sword, but it was much too late. Vines twisted around his body and limbs. Roots arched out of the ground and clamped around his boots. He tried to squirm free but the plants were far too powerful.

Where was his rager reaction? He scanned his body for any sign that he was transforming into a deadly adversary but nothing was happening. No shift in his vision, no rush in his blood. All he felt was extreme fear.

Mange was still in the pod, as far as he could tell. He could see Lapblood about ten feet away, struggling in a net of greenery.

A thick vine that had wrapped itself around his stomach began to tighten. It was like he had a giant anaconda squeezing the life out of him. "Help!" he tried to call out, but the sound was pitiful. "Help!" But who would come to help? Ripred and Hamnet were gone. He and Mange and Lapblood were immobilized. For all Temp's courage...well, what could the cockroach do except die along with them?

Gregor was aware of being drawn forward. The plant was pulling him toward one of the gaping yellow mouths. He thrashed helplessly, feeling his strength waning. He couldn't breathe....The vine was so tight....He could see the inside of the pod about a foot away now. A slimy clear liquid was oozing down the yellow walls.

Gregor could feel himself beginning to lose consciousness. Black specks swam around in front of his eyes. As the vine tightened one final notch he coughed. His bubble gum flew out of his mouth and into the pod. Stretchy, sticky lines of pink spun up in his vision. He was vaguely aware that the gum was doing something in the pod. Mixing with the clear ooze...creating a whole new bubbly pink goo. The vine around his stomach began to loosen enough for him to get a few good breaths.

Lapblood's teeth were still weakly snapping as she was about to enter another pod.

"Spit!" Gregor croaked out. "Spit your gum into it!"

Lapblood gave her head a little shake. Did she register what he was saying?

"Spit your bubble gum in it, Lapblood!" Gregor yelled.

Rats probably couldn't spit like humans did, but she managed to thrust her gum out of her mouth. Since her snout was hanging over the edge of the pod, it landed squarely in the middle. The slimy pink bubbly reaction began in her pod as well.

Unfortunately, the plants did not free them. The pods with the gum were going into a frenzy. Pouring more clear ooze down their walls, chomping up and down, frothing pale pink bubbles. Temporarily out of order. But there were more pods turning toward them, hungry mouths open.

"Help!" hollered Gregor, and at least this time his voice carried. Lapblood was giving off high-pitched shrieks, too. Surely somebody would come!

Gregor saw a zebra-striped flash above his head and the pods tilted upward. Nike, still encumbered with her water bags, was flitting in and out of the vines, raking through the plants with her claws. She held her own for a bit, but there were too many plants shooting tendrils at her. He saw one lasso her back claw and knew it was over.

The vines started to tighten again; the pods turned back. Gregor was about to abandon hope when a voice reached his ears. "Now what have you done?" Out of the corner of his eye he saw half a dozen vines fall lifelessly to the ground.

"Ripred," he whispered and felt himself smile.

The air filled with shreds of plant matter as Ripred went into one of his spinning attacks. Gregor couldn't help thinking of those gadgets they sold on TV that chopped up vegetables at the press of a button.

His vines loosened; the roots withdrew. Gregor fell to the ground and just lay there trying to fill his lungs as a shower of green rained down on him. One of the giant yellow pods fell at his feet and oozed clear liquid onto the toes of his boots. He watched, a little fascinated as it ate through the leather and began to work on the reinforced steel toes.

Someone yanked him up and slung him over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes. Hamnet. His face bounced against the reptile skin shirt as Hamnet ran. They were back to the campsite in a minute. Gregor could feel his

boots being tugged from his feet. His socks stripped off. Water gushed on his toes.

"Hazard! Hold this water bag!" said Hamnet.

There was a pause while the bag changed hands and then more water running over his feet.

Gregor saw Nike a few yards away. "I am all right. I am fine," she was telling Hamnet, who was examining her leg.

"The bone to your claw has been snapped in two. I do not call that fine," said Hamnet.

Someone was crashing through the vines, no longer worried about what he damaged. Ripred dragged Lapblood into the camp by the scruff of her neck. The minute he released her, she tried to crawl back in the direction they'd come.

"Mange..." she said.

"He's dead, Lapblood!" snarled Ripred. Lapblood kept moving until Ripred flipped her over on her back and pinned her to the ground.

"He's dead! I killed the plant that did it! The pod opened and what was left of his carcass fell out! Believe me, he's dead! And the rest of you should be as well!" shouted Ripred. "Who started this? Whose brilliant idea was it to leave the camp?"

The rat turned his focus on Nike, perhaps because she seemed best able to answer, but she remained silent.

"Not Nike," said Gregor. "She only came to rescue us."

"So, was it you?" Ripred's muzzle poked in Gregor's face.

"Mange smelled food. Lapblood and I went to help him look. We didn't know..." Gregor got out.

"Didn't know what? That the plants here could kill? You'd been told! You'd been warned! How can I keep you alive if you won't even listen! All you had to do was lie here and drink water! And you couldn't even do that!" fumed the rat.

"Enough, Ripred. Let me patch them up," said Hamnet.

"Oh, yes, patch them up. So they can hatch some stunning new plan to save the day. Worthless pack of fools," said Ripred. "You could have gotten us all killed, you know! Following one stupid idea like that, that's all it takes! Goodbye us, goodbye cure, goodbye Underland!"

"Enough!" said Hamnet. "Just sit over there and calm down."

Ripred moved off by himself but did not calm down much. He would mutter to himself for a while and then unleash a volley of insults at Gregor and Lapblood. Mutter, unleash, mutter, unleash. It went on for quite a while.

Hamnet sent Hazard over to pour water on Lapblood's eye. It had been splashed with pod acid. He got the medical pack and daubed Gregor's toes with a blue ointment and then bandaged them with white fabric.

"Does it hurt?" asked Hamnet.

"Not really," said Gregor. There was a strange, almost electric sensation on the tops of his toes. That was all.

"Well, it will," said Hamnet, shaking his head.

"The water's almost gone," said Hazard.

"I will get another bag," said Hamnet. He stood up and looked around. "Nike, where are the water bags?"

"With the plants. The vines ripped them from my back," said Nike.

"Stop!" Hamnet whipped around and caught Hazard's wrist, but it was too late. The last trickle of water was drizzling out of the bag.

"What is it, Father?" asked Hazard, puzzled. "Did I do something wrong?"

"No. No, you did what I asked," said Hamnet, running his hand over Hazard's curls. "It is just...the water. This was our last bag."

CHAPTER 18

"What?" said Ripred.

"Nike lost the water bags when she went to help the others. We used the remainder of this one on the acid burns," said Hamnet.

"No water. Just exactly how long do you think we'll last without that?" asked Ripred.

Hamnet shook his head. "Not long. It will take another couple of days before we will near fresh spring water. We will simply have to do our best."

"I have some water." Gregor pushed himself up to a sitting position and reached for his backpack. He pulled out the quart of glacier water. "It's not much, I know."

"It is a great deal, Gregor, if it keeps the pups from dying of thirst. They will be most vulnerable as they will dehydrate the fastest," said Hamnet, taking the bottle. "The rest of us will have to do without."

Gregor nodded. Of course the water should go to Boots and Hazard. He was okay, anyway. He'd chugged down a lot before they'd left in search of food. He could get by.

"Did you two find any food?" he asked hopefully.

"No, nothing wholesome," said Hamnet.

"Mange said the fruit we found was edible. He could smell it was okay," said Gregor.

"Oh, why don't I just pop back and grab us a bushel or two?" said Ripred in disgust.

"Well, at least we have your water," Hamnet said almost kindly. "That may make all the difference. It was good thinking, to pack it."

"Mareth put it in. He said pure water wouldn't be easy to find," said Gregor.

"Mareth?" said Hamnet. "Has he managed to stay alive all these years?"

"Yeah, he lost his leg, though. On the trip to get the Bane," said Gregor. He realized Mareth and Hamnet must be about the same age. "Were you guys friends?"

"Yes," said Hamnet. He turned the bottle of water over in his hands, but didn't elaborate.

It was on the tip of Gregor's tongue to ask why Hamnet had left Regalia, where he had family, where he had friends, to live out in this dangerous,

lonely place. What was it he had said when Vikus had asked him what he could do here that he couldn't do in Regalia? "I do no harm. I do no more harm." Gregor hadn't paid much attention to that at the moment. But the words had been enough to send Vikus back to his bat without further discussion. What harm had Hamnet done? It was hard to imagine.

Hamnet rose and put the water with the medical supplies. "I know everyone is spent, but I believe we must keep moving if we are to reach water in time. Can you manage?" he asked Gregor.

"He can manage," hissed Ripred. "So can Lapblood. And I better not hear any complaints out of either of them."

Hamnet anointed Lapblood's eye with medicine. For Nike's leg he made a splint with strips of stone and fabric. But when he tried to give her a dose of pain medicine from a large green bottle, she refused. "I do not want to muddy my thoughts. Not in here." Hamnet tried to talk her into it, but she was adamant. "All right. We may need your head clear. But you will ride on Frill," he instructed the bat.

"I can fly," said Nike.

"You can fly, but you cannot land well. The foliage is getting too thick for easy access to the ground. Ride, Nike. And try to sleep," said Hamnet.

Gregor helped Hamnet position Nike lying flat on her back atop Frill. They had to secure her with strips of bandages so she wouldn't roll off.

"I'm sorry about all this," Gregor told her.

"But why?" said the bat cheerfully. "Now I get to take a lovely nap while the rest of you walk. I should be thanking you."

Somehow, her being such a great bat made Gregor feel even guiltier about her injury.

Hazard climbed up in front of her onto Frill's neck and curled up in the folds on the ruff to go back to sleep. When Gregor laid Boots on her stomach on Temp's back she didn't even stir. He hoped she would sleep for a good long time. With no food and precious little water, he didn't know how he'd handle her.

His boots had been ruined by the acid. As Gregor was looking down at his bare feet, his bandaged toes, and wondering how he'd walk, Hamnet peeled off his reptile-skin shoes. "Here, Gregor. You must wear these," he said.

"What will you wear?" asked Gregor.

"I will be fine. I spent many years without shoes before I came upon the idea of using shed skin. But you must take them now, or your bandages will not hold," said Hamnet.

"Thanks, Hamnet." Gregor gingerly pulled the shoes over his bandages. They were kind of like short socks really. Thin and clingy. But somehow they made him feel more protected.

Lapblood still lay where Ripred had left her, as if she had lost the power to move. The ordeal with the plants had been physically exhausting, but Gregor knew that was not what was weighing her down.

"Hey, Lapblood, are you okay?" he asked. She wasn't okay, though. Mange had just died. All her pups might be dead, too. How could she be okay? "Because we've got to keep moving. We've got to find water."

Lapblood rolled onto her feet and got in line behind Frill without a word. Gregor remembered his state of shock after he'd thought Boots had been killed by the serpents. How Luxa had been unable to speak when Henry had betrayed her and died for it. He left Lapblood alone.

The path was gone now. It had progressively narrowed until it had disappeared altogether. Now it was a matter of trying to step between plants. At first, Gregor found it a little easier since he was wearing Hamnet's fitted shoes instead of his boots. Then the pain in his toes began to register. There was a slight tingling, then itching, then he felt like his toes were on fire. He knew any mention of his wounds would only trigger another round of abuse from Ripred, so he gritted his teeth and moved forward.

Perhaps it was the knowledge that there was no water available that made him so intensely aware of his thirst. The dryness inside his mouth. The skin cracking on his lips. Thirst had never been a problem before in the Underland. Fresh water had been available even in the Dead Land. And there was always plenty of cold, clean water to drink at home. Right out of the faucet.

They walked for four straight hours, although it felt like forty to Gregor, and then they only stopped because Boots and Hazard woke up. Hazard understood there was little water to be had, but Boots kept tugging on Gregor's shirt saying, "Thirsty! I'm thirsty, Gre-go!" As if he must not be understanding her because he wasn't getting her anything to drink.

She was so fretful and sweaty. Gregor stripped her down to just her underpants and sandals so she wouldn't perspire any more than was

necessary.

When Hamnet finally held the bottle of glacier water to her lips, Boots gulped down about a third of the bottle before he could stop her. "Slowly, Boots, we must make this water last," he said, gently disengaging her from the bottle.

"More," said Boots, pointing to the water.

"You may have more in a little while," said Hamnet, and gave Hazard a drink.

Boots was confused. She pulled on Gregor. "Apple juice?"

"No apple juice, Boots. Try and go back to sleep, okay?" he said. Of course, she didn't. After a short rest, Hamnet had them moving again. Boots rode on Temp's back and kept up a steady stream of requests for a drink. After answering with patience for about the first three hundred times, Gregor finally snapped at her. "I don't have any, Boots! No juice! No water! Okay?" It was exactly the wrong thing to do. Boots burst into tears at a time when any loss of fluids was critical and wailed inconsolably for at least twenty minutes before Hamnet reluctantly gave her another few swallows of water. Finally, she fell back asleep, much to everyone's great relief.

Gregor's toes were raw, searing, swollen lumps at the end of his feet. Roots stabbed at them through the shoes. Salt from his sweat ate into the wounds.

And then there was Ripred's voice, taunting him from behind. "It didn't happen this time, did it, rager boy?"

Gregor knew what he meant but he didn't answer.

"Oh, I don't want this gift, Ripred," the rat imitated him in a whiny voice. "You thought you could go anywhere and do anything and be safe. You thought you were invincible. Because you're a rager. Well, you're finding out now just how weak you really are."

"Cease, Ripred, the boy has enough to bear," Gregor heard Hamnet say.

"He needs to understand how close to death he came!" snapped Ripred.

"And so he does," said Hamnet firmly. "He knows he did not think well before he acted. Who among us has not been guilty of that? Certainly not you. Certainly not me."

Thankfully, Ripred stopped. But Gregor knew there was a certain amount of truth to what the rat had said. He had not thought he was invincible, but knowing he was a rager had made him less afraid to go into a dangerous situation. Sometimes he had trouble turning off his rager

reaction. He had not known it could desert him in times of need. The knowledge shook his confidence and left him feeling defenseless.

It was hard to concentrate, but Gregor tried to think back to the times he'd transformed and the times he hadn't. He'd been careful not to get into any fights in the Overland so it hadn't been an issue. When Ripred had knocked him to the ground in the tunnel, he hadn't experienced the rager sensation. But that had happened so fast, and Gregor had stopped feeling threatened as soon as Ripred had revealed who he was. When the infected bat had fallen into the arena, the situation had been dangerous, but there had been no one to fight except the fleas. Then there had been the moment with the frogs. He had known Boots was in peril. The threat had had time to register. But later, the plants had attacked so quickly...Was that the answer? Could he only become a rager if he had time to recognize a threat? No, no, because he had turned into a rager for the first time with just wax balls filled with red dye flying at him. Those weren't dangerous at all.

"There's no pattern." This was the last clear thought Gregor had for a long while. What happened next was a haze of hours, maybe days, filled with pain, fear, and disorientation. Walking. Lying face pressed to leaves, unrelenting pain in his feet, Hamnet rubbing oil on his bleeding lips, bandaging his toes. Boots crying, whimpering, then finally making no sound at all, just lying limp on Temp's back, with no way to help her. Intense thirst, dreams of water, of frosty white glaciers he could never reach. Walking...walking again...tongue swollen, head aching, heart racing, stomach sick. Collapsed on the vines looking at his sister limp on Temp's back. Boots...asleep...unconscious... dead? Not dead, her chest rising and falling rapidly, her cracked lips, shiny with oil, tinged a faint blue. Then Ripred's voice, hoarse and weak. "I smell clean water...."

He must have gotten up somehow. Followed Ripred and Lapblood into the jungle on the burning hunks of meat that were his feet. He could hear the water...Not the quiet, teasing gurgle of the jungle streams that had tormented them for days...but a rushing, splashing sound. The rats were running now, Gregor hobbling behind them. He could see the water, bursting out of a rock, cascading into a pool, a sandy beach...water...but then...

Ripred gave a cry of alarm. "Get back! Get back!"

Gregor could see Ripred and Lapblood floundering as if the ground was melting under them. Robotlike, he kept coming forward, although he could

hear Ripred's voice, trying to stop him, force him backward. His own feet were too heavy to lift and he realized he was up to his ankles in something. Looking down, he watched himself sink to his knees before a wave of adrenaline brought his brain back to life.

"Quicksand!" he said, and tried desperately to backtrack out of the stuff. It was impossible. He was in too deep.

"Stop struggling!" Ripred ordered. "You'll only sink faster!"

"Float!" Gregor cried. "Try and float!" He remembered that quicksand was like water. If he could get on his back he could float until help came. But it was too late. He was up to his thighs and had no way to pull himself free.

"Hamnet!" Ripred called. "Hamnet, get in here!"

Ripred was doing okay. He had managed to splay out all four legs and was precariously keeping on the surface. But Lapblood had panicked. Her thrashing paws were digging her rapidly into the quicksand.

Gregor leaned way out and caught hold of a vine. He lifted himself up about six inches before the vine snapped and the force of the weight sunk him up to his waist in the quicksand. "Nike!" he screamed. "Nike!"

There was a rustling in the vines to his right. Help had come! But the black, shiny eyes poking through the greenery were unfamiliar. At first he thought they were rats. No, the faces were smaller, more delicately boned. Mice. They must be mice.

"Help!" cried Gregor. "Help us!" The mice didn't move.

Someone fell from high in the vines, spinning, flipping, landing neatly in the small space between two of the mice. And Gregor did recognize the newcomer. Her clothes were rags, her pale skin marred with bruises and cuts. A long, curved scar ran from her left temple to the tip of her chin. But she still wore that thin band of gold around her head. And those violet eyes...well, he would know them anywhere.

"Luxa!" Despite his desperate condition he felt joy spreading through him. She was alive! He smiled and felt fresh blood run out of his cracked lips. "Luxa!" He reached out his hand so she could save him.

But Luxa didn't reach back. She didn't flatten herself on the bank and stretch out her arm. She didn't even throw him a vine.

PART 3

The Mirror

CHAPTER 19

"Luxa! What are you doing?" gasped Gregor.

"What are you doing, Overlander? Here in the jungle in the company of rats?" she asked coolly.

What was she talking about? What was going on?

"We need the rats!" sputtered Gregor. "You don't understand!"

"I understand you spared the Bane's life. I understand he thrives under Ripred's protection. What more do I need to understand?" said Luxa.

So that was it! How she'd gotten here or why she had remained, Gregor had no idea. But she knew enough of what was going on outside the jungle to have heard about the Bane.

"Nerissa said I did the right thing!" said Gregor. That was all he could manage because the quicksand was now reaching his mouth.

"The plague has erupted, you self-righteous brat. We're seeking the cure! Now get us out of here!" Ripred growled at her.

"The plague?" repeated Luxa. Her brow furrowed, but she did not make any move to help them. "I have not heard of any plague."

"Really? Well, with all the visitors you must get here, I can't believe someone hasn't mentioned it," said Ripred. "It's the talk of the Underland!"

"Judith!" Gregor heard Hamnet's voice. "Help them!"

Hamnet skidded to a stop before he reached the quicksand, but his attention was on Luxa. She looked back at him in shock. As they faced each other in profile, Gregor could see the resemblance was uncanny.

"I am not Judith," said Luxa, confused.

"No, you are not," said Hamnet, recovering and yanking a vine from a nearby tree. "My sister would have never stood by and watched those who had risked so much for her die!"

Gregor's fingers caught the vine just as his nose was going under. He clung to it with what little strength he had left, and Hamnet slowly pulled him from the quicksand. He lay on the ground, covered in wet sand, sick and dizzy as he watched the rest of the rescue.

Hamnet had swung another vine that was still attached by its roots out to Ripred, and the rat was managing to inch himself to safety.

It was Lapblood who looked like a goner. All that was visible of her were a few inches of snout and one paw still feebly clawing at the surface.

Hamnet threw her a vine, but there was no way she could see it since her eyes had sunk under the sand.

"Lapblood!" Hamnet shouted.

"Lapblood!" hollered Ripred. "Get the vine!"

It was no use. She was going down.

The paw was gone and the last bit of her twitching nose had almost disappeared when Nike dove in from above. The claw of her sound leg dug into the quicksand and latched on something. Then her wings began to beat like crazy. Slowly, very slowly, she managed to raise Lapblood's head out of the muck by the scruff of her neck.

"I cannot lift her!" panted the bat. "You must help!"

Hamnet threw out the vine again, but Lapblood's eyes were sealed shut with sand. "Lapblood!"

"Wake up, Lapblood!" ordered Ripred. "You've got to get hold of the vine so we can pull you out!"

Lapblood's mouth began to work. "No...just let me go....Let me go...." she barely whispered.

"Let you go? After I saved your sorry hide from those plants? Not likely! Now do as I say!" roared Ripred.

But Lapblood only gave her head a slight shake. "No...no more..."

Gregor realized it had all been too much. The months of starvation, watching her pups dying, this torturous trip, Mange's death. And Lapblood had decided that she no longer wanted to live.

"No!" Gregor said. "Don't give up! Lapblood!" She didn't respond. His words meant nothing. But then he thought of some words that might make a difference. Words that had never been meant for his ears. "What about Sixclaw? And Flyfur? What about them?"

At the sound of the names, Lapblood's eyes opened. She looked around frantically. "My pups!" she said.

"That's right! Your pups need you!" said Ripred. "Now pull yourself together and grab that vine!"

Lapblood swung a claw out and dug it into the vine. Ripred and Hamnet pulled from the bank and, with Nike's help, they finally dragged her from the quicksand. She lay next to Gregor, her fur coated in a thick layer of wet sand.

"So this is my niece, then?" Hamnet asked Ripred as he turned angrily on Luxa.

"You know it is. She's the spitting image of your twin," said Ripred.

"Hamnet," said Luxa. "You are Hamnet. We thought you dead."

"We thought you dead, too, Luxa. And perhaps better you were, if you can so unflinchingly watch the death of your comrades," said Hamnet.

"Oh, I can tell we're in for another lovely family reunion," said Ripred. "But it will have to wait. Take us to water, Your Majesty, or I swear I'll rip you and your nibbler friends to shreds on the spot."

Gregor felt himself being lifted and then began to move. Frill. He must have been the one on her back this time. In a few minutes he could hear water again. Ripred was nudging him in the side with his snout.

"Come on, warrior. Up you go. Get yourself a drink," said Ripred.

Gregor slid off Frill's side onto his hands and knees and crawled to the splashing sound. A spring bubbled out of a rock and down into a crystal-clear pool. He stuck his whole face in the water and sucked cool mouthfuls into his body. He lifted his head for just a moment to catch a breath and plunged his face back into wetness...into water...into life . . .

When he had finally slaked his thirst, he looked around. They were on a big stone slab of rock that stretched out beside the pool. Luxa and the mice were nowhere in sight. Ripred, Nike, Hazard, Frill, and Temp were all lined up along the side of the pool drinking with Gregor. Hamnet had filled their last water bag and was alternating between trickling water into Boots's and Lapblood's mouths.

Gregor crawled over to Boots's side. "Is she okay?" he asked.

"She will be fine, Gregor, once we get some food and water into her," said Hamnet.

Gregor pressed his nose into Boots. She opened her eyes and smiled a little. "Hi, you," he whispered.

Boots's lips moved in response. No sound came out. But she was alive.

"I can give them water," said Gregor. "You should go drink."

"I have been drinking from the bag. And I am well enough," said Hamnet. He seemed wiped out but he looked pretty good compared to the rest of them. Gregor guessed that years of jungle life combined with his natural physical strength had made him survive the trip better. "You must go wash the sand off you before it hardens, Gregor."

"He's right," Ripred said. "This stuff will be like cement soon." With that the rat dove into the pool and began to roll over and over. Sand billowed out from his coat and into the clear water.

"Come, those of you who are still thirsty, and drink from the bag until the sand settles," said Hamnet.

When Ripred had pulled himself out of the pool and begun to groom his coat, Gregor got on his wobbly legs and made it to the pond. He thought about undressing, but his clothes were so caked with sand he wasn't even sure he could find the fasteners. So he just jumped in.

Ahhh! Nothing had ever felt so good as the cool liquid enveloping his body. The water came about chest high on him so it was plenty deep for swimming. He dove under the surface and swam across and back before he came up for air. After a few laps, most of the sand had fallen away from his clothes. He sat on the side of the pool and stripped down to his underwear. Taking off the reptile shoes was a special challenge, since his toes were about the size of walnuts and embedded with bits of sand. He had to soak his feet a while before he could peel off the bandages. Big pieces of skin came off. But, underneath, delicate new skin was beginning to grow.

Gregor swam over to the spring, stood on the rock ledge, and let the water cascade down his body. He stayed under the flow until he was sure every grain of sand, every drop of sweat, and every bit of dead skin had been washed from his body. Then he rinsed his clothes and climbed up onto the slab to lay them out to dry.

Luxa appeared, swinging several large fish by the tails and carrying something in the lower part of her shirt. When she released the hem, a bunch of round yellowish fruit fell to the ground. She tossed the fish beside them and selected the largest. "I will grill this for Boots. She will not eat it uncooked," she said to no one in particular.

It was hard not to dive on the food before Hamnet divided it up. Gregor received four pieces of yellow fruit. His teeth split the skin of the first and a delicious plum taste filled his mouth. He decided it was safe and ate it in three bites.

Propping Boots up on his lap, he tried to coax her to eat. At first, she seemed indifferent. But when he dribbled some of the sweet juice into her mouth her face lit up. She grabbed his hand and pulled the fruit to her mouth and gobbled it up. " *P* is for pum," she said, licking the juice off her fingers. "More pum?" And Gregor was happy he could give her a whole handful.

The fish was good, too. On his last trip, he'd had a little trouble adjusting to the cold, raw flesh. This time, he scarfed it down without a

thought. Luxa brought over some pieces of fish she had grilled over the lantern on her sword for Boots. She had squeezed the juice of one of the golden plums over the chunks to make it more appealing.

"Will you try some fish, Boots?" she asked, not even looking at Gregor.

"Ye-es!" said Boots and stuck a piece in her mouth. "Where is rat?" she asked Luxa and then pressed her hand to her nose. "Ow!"

"Who, Twitchtip?" said Luxa, and Boots nodded. Gregor realized that the last time the queen and his little sister had seen each other had been in the rats' maze. Twitchtip had been with them, with a badly damaged nose. "I do not know."

"Oh, yes, my darling Twitchtip. Where did you leave her, Your Majesty? Dead in the Labyrinth, I'll warrant," said Ripred. "It's too bad, really. I mean, it's not like anyone will miss her, but what an amazing nose."

"I'll miss her," said Gregor brusquely. He had liked Twitchtip, rat or no rat. He didn't want to hear Ripred running her down now.

"Sorry, I forgot what chums you'd become," said Ripred. "But she's just another dead rat to you, right, Your Queenliness?"

Luxa ignored him. She ignored everyone except Boots. But what was she so mad about, anyway? Gregor not killing the Bane? Yes, but he had told her Nerissa said he had done the right thing. Finding him with two rats? Well, there was no other way to get the cure for the plague. Hamnet chewing her out? Yeah, she wouldn't have liked that. Besides, she must have been living out here with the mice in semidarkness for months. When someone finally did show up, it wasn't to rescue her, it was just by chance. Maybe she was just mad at everything and everybody.

And where was her bat, Aurora? Dead, probably, or why would Luxa be hanging out in the jungle instead of flying home? Gregor started to feel sorry for Luxa until he remembered she had been prepared to watch him smother to death in the quicksand. "I don't owe her a thing," he thought. But he didn't quite believe that. There were times in the past when she had saved his life and, even more important, saved Boots. Still, he wasn't going to beg her to talk to him, if that's what she was waiting for.

When Boots had finished eating, he gave her a bath. Mostly he just held her and walked around the pool. She was too weak to really play. But he could tell the water felt good to her. After she was clean, he made her a little bed out of a blanket, and she drifted off to sleep. He washed all her

clothes, too, and laid them out to dry beside his on the slab. Then he stretched out beside Boots and slid into oblivion.

He was unsure how long he slept before he was awakened by Ripred's voice laying into Lapblood. She had not moved since they'd arrived at the pool. She'd let Hamnet pour water into her mouth, but sometimes it just ran out of the side. None of the food before her had been touched. And she had made no attempt to bathe, so her fur was still caked with sand. Whatever brief rally she had made to save herself from the quicksand was over. Grief and pain had consumed her again.

"Get up, Lapblood! You've got to get that sand out of your fur before it's too late!" ordered Ripred. She didn't even react to his voice. He tried a few different methods of persuasion, but got no results. Finally, he snorted in frustration. "Fine! If you're just going to lay there, I'll throw you in myself!" With that he grabbed Lapblood by the scruff of the neck and dragged her into the pool. She floundered around in a daze, as if she wasn't quite sure what was going on, until he pulled her back out. "Now groom yourself! The water doesn't get in by your skin! You've got to clean the rest of the sand out with your claws before it rubs you raw!" said Ripred. But Lapblood seemed no more inclined to groom herself than she had been to bathe. She just lay on her belly, indifferent to the world. Ripred began to threaten her, and had actually opened his jaws to bite her on the flank when Gregor intervened.

"Stop it!" Gregor said.

Ripred looked at him in surprise. "Excuse me?"

"Stop it. Just leave her alone. She feels bad, okay?" said Gregor.

"Tell you what. Later, when we're all safe and sound, I'll make a point to be extra sympathetic. But at the moment, I can't have her checking out," said Ripred. "I need her. She can fight and chances are we're going to run into at least a few more things that want to eat us in the Vineyard. And who do I have as backup? A handful of pups, a lame bat, a crawler, a couple of pacifists, and a rager who freezes up. All of you in bad shape, to boot. Oh, Lapblood will clean her fur, if I have to yank every piece out to convince her!" He opened his teeth to tear out a hunk of her fur. Gregor's fingers closed around a plum Temp had set aside for Boots, and he beamed Ripred between the eyes with it.

The rat looked at him in disbelief. It couldn't have hurt; Gregor hadn't thrown it hard. But it was so rare that anyone defied Ripred that it genuinely

took him aback. "What was that?"

"I'll do her fur," said Gregor.

"What?" said Ripred.

"I'll groom her myself," said Gregor. He took out the brush Dulcet had packed for Boots and crossed over to Lapblood.

"You? You're going to groom her?" said Ripred with a laugh.

"Why not?" said Gregor. He'd brushed dogs before. How different could it be?

"This I've got to see," said Ripred, and settled himself back comfortably to watch the show.

Water was still dripping off Lapblood. She had not even given herself a shake when she'd come out of the pool. While the swim had rinsed away the big chunks of sand, her fur was still gritty to the touch. Gregor wasn't exactly sure how to start. For one thing, she was way bigger than any dog he'd ever brushed. Plus she was wet. Still, he had to give it a shot.

Gregor got his clean shirt, which was mostly dry, and patted a patch on her back so it was at least not soaked. Then he took the brush and began to work through the fur very gently. Ripred was right. It was matted in places and the grains of sand were already beginning to rub sore spots on her skin. It took him a while to get a patch the size of his hand clean.

"Man, this will take forever!" he thought. But he didn't stop because Ripred was watching. So were a lot of other creatures. As they awoke, his traveling companions seemed fascinated by the sight of him brushing Lapblood's coat. A dozen pairs of shiny black mouse eyes peeked out from the vines. And though he could not see her, he felt certain Luxa was somewhere in the jungle watching him, too. Disapproving, no doubt.

As the fur dried, the job became easier. His arms ached but his fingers loved the feel of the silky coat. Who knew rats had such soft fur? There was something soothing about the whole thing.

When he'd finished her back, Gregor moved around so he was facing Lapblood for the first time. She seemed startled by his appearance. Confused.

"I'm going to brush out your belly now. You've got to lay on your side," said Gregor.

As if in a trance, Lapblood rolled over on her side. But she kept her eyes trained on Gregor. He wondered if at any moment she might come to her senses and bite his head off. She didn't. She was too far gone. Too weak.

Too sad. And a little crazy, or why would she ever ask Gregor what she did just then?

"Do you think they're still alive?" whispered Lapblood. "Flyfur and Sixclaw?"

It was almost the same question she had asked Mange.

"Sure. Sure, I do," said Gregor. He tried hard to remember what Mange had said to her. "They'll have the yellow powder by now. And —" What was that other rat's name? "And Mincemeat will feed them." That name wasn't exactly right, but it must have been close enough.

"Yes, she will feed them," said Lapblood. "My pups."

"Now you should try and get some sleep, Lapblood," said Gregor. "Okay?"

She blinked at him a few times and then, amazingly, fell asleep.

Gregor's thoughts turned to his own mother. She must be very sick by now. Howard as well. Neveeve said the bats didn't get sick as quickly, so maybe Andromeda was still okay. But Ares? Face it, Ares must be dead. Gregor was blindsided by pain for a few moments, and he struggled to push it away. He couldn't afford to give in to it now. Like Lapblood, he had others to save.

He brushed her coat until every inch of it was as smooth as velvet. It was funny...how he and Lapblood were like two sides of one coin. A mother fighting to save her kids. A kid fighting to save his mother. Despite their differences, he felt they'd had a special link from that first night, when they had lain awake together in the darkness, wondering about their loved ones. At the moment, Lapblood was past being able to bear what she had to bear. He knew what that was like and he could not watch Ripred abuse her. That's why he had stepped in. He would like to have explained that to all the spectators. But he didn't have the words.

So instead, without bothering to clean out the brush, he groomed his own hair.

CHAPTER 20

Food, water, and a good night's sleep produced a miraculous change in Boots. She woke up cheerfully and demanded breakfast. By this time, both Hamnet and Ripred had gone foraging for food and there was plenty. Dozens of fish, piles of plums, and big heaps of mushrooms.

Hamnet made a small fire on the stones using chunks of dead vines for fuel.

"Are you sure you should be building a fire?" asked Gregor, looking nervously around at the jungle.

"Take ease, Gregor, the plants are harmless in this part of the jungle," said Hamnet. He grilled several fish basted in plum juice. Gregor thought it was the best thing he'd ever tasted. Everyone packed away a huge breakfast except Lapblood, who was still dead to the world.

"Let her sleep," said Hamnet. "There will be food when she wakes."

Boots was begging to go swimming so Gregor took her in the pool. She rode on his back, jumped off the bank into his arms, and practiced blowing bubbles. When she got tired of the water she ate again and then pulled Temp and Hazard into a game with her ball.

Hamnet called Gregor over so he could examine his feet. "They are healing, but you must take care to keep them from infection," he said. He painted Gregor's toes with the blue medicine, bandaged them again, and made him put the reptile shoes back on. Then he turned his attention to Nike's leg. "How is the pain?" he said.

"Not too bad," said Nike, but she let out an involuntary squeak when Hamnet ran his fingers over the break.

"We will have to camp here at least a day, Nike," said Hamnet. "Take the painkiller. It will allow you to rest." This time Nike did not object so Gregor knew she must really be hurting.

Hamnet dug through the medical supply pack, then emptied it on the ground and ran his hand over the contents. "Where is it? Where is the medicine?" The big green bottle was not among the supplies. "Has someone taken the painkiller?"

Gregor looked around the group but no one spoke up. It was unlikely that any of them would have taken it. Boots and Hazard were just children. Temp, Nike, and Frill wouldn't have been able to even open the container.

The rats might be able to break the bottle. But Lapblood was in a state of shock. And Ripred? He wasn't in pain, and he probably wouldn't be interested in something that fogged your mind. Gregor saw Hamnet looking at him and realized that he was the most likely suspect. He had fingers to open the bottle and painful toes to motivate him to want the medicine.

"You know, Gregor, if you had asked for the painkiller I would have given it to you," said Hamnet. "It is just that we usually save it for those in the greatest agony."

"I didn't take it. Honest," said Gregor. "You can look through my stuff."

Ripred crossed to where he was sitting. "Open your mouth," he said. Gregor did, not sure what was going on. The rat took a deep sniff of his breath. "He hasn't swallowed any of it."

"My apologies," Hamnet said to Gregor. "Well, that does not leave us many options."

Before Gregor could ask what he meant, Boots threw one of her long high balls into the surrounding jungle. Hazard started after it but Gregor caught his shoulder. "No, I'll get it, Hazard." He didn't want either of the kids running around out there, even if the plants were supposed to be harmless.

It took a little while to find the ball since there was no path and the vines were thick close to the ground. He finally spotted it wedged between two roots. "Heads up!" he called and winged it back into the clearing. That's when he caught a glimpse of her out of the corner of his eye. She was sitting motionless up in the vines and must have been watching him the whole time.

While he spoke, he examined a hangnail that was bugging him. "So, you were just going to stand there and watch me die."

"I thought you and Ripred were here to attack the nibblers," said Luxa. There was nothing apologetic in her tone.

"Why's that?" said Gregor.

"The rats have always hated the nibblers because they are on good terms with the humans. The nibblers fought on our side in the last war. So the rats drove them into the jungle, hoping they would starve and be eaten by predators. However, the nibblers are stronger than the rats give them credit for," said Luxa.

"That could be a reason why the rats are here. What about me?" said Gregor.

"You did not kill the Bane," said Luxa. "When I saw you and two rats in the jungle, I could only assume you had crossed over to their side."

"Okay, you got me. I've hooked up with Ripred, and we're taking over the Underland and splitting it fifty-fifty. Because, you know, I just can't get enough of the place." Gregor bit off the hangnail and spit it into the vines with disgust. "Geez, Luxa." The whole time he was down here all he ever wanted to do was get home to his family in one piece. She knew that. The idea that he had some big plan with Ripred was ridiculous.

"You may sneer, but that is not so different from what Henry tried," said Luxa.

Henry. He'd been her cousin, her best friend, and the guy who had sold her over to the rats for some crazy scheme where they would all share power. Gregor admitted Luxa had cause to be suspicious. But still.

"I'm not Henry," said Gregor. He sighed when he thought of what an impossible task it was to get Luxa to trust him. Probably the only one she trusted was her bond. If the bat was still alive. "What happened to Aurora?"

"She is injured," said Luxa.

That was a relief, anyway. To know Aurora hadn't been killed. "Injured how?" asked Gregor.

"It is her wing. It has been pulled from its socket. She cannot fly and I cannot leave her. She suffers greatly," said Luxa.

Something clicked in Gregor's head. "So, you took the painkiller?"

"I did not know Nike needed it. I will bring some back," said Luxa.

"You know, your uncle should look at Aurora. He's pretty good with medical stuff," said Gregor. Luxa didn't answer. She had not made a very good impression on Hamnet. And who knew what she thought of the guy? Showing up after ten years when everybody believed he was dead. As things stood, Gregor realized she would never be able to ask him for help. "I'll talk to him. See if there's anything he can do. But you have to come with me." After a minute, she slid down a vine next to him. Her eyes were so sad and tired. Suddenly, it was hard to stay mad at her. "What happened here?" he asked, drawing a line from his temple to his chin to indicate her scar.

"A rat clawed me in the Labyrinth," said Luxa.

"Thanks for getting Boots out of there," said Gregor.

"It was Temp," said Luxa.

"It was Temp who ran. It was you who fought so he could," said Gregor. She just shrugged. "Come on, let's talk to Hamnet."

When Gregor told him about Aurora, Hamnet slid the pack with the medical supplies on his back. Gregor and Hamnet followed Luxa a short distance through the jungle. She pushed aside a thick swath of vines and revealed the entrance to a cave. Inside were a few mice and Luxa's golden bat, Aurora. The poor thing was lying on her belly, probably the last position a bat would choose to rest in, with one wing extended at a grotesque angle. Her eyes had a dull, remote expression that Gregor had never seen in them. He hoped it was just from the pain medicine.

"She has dislocated the wing," said Hamnet with a frown. "How long has it been out of the socket?"

"Many weeks," said Luxa.

Hamnet shook his head. "Even if I can maneuver it back into place, the damage may be lasting. But we can do only what we can do."

Just getting Aurora into a standing position caused the bat to shriek.

"Can you not do it while she is lying down?" said Luxa, stroking Aurora's face to calm her.

"No, even this may not work," said Hamnet. He instructed Gregor to hold Aurora securely by the chest. Gregor couldn't wrap his arms around her, since her wings interfered. The best he could do was to clutch large handfuls of her fur on each side of her body.

"Sorry, Aurora," he said.

She blinked at him, dazed. "Overlander? You are here?"

"Yeah, I'm back again," said Gregor.

"And Ares? He is with you?" asked Aurora.

"No, he...he got the plague," said Gregor.

"The plague?" Even though Aurora was in a drug-induced stupor, he could hear the horror in her voice. Images came rushing back into Gregor's mind. Purple lumps bursting...white sheets stained with blood...his bat...his mother...

"Oh, not Ares..." said Luxa hollowly.

"It is time." Hamnet had moved behind Aurora and taken hold of her twisted wing near the top. "Brace yourselves!" he ordered and then gave a quick, sharp tug on the wing. Gregor lost his grip on her fur, and the bat gave a heartbreaking cry.

"Stop it!" screamed Luxa, and Gregor could see she was about to lose it. She grabbed Hamnet's arm and tried to pull him away. "Do not give her any more pain! She cannot bear it!"

Hamnet caught her by the wrists. "If you do not want her to die here in the jungle, there is no other way, Luxa. You do not help by objecting. Go outside the cave."

But Luxa wouldn't. She pressed her back into a wall and refused to move.

"Again, Gregor," said Hamnet grimly. "And you must hold her tighter. I must have something to pull against."

Gregor wiped his sweaty hands and latched on to Aurora's fur.

"On the count of three," said Hamnet. "One — two — three!" There was another yank, another screech, but this time Gregor managed to hang on. And this time, wonderfully, beautifully, Aurora's crooked wing popped back into place and folded neatly up against her side.

"Ohhhh!" Aurora let out a gasp of relief. "Ohhhh!"

"Good," said Hamnet. "Very good. But it is not healed. You are not well. No doubt damage has been caused by its displacement. Use it too quickly, and it may dislocate again. But the pain is much less, I believe."

"Much less," whispered Aurora. She gingerly opened and closed her wings a few times. Luxa wrapped her arms around her bat and pressed her face into the golden fur. Gregor was sure she was crying and didn't want them to see.

"Rest now. I will come back and check on you in a few hours," said Hamnet. He picked up the green bottle of painkiller that was lying against the cave wall and returned it to the medical pack. "Come, Gregor."

As they walked back to the camp Gregor said, "I guess they've had a pretty bad time."

"It could not have been easy," replied Hamnet. He stopped to strip a vine of a dozen of the yellow plums. "You know my niece better than I. What manner of person would you say she is?"

"Luxa?" said Gregor. He tried hard to think how to describe her. "Well, when I first met her, she seemed stuck-up. That's when she was hanging out with Henry all the time. Then we sort of became friends." It seemed so weak, his impression of Luxa, when she was so strong. He thought of her killing the rat, Shed, to save his life. Flipping through the air with Aurora as they destroyed a funnel spiderweb with a move called the coiler. Secretly

flying out after the boats on the Waterway so that she could help him find the Bane. How to describe Luxa? "She's brave," said Gregor finally. "Brave as anybody I've ever known. And I know this might sound crazy...what with the quicksand thing and all...but I trust her with my life."

"That does sound crazy," said Hamnet, but he smiled.

Back at the campsite, Hamnet administered the painkiller to Nike. It affected her almost immediately. "Ah. I can barely feel my leg. Well, I have not been able to unravel 'The Prophecy of Blood' with a clear head, perhaps I can do it when everything seems unreal," she murmured.

"Yes, 'The Prophecy of Blood,'" said Hamnet. "It has been many years since I studied it in Sandwich's room. How goes the repeating stanza?"

It was still so fresh in Gregor's mind that he answered automatically.

Turn and turn and turn again.

you see the what but not the when.

Remedy and wrong entwine,

And so they form a single vine.

Hamnet had him say it a few more times so he could commit it to memory. While he recited it for the fourth time, Gregor realized Boots was by his side, doing a little dance to the words.

"Turn and turn and turn again," she said. Every time she said "turn," she'd spin in a half circle. "Turn and turn and turn again.' Turn and turn and turn again." She went on until she got dizzy and tumbled over, giggling.

"Okay, it says, we 'see the what,'" said Gregor. "So, what's the what?"

"Presumably, the plague," said Ripred.

"We 'see the "plague" but not the when,'" said Gregor, swapping in the word. "Then what's the when?"

"It could be many things. When the plague began. When the cure will be found. When the last warm-blood dies," said Nike dreamily.

"Remedy and wrong entwine, / And so they form a single vine," said Hamnet. "I suppose that refers to the plant that is the cure. What is it called again?"

"Starshade," said Gregor. "It looks like this." He took a piece of charred vine from the edge of the fire and drew the plant on the stone as he remembered it from Neveeve's book.

"Remedy and wrong entwine...' if the remedy is the starshade, then what is the wrong?" asked Ripred.

But no one could even venture a guess.

So instead they ate and got ready for bed. Hamnet and Luxa helped Aurora back to the camp. The two injured bats greeted each other warmly and snuggled together to sleep.

"It will be much comfort for Aurora to have another flier to sleep with," said Luxa. But Gregor wondered if this was the only reason they had moved to the camp. Luxa could probably use some human company, too.

"Are you going with us to the Vineyard?" Gregor asked her.

"You might have need of me," said Luxa.

He thought about mentioning how dangerous it was to her, but he knew that wouldn't matter at all.

Hamnet let them sleep a full eight hours. Then they had breakfast and prepared to travel the last leg of the trip to the Vineyard of Eyes. The two bats were secured on Frill, Boots was assigned her regular seat on Temp's back, and everyone else was to go on foot.

"To the Vineyard of Eyes, then," said Hamnet, and Frill led the way into the jungle.

Gregor tried to get Boots up on Temp's back but she was still enamored with her dance. She would take a couple of steps into the jungle and then say, "'Turn and turn and turn again,'" and run back in the opposite direction.

"No, Boots, that way leads to Regalia," said Gregor. Back to Regalia where everybody was counting on them. He scooped up Boots and planted her on Temp's back. "Come on," he said. "The cure's this way."

CHAPTER 21

There was a small path, probably worn by the mice traveling from their nests to the spring, but it quickly became overgrown, and they were just wading their way through the jungle again. It was harder here. The vines grew more thickly so that, in places, they had to separate them with their hands to get through. Then the stems snapped closed behind them. At times, Gregor couldn't even see most of his fellow travelers. He stayed right on top of Temp and Boots, making sure they didn't get lost in the foliage.

Hamnet assigned each of them a number, one through eleven, and made them sound off periodically. Boots loved this and never failed to shout out, "Nine!" with great enthusiasm. It was trickier for Temp, who had trouble remembering he was the number ten and also that it followed nine. Gregor knew math was not the roaches' strong suit; they had trouble with the simplest addition. Boots, who could now count up to twenty with just a few problems in the thirteen-fourteen area, kept jumping in to help Temp. "Temp, say 'Ten!' Temp, say 'Ten!'" she'd cry when he missed his number. Gregor hoped this wasn't embarrassing him, but if it were, he didn't show it.

At one point during the sound off, Gregor realized Luxa had fallen back in line and was walking just ahead of them. "How's Aurora doing?" he asked.

"Better, so much better, although she still has some pain," said Luxa. She waited until he had caught right up to her and asked in a puzzled voice, "Gregor...who is that boy? The one who speaks to the hisser?"

"His name's Hazard. He's Hamnet's son. So, I guess that makes him your cousin," said Gregor.

"How is that possible?" said Luxa with a frown. "His eyes are green."

"Yeah, his mom was an Overlander. Hamnet met her somewhere out here. He hasn't talked much about it," said Gregor.

"My cousin," said Luxa. She looked conflicted. Her experience with cousins had not always been happy.

"I think he'll be a good one. Like Nerissa or Howard," said Gregor.

"So, Nerissa is queen now?" asked Luxa.

"Yeah, but you'll be queen again when we get back, right?" asked Gregor.

"Oh, yes. I will not be relieved of this crown so easily. How fares Nerissa? Have they been dreadful to her?" asked Luxa.

"She seems to be hanging in there. She stood up to Ripred and everybody in a meeting. You'd have been proud of her," said Gregor.

"I am always proud of Nerissa," said Luxa. "If fools wish to belittle her, it does not affect my judgment of her gifts."

"That goes double for me. You know, she's the only reason Ares and I are alive. She's the one who finally figured out what the Prophecy of Bane meant. Why it was good I didn't kill the Bane," said Gregor significantly.

"Then tell me, Gregor, why it is good that the Bane lives?" said Luxa with a sigh.

So Gregor took a deep breath and started back at the fight with the sea serpents where he had lost Luxa. He told her about sparing the Bane's life in the Labyrinth, leaving it with Ripred, the angry reaction back in Regalia and how Nerissa had saved his life by cracking the prophecy. He told her of Boots's return, and the months he'd spent waiting for word up in New York City. Then he explained everything he knew about the plague and the hardest part—the names of all who were stricken. He quickly moved on to the search for the cure, meeting Hamnet, and the treacherous trip through the jungle that landed him in a pit of quicksand. "And that's where you came in," he said. "So, what happened to you and Aurora?"

Luxa's was a shorter story, but as loaded with trouble as Gregor's. During the battle with the sea serpents, she and Aurora had caught Boots and Temp and dove into a tunnel. Waves had soon blocked their way to their companions and they had floated for hours in the chilly water, clinging to Boots's and Temp's life jackets. Eventually, they had made their way into the Labyrinth and ran into Twitchtip, who was in the process of leading them to a safer spot when a dozen rats had attacked. Luxa had ordered Temp to run with Boots and held off the others long enough for him to get a good start. Then she had fled, following Twitchtip's directions. It took them two days to find a path out of the maze and into a network of tunnels that had led to the jungle, where almost immediately, Aurora had dislocated her wing in a fight with a giant tree snake. If the mice had not given them refuge then, they would not be alive.

"Any idea what happened to Twitchtip?" he asked.

"I do not know, Gregor. She was so weak from her injuries...I do not know," said Luxa.

The dense foliage ended abruptly and they came out along the stone rim of a valley. What lay below them took Gregor's breath away. The valley was covered with vines, too, but these were more slender and graceful with delicate blossoms of every shade. A light, sweet scent filled the air, which was the coolest they had encountered since they'd entered the Arch of Tantalus. The relentless chatter of the jungle was behind them now, because over the valley was a hush.

"Here lies the Vineyard of Eyes," hissed Frill.

Gregor wondered why everyone dreaded it so. It was like a magnificent garden with those multicolored blossoms and that glorious smell and...then he remembered the plants that had taken Mange's life. Maybe here in the jungle, beauty was synonymous with danger. There was a smooth, wide stone path leading into the valley. The vines grew in a high arch above it, as if they'd been planted and pruned by an expert gardener.

"Who made the path?" asked Gregor.

"The Vineyard made the path itself. To invite weary travelers in," said Ripred.

What? The Vineyard had made the path? Was this just a large-scale version of the plant that ate Mange? But instead of just one plant, a whole variety had worked out this enticing trap together? Suddenly, all the beauty became sinister, and Gregor did not want to enter the Vineyard at all.

"Courage, boy," said Ripred, who could no doubt smell the fear in Gregor's sweat. "Others must have survived it and lived to tell the tale if your Doctor Neveeve has a record of it in her books. That means it can be done. And if it can be done, then we can do it. Hamnet, what do you suggest?"

"Stay very close together. Walk in twos or even threes if possible. But avoid touching any plant. And under no circumstances, leave the path," said Hamnet.

"Boots," said Gregor weakly and then cleared his throat and tried again. "Boots, you have to stay on the path. Like...like...you know how Red Riding Hood had to stay on the path?" he asked.

"Because of wuff?" said Boots, her eyes lighting up.

"Right, these plants have bad things like wolves in them, so you stay right here on the path, okay?" said Gregor.

"You stay on the path, Temp!" said Boots, but then she immediately began to peer into the vines, clearly hoping for a glimpse of a "wuff."

Gregor would just have to keep her right next to him.

Frill and Hamnet led the party down the path with Hazard walking between them. Aurora and Nike, still secured to Frill's back, were completely vulnerable. Luxa covered them on the right and Lapblood on the left. Gregor came next, holding Boots's hand while she rode on Temp. Ripred, in the rear, walked alone.

Quiet. It was so quiet. Gregor strained his ears as the last vivid clamor of the jungle died away. Then, for the first time, he heard the sounds of his companions, stepping, sniffing, sighing. Nike coughed, Frill gave a hiss of surprise when Ripred trod on her tail, Gregor's stomach rumbled with hunger. But the Vineyard of Eyes drank in their sounds and gave them nothing in return. It was very creepy. They had been walking for about five minutes when Gregor began to see them. The eyes. At first he mistook them for flowers or some of the enticing fruit that hung from the vines. But flowers didn't blink and fruit didn't roll around to follow your movements. Were they insects? Did the plants themselves have eyes? Was that possible? Gregor didn't know and didn't ask. He just kept one hand on Boots and one on the hilt of his sword and pretended not to notice them. Yeah, right.

They made good time. The path continued to be smooth and straight, sloping gently downward. It was easy to travel but Gregor had the sense they were descending down the throat of some horrible beast. "Just waiting for the right moment to swallow us up," he thought. He tightened his hold on Boots's hand until she complained.

Eventually, they came to a large clearing, shaped in a geometrically perfect circle. Across the path from which they had arrived, three smaller paths branched out from a single point, equal angles between them. Like they had been measured and drawn with the aid of a protractor. Gregor had never seen anything like this in the Underland. Sure, he'd run into plenty of paths that forked, but they were a variety of sizes and shapes and seemed to have formed naturally, by streams or rivers that had dried up long ago. The Vineyard of Eyes had been carefully designed and executed by someone. Or something.

"Why don't they just attack us?" he blurted out, not even knowing who "they" were.

"This part of the Vineyard must not be as hungry as others," said Hamnet. "Or perhaps they want our blood for a special purpose. To feed the young or heal an ill."

"So, this place, it has a brain or something?" said Gregor.

"Look at the paths, boy. Do you think they just happened by accident?" said Ripred. No, they hadn't. So, the answer must be "yes."

Hamnet positioned a lantern directly in the center of the circle and they all gathered tightly around it while they ate. When they were done, Hamnet rose. "I am going to take Frill and scout the paths," he said.

"Fine. The rest of us can take turns sleeping," said Ripred.

"I'm going with you," said Hazard, jumping up and clinging to Hamnet's hand.

"You will be safe here, Hazard," said Hamnet. "Ripred will look after you."

But Hazard would not let his father and Frill leave without him. After it was clear he was determined to follow them on foot down the path, Hamnet gave in and took him along. They took the path that branched off to the left and soon they were out of sight.

"Will they be all right?" Gregor asked Ripred.

"Don't worry about Hamnet. He can look after himself," said Ripred. "Survived ten years out here without any help from the rest of us."

"Why did he leave Regalia, Ripred?" said Luxa in a hushed voice. She rarely addressed the rat, so Gregor knew the question had been weighing on her.

"They never told you? Not your mother? Or Vikus?" said Ripred.

"No. Henry heard Hamnet had gone mad. But he could never find out the whole story, and Henry could find out almost anything," said Luxa.

There was no sound except their breathing while Ripred considered this. Gregor looked into the Vineyard and saw the lantern light reflecting off numerous pairs of eyes. Blinking. Blinking. He wanted to scream at them to go away, but that would only frighten Boots, and he felt sure they wouldn't go anywhere.

"You may as well know," said Ripred finally. "I expect Vikus is only waiting for you to be old enough to tell. But he would keep you young as long as possible. And then, it's hard for him to talk about Hamnet without weeping."

"Then you tell me," said Luxa. "And Vikus and I will both be in your debt."

"You in my debt, Your Highness? Well, that's an opportunity I can scarcely let pass," said Ripred. He slouched over on his side and stared into

the lantern's flame. "Now where to begin?...You see, the thing is...the thing you have to understand is that the humans and the rats were not always so consumed with hatred for each other. Or at least, the hatred has ebbed and flowed, so that there have been periods when one could hope for a genuine peace. These times coincided with both the rats and the humans having leaders that were willing to place a higher priority on harmony than gain. Several hundred years ago, they say, was such a time."

Boots nudged her way onto Gregor's lap, and he wrapped his arms around her. She gave a big yawn and leaned her head against his chest.

"As a token of goodwill, the humans gave a gift to the rats. A place the bats had named the Garden of the Hesperides. Sandwich's own people had planted the garden soon after they had arrived in the Underland. There was a small plain that flooded each year when the river was high. The humans built a dike so that the plain would no longer flood, and when it dried, the land was very fertile. They planted apple trees. They were small by Overland standards, but sturdy and able to grow with just the light from the river. There were sluice gates along the dike that could be opened and shut to provide water. The trees flourished and soon their branches were heavy with golden apples."

"A is for apple," murmured Boots.

"For the rats, it was a rare gift indeed. Unlike the humans, we can't grow crops. But the trees required little care and produced fruit almost continually. When I was a pup, I remember, it was a great treat to go to the garden," said Ripred, "to eat the apples, to sleep in the caves surrounding it, which smelled as sweet as the fruit."

"Yes," whispered Lapblood sadly. "Everyone loved the garden."

"I have never even heard of the Garden of the Hesperides," said Luxa suspiciously.

"No, because if you had heard of it, you would also have heard the story of why your uncle left. Which I will tell you now," said Ripred. "Ten or so years ago was not one of those fortunate times. While your father was a decent enough king in some respects, Your Highness, he was too rigid in others. And, of course, King Gorger was a bloodthirsty monster from the get-go."

"The same King Gorger..." Gregor began.

"Yes, the same King Gorger who fell to his death on your first visit, Gregor. Anyway, the humans decided they wanted the garden back. Solovet

sent an army under Hamnet's command to run out the rats. Hamnet, at the time, was hands down the best warrior among the humans. Everyone assumed he would take control of the army after his mother, since he seemed just like her. But as it turned out, he was as much like Vikus as he was like Solovet. And so he was doomed."

Gregor began to get a sick feeling in his stomach. He had an impulse to tell Ripred to stop. He was not sure he wanted to hear the rest of the story. But Luxa did. And it was about her uncle.

"Under Hamnet, the humans and their fliers launched a surprise attack. The rats, most of whom were playing in the garden with their pups, were thrown into chaos. But they quickly regrouped, herded the pups into the surrounding caves, and turned to do battle. They fought so viciously that the tide began to turn in their favor. But Hamnet had a backup plan provided by his mother. If the rats should prove too strong, he was to open the sluice gates and flood the field. Then the rats would have to swim, and the humans on fliers would have a great advantage. So, Hamnet opened the gates."

In the pause that followed, Gregor remembered Hamnet's words to Vikus: "I do no harm. I do no more harm." He knew he was about to find out what that harm had been.

"The river was high, the dike was centuries old. As the water burst through the sluice gates, the surrounding mortar and stone crumbled and the whole dike gave way — not merely flooding the plain, but reclaiming it under twenty feet of water. Hundreds of rats were drowned in the deluge, and many humans and fliers were caught as well. But the carnage didn't end there. Having filled the plain, the water rushed into the cave entrances, drowning the pups that had been hidden there for safety. You could hear their shrieks for miles around," said Ripred.

"Miles around," Lapblood softly echoed. "Miles around."

"What did Hamnet do?" Luxa asked.

"He began a desperate effort to rescue the drowning, human, rat, bat, whatever, but it was useless. His own flier, his bond, was dragged into the water by two rats trying to save themselves, and she never resurfaced. Hamnet was pulled out by Mareth, who had to knock him senseless in order to keep him from diving back into what was by this time a lake of corpses," said Ripred. "When Hamnet regained consciousness in Regalia, he was, for all practical purposes, mad. For days, he recognized no one and spoke in strange, garbled sentences. Then his reason returned and he stopped

speaking entirely. A few nights later he fled Regalia. The last person who saw him must have been Nerissa, who was just as unstable as a child as she is now, I might add. But she never mentioned it. A year after his disappearance he was pronounced dead and all efforts to locate him ceased," said Ripred. "And that is the story of your Uncle Hamnet."

"What happened to the garden?" asked Aurora.

"It lies underwater. And those golden apple trees won't grow anywhere else in the Underland," said Ripred. "So they were lost as well."

For a while, all Gregor could hear was the occasional crackle of the lantern and Boots's soft snoring as she slept on his chest. Then a strained voice came from the path on the left. "Telling tales out of school again, Ripred?" Gregor didn't know how long Hamnet had been sitting there on Frill, holding his sleeping son. Long enough, though.

"You know my theory on that, Hamnet. The more tales told, the less chance of repeating them," said Ripred. "Maybe it will help your niece out one day."

Luxa and Hamnet exchanged a look. "Maybe," said Hamnet. "Depending on whose ears she inherited."

"Any luck out there?" asked Ripred.

"I think so," said Hamnet. He held up a handful of plants. The roots still dangled from the stems. Above his clenched fist was a cluster of star-shaped leaves.

CHAPTER 22

"Starshade," said Ripred. "You found it."

"You found it?" Gregor started to jump up, forgetting Boots was asleep on his lap. He set her on the ground and hurried to Hamnet. "You found the cure?"

"It fits your description," said Hamnet. He settled Hazard on Frill's back and slid down the lizard's tail. They all gathered around him.

"What do you think, boy? Does it look like the picture in the book?" Ripred asked Gregor.

"Exactly!" said Gregor excitedly. They had found the cure! Finally, something was going right! He plucked a leaf from the plant and took a deep sniff. The clean, refreshing scent made his nose tingle. "Mmm, smells like lemons. This must be it. It smells...like it could heal you. Where is it? Can we go get it now? And then get back to Regalia and —"

"Slow down, Gregor. I know we are all eager to obtain the cure. But first things first. We must sleep. Frill will keep watch. And then we will begin," said Hamnet.

Gregor lay down next to Boots. He was tired, but keyed up, too. He held the starshade leaf in his palm and let the light dance over it. In his hand was life for his mom, for Ares, for all of the Underland. He pressed the leaf against his nose, and comforted by its lemony essence, closed his eyes.

The next thing he knew, Hamnet was shaking him awake. They ate some leftover fish and a few plums. But when they started to get in their previous formation, Hamnet stopped them. "I did not tell any of you save Ripred this last night because I did not want to disturb your slumber, but this final leg of the journey will be treacherous. The field is nearby, but to reach it we must traverse a very dangerous path. As a group, we will need to move with all possible speed."

"I've designed a formation that should give us the highest rate of survival," said Ripred. "Hamnet will show you. Do exactly as he says." Hamnet left Frill at the front of the line with the two bats and Hazard on her back. He instructed Temp to crawl beneath Frill's back legs. Flanking the lizard to the right was Ripred, with Boots and Gregor riding on his back. Luxa was to travel on Lapblood on the left. Hamnet was to run at the back.

"I can travel fast enough on my own two legs," said Luxa. She clearly didn't want to ride Lapblood.

"No, Luxa, you cannot," said Hamnet. "And trust me when I say you will be grateful for Lapblood's speed."

Luxa reluctantly settled herself on Lapblood and reached up to stroke Aurora's fur. Gregor placed Boots up by Ripred's shoulder blades and sat behind her. He had to keep his knees slightly bent so his feet wouldn't scrape the ground.

"We ride on here?" Boots asked him, puzzled.

"Just for a little way, Boots. Then you can go back on Temp," said Gregor.

Boots crawled up on Ripred's neck and poked him on the top of the head with one finger. "R is for rat," she said.

"Yes, and B is for bite," said Ripred in a singsong voice. "Be careful the rat doesn't bite your fingers!" He snapped his teeth together for emphasis.

"Oh!" Boots quickly scooted back against Gregor and held her hands close to her chest.

"Was that really necessary?" said Gregor.

"Absolutely. You want her going up and trying to pet rats? Not in this day and age," said Ripred.

Ripred, as usual, had a point. In general, Gregor did not want Boots petting rats. Most of them would kill her in a second. But then...if the humans and rats taught their babies from birth to fear each other...how was anything ever going to get better? He had a feeling this was a much bigger question to answer than he had time for at the moment, so he just wrapped his arms around Boots and said nothing.

Everyone was in place. "We will only travel a short while when I will give the command to run. At that point, do not stop until you have reached the field of starshade," Hamnet said. "Let us go."

This path was narrower although similar-looking to the one that had brought them this far. But as they turned a corner, Gregor saw a long corridor that was so lovely it looked unreal. The vines were covered with a million tiny silvery-white blossoms that seemed to sparkle in the lantern light. There was a soft, tinkling sound of bells. It was like entering the pathway to some magical fairyland. And the smell...oh, the smell of the flowers made him dizzy with happiness.

"Run!" he heard Hamnet shout.

Ripred sprang forward with such power that Gregor almost lost his seat and had to fling himself forward across Boots and grab hold of the rat's ears to hang on. Boots gave a squeal of protest, since she was pretty much flattened into Ripred's neck, but Gregor didn't dare let go.

The scent of the flowers was making it hard to hold on, though. He could feel his mind beginning to get cloudy and for no apparent reason, he started grinning.

"Hang on, Overlander!" Ripred snarled.

It was the funniest thing Gregor had ever heard, and now he was laughing. He saw the bewitching vines begin to shoot out at them, and he wanted to reach out his hands to meet them. Just then, Frill caught his attention by rearing up on her hind legs and breaking into a sprint. The sight of the big lizard bicycling along on those big legs made him laugh so hard that tears began to stream down his face.

Then Gregor could see a green field....That must be the starshade....What a dumb name for a plant since there were no stars down here or shade, either, since there was no sun. Which was a star. Since the star was a sun...No, the sun was starshade....No..."Maybe they should call it 'Never-seen-a-star-shade!'" Gregor yelled. The idea was so hilarious that he lost his grip on Ripred's back and fell off onto the path. The plants...the pretty plants...wove around his arms and fingers....He had never seen anything so amazing in his life!

Something yanked him from behind and he was being pulled back and forth because his new friends, the silvery-flowered vines, did not want him to leave so soon. They bit deeply into his arms before they finally snapped. "Bye!" Gregor called as he was dragged away. "Nice knowing you!"

Then he was lying in a cool, green, lemony world, still chuckling about the "Never-seen-a-star-shade" joke when he realized there was nothing funny about it. Alarm shot through him and he sat up quickly. The group was strung out along a large rectangular field covered in starshade. Boots was curled up in the leaves next to him giggling about her thumbs. Nike was hiccuping, which had Luxa and Hazard in stitches. Aurora, who apparently could fly again, was making lazy loops in the air. Most of his other fellow travelers seemed disoriented, too. Ripred and Hamnet were both taking deep breaths of the starshade, so Gregor did the same. His head began to clear almost immediately.

"What happened back there?" he asked.

"Those flowers put out a scent that gives a feeling of great happiness and well-being," said Hamnet. "And then, my guess is, they drag you into the Vineyard and dismember you."

"Whoa! You might have given us a heads-up on that one!" said Gregor.

"We were afraid you would try to fight them," said Hamnet. "That would have guaranteed your destruction."

"We could have fought them," said Luxa, but then Nike hiccuped again and she fell over, laughing.

"Oh, please," said Ripred rolling his eyes. "As it was, Hamnet and I had to drag half of you out of there, or don't you remember that part, Your Highness?"

Gregor could see the confusion on Luxa's face and guessed that part of the ride was as much a blur for her as it was for him.

"It affects the smallest the fastest," said Hamnet. "Luckily, Frill and I had Hazard with us last night. He began to babble almost as soon as we encountered the silver flowers. It warned us what we were up against." He wrapped his arm around Hazard and gave him a squeeze.

"Are we going to pick the leaves now?" asked Hazard. "Can I help?"

"Yes, we can all help," said Hamnet. "The sooner we can harvest these plants the better."

But before they started, Hamnet insisted that everyone eat a handful of the starshade leaves.

"Why do we need it?" asked Gregor. "None of us has the plague."

"But we are all no doubt being exposed to it. 'In the cradle lies the cure,'" said Hamnet. "That means the plague breeds here in the Vineyard. I do not know exactly where or how. All of us have scrapes and wounds. Your feet, Gregor. These cuts from the vines." Hamnet turned Gregor's arm around and revealed a crisscrossing pattern of marks where the vines had ensnared his arms. "If the plague germ floats in the air or grows on the plants or sleeps dormant in this earth where we stand, be sure it will make its way into your blood as well."

"Boots!" said Gregor. "Come on, we have to eat this stuff!" He stuffed a wad of leaves in his mouth and chewed. They weren't bad, actually. Sort of like lemon and mint and tea all in one. Boots resisted eating the leaves, since she was not big on greens, until Hamnet made it into a game of who could eat a leaf the fastest. Hazard and Temp played with her and had the

sense to let her win almost every time, so she soon had a fair number of leaves inside her.

The starshade was easy to pull from the thin layer of soil in which it grew, but no one could think of the best way to package it for the trip home. The plants were only about eighteen inches tall, so they were not long enough for tying around bundles of the stuff. Then Gregor remembered the duct tape and took it from his pack. "Here, this will work!" He pulled out a strip of the tape to show them. By cutting the wide tape into thin strips, they could secure a really big haul.

"This is most excellent," said Hamnet. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me, thank Mareth," said Gregor, and then caught himself. Now that they all knew about the Garden of the Hesperides and Mareth saving Hamnet, somehow he felt awkward mentioning the name. "Sorry," he mumbled.

"Why?" asked Hamnet. "Mareth is one of the few people I do not mind being in debt to."

"Yeah," said Gregor. "He's a good guy."

"Come, let us begin the harvest," said Hamnet.

Initially, everyone gathered the starshade from the field, but it soon became apparent that the humans would be most useful taping bundles of the leaves together. None of the other creatures had the hands to do it. Boots and Hazard really weren't much help, either, so they went back to picking plants. That is, Hazard did, while Boots sang "The Alphabet Song", then chanted "'Turn and turn and turn again'" while she did her spinning dance until she fell over with dizziness. Occasionally, she presented them with a few leaves, too. Aurora and Nike, who, with their injuries, were also fairly limited in what they could do, made sure she stayed safely in the field. When she began to get too interested in the jungle again, Gregor dug around in his backpack and pulled out her ball and the top Dulcet had packed for her. He also gave her the hand mirror Nerissa had given him — Boots was very fond of making faces at herself.

Gregor ended up working mainly with Luxa, cutting strips of tape and wrapping up bundles of starshade. Hamnet gathered the bundles and began to build them into a haystack of sorts. When he was out of earshot, Gregor turned to Luxa. "So, that was some story Ripred told us about Hamnet."

"Yes, it explains a great deal about why he left," said Luxa. "He was mad. But it does not explain why he did not come back to Regalia when his

senses returned."

"Because they would have made him fight again, Luxa," said Gregor. "And he couldn't stand killing anymore."

"There is no great joy in killing for any of us," said Luxa. "We do it to survive."

"So, what are you saying? You think he's a coward?" said Gregor.

"Not a coward in that he is afraid to die. But I think it is easier for him to live here in the jungle, than return and face his true life," said Luxa.

Gregor thought about it. First of all, living in the jungle was no picnic. And Hamnet had left everyone he loved behind. He couldn't have known he would meet an Overlander woman and have Hazard. He probably didn't think he would even live. He had given up everything, his home, his loved ones, his life, because he felt so strongly that what he did for Regalia was wrong.

"I don't know, Luxa. I think he made a pretty brave choice. And I think in his mind it was the only one he could have made," said Gregor.

"Perhaps. I do not know." Luxa gave her head a shake. "But would you have abandoned your family, Gregor?"

"That's different. My family doesn't even allow hitting," said Gregor. "Your family's always in a war."

"So is yours, now," said Luxa and ripped off a piece of duct tape with her teeth.

Hamnet had assembled all the available bundles in the haystack, so he came to help them tape up some more. Luxa and Hamnet avoided speaking much to each other. It was too bad, really, since Gregor actually liked them both and they were related and all. He wasn't exactly sure how to get them to talk, but he gave it a try.

"Man, you two sure look alike," he said. "You even smile the same."

Luxa and Hamnet glanced at each other warily but said nothing.

"So, Luxa must look just like her mom did, huh? Ripred said she was the spitting image of your twin," Gregor continued.

It was more of a question, so Hamnet had to answer. "It is remarkable how much she resembles Judith. Even as a baby —" He broke off.

"Oh, yeah, you must have still been around when Luxa was a baby," said Gregor.

"Yes, we were good friends then, Luxa and I. I took her on her first flier ride outside the city," said Hamnet.

"To the beach with the crystals," said Luxa softly.

Hamnet looked at her in surprise. "You remember that? You could not have been more than two years."

"Just bits and pieces. I still have a chunk of crystal. It is blue," said Luxa.

"And shaped like a fish," said Hamnet. "I remember." Suddenly, his eyes filled with tears. "Of everything I left behind in Regalia, Luxa, you were my greatest regret. You and your mother."

"You could have come and seen us," said Luxa and her voice sounded very young.

"No. I could never have left twice. You know how Solovet works. She would have had me leading an army again in no time," said Hamnet.

"She could not have forced you," said Luxa.

"Bet she could have," muttered Gregor. Solovet would have found a way to make her son fight again. Guilt. Shame. Duty. Something.

"I could not do that again," said Hamnet. "Not after...I still dream of it every night....The voices crying out for me to save them....And what did it solve? That battle at the garden? Nothing. It solved nothing at all. When it was over, the humans and gnawers hated one another more than ever. The Underland only became a more dangerous place."

There was a long pause in the conversation before Gregor spoke up again.

"So, don't you ever fight now? I mean, what if something attacks you or Hazard?" he asked.

"I do fight on occasion, but only as a last resort," said Hamnet. "It is a method of survival I have learned from Frill. It turns out there are many alternatives to violence if you make an effort to develop them."

"Like what?" asked Gregor.

"Well, say that Frill is in danger. Her first reaction is to make herself unseen. Camouflage," said Hamnet.

Gregor remembered the first time he'd seen Frill. He wouldn't have noticed her if she hadn't opened her mouth to catch Boots's ball. "Oh, right. So, what if that doesn't work?"

"Then she attempts to scare off whoever is threatening her. She hisses and opens her ruff, which makes her look much larger and more frightening," said Hamnet.

"Didn't work on Boots." Gregor laughed.

"No, Boots tried to frighten her right back." Hamnet grinned. "If Boots had been a true threat, Frill would have begun to lash her tail on the ground."

"And if something still tries to attack?" asked Gregor.

"She runs. Very fast, too, once she gets up on those hind legs. She runs to a place where the vines will support her weight and climbs high above her attacker," said Hamnet.

"But if there are no vines, and she is cornered, and something is trying to kill her?" said Luxa.

"Then she fights. She has very wicked teeth if she chooses to use them. But it is always her last choice, as opposed to the Regalians, who seem to conclude it is their only option almost immediately," said Hamnet. "Living out here, I have found that many creatures would prefer not to fight. But if your first instinct is to reach for your sword, you will never discover that." Gregor did not know if Hamnet had convinced Luxa he'd done the right thing, but at least she seemed to be considering it.

The field of starshade was about half harvested. They had a huge pile of the plants now. With every bundle he taped, Gregor could feel his heart grow lighter. They had the cure. All they had to do now was get it back to Regalia and into the victims. His mom would get better, and they could all go home. And if she still wanted to move to Virginia then, Gregor would be the first one packed.

For a few minutes he let his mind wander to his dad's family's farm in Virginia. It was pretty nice there, even if it was kind of far away from, well, other people and buildings and stuff. He loved New York City, he would miss his friends, but if it meant his family didn't have to spend every minute afraid, it would be more than worth it.

He was just thinking about how maybe he might learn to ride a horse when he saw Aurora's head snap up. Nike's went up, too. And suddenly, Ripred and Lapblood had their noses in the air. They were all facing the far end of the field.

"What? What is it?" said Gregor. Usually, the bats reacted to rats, but the rats were reacting as if something dangerous were around, too. "Is it some kind of plant?" He still felt shaky from the silvery flowers.

"No!" snarled Ripred. "How did they even get in here?"

"They ate their way in, I imagine," said Nike. Her wings were beating open and shut in apprehension.

"Who?" said Gregor, grabbing Boots up in his arms. "Who ate their way in?"

But before Nike could answer, Gregor saw the red wave beginning to seep into the field. They were so close together that they appeared to be one entity, a thick bloody liquid oozing toward him. He shot the beam of his best flashlight in that direction and could see the wave was made up of individuals.

Ants. Hundreds of red ants were descending on the field, destroying everything in their path.

CHAPTER 23

Ripred took command of the situation immediately.

"You!" he called to Aurora. "Get those pups and fly out of here. Take them to the nibblers and then back to Regalia if we don't show up in twenty-four hours!"

Hamnet swung Hazard and Boots up onto Aurora's back. "You look after Boots for us, all right, Hazard?" he said, giving his son a hug.

Gregor began to object. "No, I don't want Boots to go!"

"Aurora and I are bonds. We do not separate!" said Luxa.

"Your sister, Overlander, is about to be torn apart by cutters," said Ripred. "And I need you on Nike, Your Highness. Your bond is in no condition for battle."

"Battle?" said Gregor numbly. "The ants are here for a battle?"

"Well, they aren't here for a picnic! They're here to destroy the starshade and all the warmbloods along with it! Now move!" Ripred snapped his teeth at Aurora's shoulder and she shot into the air.

"Boots! Hang on!" cried Gregor. He caught a glimpse of her puzzled face peeking over Aurora's neck before Ripred pushed him hard.

"Wake up, Warrior! You've got your sword. What about light?" said the rat.

Gregor glanced at the flashlight he usually kept at his waist. That would be worthless to him in a battle. He remembered a trick he had used on the last quest. "Luxa! Here, quick!" he said. He pulled out two flashlights and duct-taped one to each of their forearms.

"Five-point arc!" shouted Ripred. "I'll take the tip. I want the Overlander and Lapblood on my right, Hamnet and Frill to my left." The rat turned to Hamnet, who seemed suddenly to have frozen to the ground. "You are fighting, right?"

"I — I —" Hamnet stuttered.

"The cure is at stake. Think of it as a way of redeeming past actions," said Ripred. "Think of it as a way of saving your son. Think of it any way you like, but arm yourself or get out!"

Hamnet looked over at the sea of ants coming down the field. Already, a quarter of the starshade plants had been shredded, chewed, trampled to bits.

"Yes. Yes, I will fight," said Hamnet. He ran to Frill, ripped open the pack under her neck, and pulled out a sword.

"Fight cutters, too, I will, fight cutters, too," said Temp.

"Oh, Temp," said Gregor. "You should have gone with Aurora." Gregor knew the cockroaches weren't known for their ability to battle. They were good at fleeing. That was how they survived.

"Fight cutters, too, I will, fight cutters, too," insisted Temp.

"All right, Crawler, position yourself in that stack of starshade. If they make it in, do your best to disable them," said Ripred. Temp scurried to the pile of starshade and concealed himself. "In the air, Your Highness, give us as much cover as you can," said Ripred. Luxa's face was grim as she mounted Nike's back and took off, her sword already drawn. "The rest of you, take your positions." Ripred bounded toward the ants and crouched down about ten yards from the oncoming army. Hamnet took his place about five yards behind Ripred off to the left, and Frill backed him up by the same distance. Gregor looked around in confusion.

"Do as Hamnet does!" said Lapblood. "I'll be behind you."

So Gregor ran up as far as Hamnet was, but on Ripred's right side. Lapblood fell into place behind him.

"Hold your positions as long as you can before you fall back. When we reach the stack, circle around. Don't save each other, save the plants! Remember, it's the starshade we need. Defend it at all cost!" said Ripred.

Gregor stared at the ants. Each was about five feet long and about two feet tall. Apart from their size, they seemed to be anatomically like the ants in the Overland. Each had six legs, two antennae, and a pair of razor-sharp mandibles that opened and closed horizontally, shearing the starshade to bits. They were aligned in a clear formation, shoulder to shoulder, like a well-trained army. Hundreds of soldier ants. Headed right for them.

"Warrior!" Ripred shouted. "Look at me!" Gregor tore his eyes off the ants and turned to Ripred. "If you can rage, do it now! This is life and death, boy! Life and death, understand?"

Life and death? Not just for the handful here in the field, but for all the warmbloods, for Lapblood's pups, for Howard and Andromeda, for Ares, for his mom. The ants were only a few paces from Ripred when Gregor realized he had not even drawn his sword. It came out now, in a smooth even movement. The buzzing swept through his body and his vision splintered as the rager sensation roared through him.

"Take off their legs, decapitate them, drain them, do whatever you have to do to stop them!" bellowed Ripred. And with that, he sprang straight into the column of ants.

In the period that followed, Gregor lost all sense of where he was, of his companions, of himself. There was heat, sweat, the taste of his own blood in his mouth. His sword knew where to go — to the joints of the legs, napes of the neck, the thin waists. But there were so many...so many! Where each ant fell, another appeared to take its place. Slowly, reluctantly, his feet shifted, as their sheer numbers forced him back. Eventually, he could feel the starshade bundles scraping the backs of his calves as he took one final stand at the stack...and then they swarmed over him, knocking him into the bundles of plants.

"No!" he heard himself scream. "No!" Gregor fought his way back to his feet and plowed after the army as he tried to stop the demolition of the plants, but it was no use. The stack was gone in less than a minute, and the rest of the field was completely vulnerable. As he staggered behind the disappearing army, a pair of teeth caught his shirt from behind and dragged him quickly back from the jungle. He struggled to free himself, to follow the enemy in among the vines, but whoever held him was too powerful to resist.

"Let them go! It's over, boy! It's over. We've lost," said Ripred, as he yanked him onto his rear end.

The force of the impact helped bring Gregor back to reality. He was sobbing in fury at the ants, in revulsion at the battle, and in despair because the field...oh, the field was a wasteland! Ruined bits of plants lay ground into the earth, which was sodden with an evil-smelling lilac goo. He scooped up a handful of the stuff and watched the last shreds of the starshade dissolve into greenish liquid and vanish.

"It's gone," Gregor wept. "The starshade is gone. The cure is gone."

"All gone," said Ripred quietly. "It's all gone now."

Luxa and Nike landed beside them. Through his tears, Gregor could see the blood streaming from the cuts on Luxa's pale legs. He realized he was covered in stinging wounds himself, where the mandibles had found their way through his defenses.

"If it's any consolation, the jungle has finished our work for us," said Ripred.

Gregor looked up at the jungle where the remainder of the ant army had disappeared. It had plowed into the area that Hamnet had raced their party through. Into the pretty white blossoms that made you deliriously happy. The ants must have been susceptible, too, because the jungle was filled with vines ripping obliging insects to bits. It didn't take long. In minutes, the ants were dismembered and dropped to the jungle floor where the roots shifted and covered them. And the silence returned.

Gregor wiped his eyes and struggled onto his feet. Ripred and Lapblood were hunched behind him. Luxa still sat on Nike's back. Surrounded by dead ants, Frill's beautiful blue-green body lay sprawled across the field, the skin scored with hundreds of cuts. Gregor looked for motion in her chest, but it was still as a stone.

Temp was hovering over something at the edge of the jungle. Gregor realized the form on the ground was Hamnet.

"Uncle!" Luxa cried, and then she was sprinting across the field to him.

When they reached him, they could see Hamnet was not long for this world. A gaping hole just under his ribcage was pumping out blood so it formed a pool around him.

Luxa knelt beside him and grasped his hand. "Judith," he whispered. "Judith..."

"Yes, it is Judith. I am right here," said Luxa.

"Hazard...Promise me...he will not be...let him be... anything but a warrior," said Hamnet.

"I promise," said Luxa. "Hamnet? Hamnet?" But his violet eyes were vacant now. He had slipped away.

"Anything but a warrior. Like me," thought Gregor dully. "Oh, let him be anything but me."

Luxa slowly reached up and shut Hamnet's eyes. Then she trailed her fingers along his cheek, removing a spot of blood.

"Now cracks a noble heart," said Ripred. He brushed Hamnet's head with his nose. "Take a lock. For his parents," he told Luxa. She cut a wave of Hamnet's hair and tucked it carefully into her belt.

They all sat near Hamnet's body in the wasted field, mindless of the blood and viscous lilac substance that the ants had spread. Their friends were gone. The starshade was gone. And with it went all of their hope.

CHAPTER 24

Gregor stared at the ground for a while, before he realized he was looking at something he recognized. Obscured by the muck was the mirror he had given to Boots to play with. She must have dropped it. He pried it up and slowly wiped it clean on his shirt. "At least Boots and Hazard didn't have to watch the battle," he thought. Hazard hadn't seen his dad and Frill die. And Boots hadn't seen Gregor hacking away at the ants.

"Why did they do it?" Gregor said finally. "Why did the ants want to destroy the cure?"

"They view us as an enemy," said Ripred. "All of us warmbloods but the rats in particular. Hasn't helped much that the humans pushed us up against their borders." Gregor vaguely remembered Ripred talking about this, when was it? Before he had gone after the Bane. At dinner in Regalia, a long, long time ago. Ripred had accused Solovet of starving the rats, of driving them up against the ants' borders.

"It was an excellent plan, you have to give them credit for that," said Ripred. "All they had to do was come, obliterate this field, and their problem with the warmbloods would soon be only a memory."

"How did they know where it was?" asked Gregor.

"Oh, that wouldn't be hard to find out. Probably the whole Underland knew we'd gone after the cure. And you can't take a mixed pack, as Hamnet called us, into the Vineyard without causing a lot of gossip. All they needed to know was when and where we'd found the cure. Any number of insects would have been happy to supply that information, right, Temp?"

"Any number," agreed Temp. "Hated here, the warmbloods are, hated here."

"Why?" asked Gregor.

"We have the best lands. The most plentiful feeding grounds. What we do not have and covet, they say we take. We are thought to be lacking in respect for other creatures," said Nike with a sigh.

"Well, you are. I mean, you all treat the cockroaches like trash," said Gregor. "Like when everybody laughed at Temp at that meeting. Do you make fun of the ants, too?"

"The ants are a completely different situation. They have little sense of self. Everything they do is for the collective benefit of the colony. So you

see there would have been no trouble sending an army into the jungle. If they lost a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand soldiers, it would be nothing if it meant our destruction," said Ripred. "And every one has such blind loyalty to the queen...No, we don't make fun of the cutters much. They can be too dangerous, as we have all just witnessed."

Gregor's eyes wandered across the field. It was littered with dead ants. But they had done their job. Not a stalk of the starshade was left standing.

"What shall we do now?" said Nike.

"What is there to do but go home, and choose a good place to die?" said Lapblood. "The starshade is gone."

"It does not make sense," said Luxa. "We did all the prophecy asked. Brought the warrior and the princess. Joined with the gnawers to seek the cure. Why have we not succeeded?"

"I do not know. But I do not believe we have ever understood the prophecy. Possibly we fail because we still do not see the when," said Nike.

"What?" said Lapblood.

"You see the what but not the when," Nike quoted from the prophecy.

"I've seen the when. It was when the cutters destroyed this field, and we didn't see it coming," said Lapblood.

"Maybe, but if you are wrong..." Nike trailed off.

"What are you thinking, Nike?" said Luxa.

"Perhaps, the cure still exists somewhere. Perhaps there is more starshade right here in the Vineyard," said Nike.

"Doesn't seem likely somehow. Doctor Neveeve said there was only a single field. I think we're sitting in it," said Ripred. "If this is the cradle, then this was the cure."

"Then there is no hope at all," said Luxa.

A long silence followed. Gregor could hear the tinkling of the white flowers and thought how easy it would be to walk into them and never come out. So much easier than going back to Regalia to watch his mom die. So much easier than watching Ares, if by some miracle he still lived, give up when he found out Gregor had failed. He didn't know if he and Boots would ever make it home. Probably they'd been infected with the plague. Would that handful of leaves they'd eaten be enough to keep them safe?

"Not the cradle, unless this be, not the cradle," said Temp.

Since everyone had drifted into their own dark thoughts, Temp's comment made little sense. Besides, no one ever much listened to the

crawlers.

"What, Temp?" asked Gregor, more out of politeness than anything else.

"Not the cradle, unless this be, not the cradle," repeated Temp.

It took Gregor a bit to swap Temp's words around and make sense of them. Unless this be...not the cradle. The last one who had spoken before Temp had been Nike, who had said there was no hope. Unless this be not the cradle. Yes, Temp was right....

In the cradle find the cure

For that which makes the blood impure.

The cure could still be somewhere if the Vineyard of Eyes were not the cradle!

"But this is the cradle," said Lapblood.

"Is it?" said Ripred. His eyes began to come back to life. "Who says it is? Some dusty book written by humans years ago? Why, we don't even really know if this is the same plague, or just one with similar symptoms. And if Temp is right, it would explain one thing."

"What?" asked Luxa.

"The point of having a crawler on this whole hellish trip! Honestly, how has he added to anything of significance? No offense, Temp, you've been a real champ about babysitting, but what have you contributed? Nothing! Maybe this is it! Your big moment! Maybe this is why Sandwich put you in the prophecy," said Ripred. "To see this wasn't the cradle!"

The big rat began to pace back and forth, the wheels turning in his head. "Let's roll it around the ground a bit and see where we get. All right, say this isn't the cradle, and the starshade wasn't the cure. We saw the what, which is still the plague, but not the when. So, what is the when? Think, everyone! Just say anything that comes into your head!" said Ripred. "You saw the plague but not when —!"

"Not when it would take my pups," said Lapblood as if she could not help herself.

"Not when the cutters would use it against us," said Nike.

"You saw the plague but not when—!" Ripred turned sharply to Luxa.

"Not when Ares got it," Luxa burst out. "I mean, if he caught it from those mites, none of us saw that. And not only when but why? Why don't Gregor and Aurora and I have it?"

"That's what Mareth and I were saying. Especially me. I rode on his back for days with open cuts on my arm and he was bleeding

and...and...how can I not have the plague if he got it when the mites bit him?" said Gregor.

"Let's say he didn't," said Ripred. "Let's say your other mates, Howard and Andromeda, they caught it when they brought him in sick from his cave. So, where did Ares get the plague?"

"Well, the answer could be anywhere!" snapped Lapblood in frustration.

"No," said Nike. "It could only be somewhere Ares had been."

"Somewhere he had been *and* somewhere that the plague could exist," said Ripred. "Luxa, you know his habits best. Where would he have gone?"

"To find Aurora and me, probably," said Luxa. "Back to the Labyrinth. And his cave...the flier's lands...Regalia."

"No, he did not go into your city or the flier's lands," said Nike. "After his trial, no one saw him in either place."

"Yeah, he was afraid he'd be executed. He wouldn't even go to the hospital to have his wounds treated. He went...He went..." Gregor found his eyes locked on the pool of Hamnet's blood that had spread almost to his toes. He could see the light reflecting back from the red surface. It was strangely familiar. "Where did I see that before?" he wondered. And in an instant, everything began tumbling into place. Somewhere that Ares had been...and somewhere that the plague could exist..."Oh, geez. Oh, geez," he said.

"What, Overlander? What?" said Ripred.

But Gregor couldn't speak his thoughts yet. The red pool of blood in Neveeve's office...The fleas gorged on blood...The empty plague container...brand-new...because the old one had broken. Not that day, or the day before. Neveeve had said it had broken months ago. She had had the plague months ago, before Ares had even gotten sick!

"Ares went...he went to the lab...for his bites...to get medicine..." he stammered.

"Yes, so what?" said Ripred.

"Neveeve, she had the plague there," Gregor said.

"She had the plague germs there, yes, to study them, to try and find a cure," said Nike. "After the plague started."

"No, I think...I think she had it way before," said Gregor. "She said a plague container broke months ago. Ares must have been there in the lab when it happened! That's when he caught it! And that's why I don't have it! Or you, Luxa! Or Aurora!"

And Neveeve — jumpy, twitchy, nervous Neveeve. She wasn't just stressed because there was a plague, she was stressed because she had started it!

"That makes no sense. What use would the plague be to the humans?" said Luxa dismissively.

"A great deal, Your Highness, if they had the cure as well. They could wipe out every gnawer, every warmblood who displeased them, safe in the knowledge that none of them could die!" said Ripred. "Oh, that's a fine weapon indeed to be brewing up in your labs."

"The remedy and wrong entwine, / And so they form a single vine," said Nike with an agitated voice.

"That could be Doctor Neveeve. She could be the vine. Both the remedy and wrong in one."

"This seems like wild conjecture to me," said Luxa.

"Really? It seems very plausible to me. But I suppose if we can't convince you, we can't convince the other humans, either. Think harder, boy! What else do you have?" said Ripred.

What else did he have? There must be something. Gregor was clutching the mirror so tightly it hurt his hands. The mirror! He thought of the hours he'd spent before the bathroom mirror, holding up the prophecy, trying to make sense of it. "The mirror!" he said holding it up urgently for them to see. "You know how you need a mirror to read the prophecy? You have to look in a mirror...and when you do, you see...What do you see?" He flipped it around and pointed it at each of them.

"Yourself, you see, yourself," said Temp.

"It was the humans. They had the plague all along!" spat out Lapblood.

"No, even in the worst times we humans would not create something so destructive to so many. Something that could turn against us," said Luxa defiantly.

"Turn...yes, "Turn and turn and turn again,"" said Ripred, his ears sticking up. "That's it! Don't you see? It's like Boots's annoying little dance." Ripred glared into the field. "We started out heading toward the jungle looking for the cure. But if you turn..." He turned 180 degrees. "And turn..." He swung back around to the jungle. "And turn again..." He spun halfway around again. "You're not facing the jungle, Your Highness. You're facing Regalia."

CHAPTER 25

"I do not — I cannot believe this is true!" said Luxa.

"Hope it is, for all our sakes. And if the Overlander is right and you have the cure in your lab back in Regalia, I want your first action to be to send it to us," said Ripred.

"There is no cure in Regalia," said Luxa stubbornly.

"But if there is —?" said Ripred.

"If there is...on my word, the gnawers will be served first," said Luxa.

"All right then. Fly back to Regalia and straighten this mess out. Lapblood and I will head home to deliver our latest theory. I expect to hear from you very soon," said Ripred. He turned to Lapblood. "I think our best bet will be to follow the ants' trail back. It should lead close enough to the tunnels, and the plants won't have had time to recover yet —" Ripred noticed no one was moving. "What are you waiting for? Get on your flier and go!"

"What about Hamnet and Frill?" asked Gregor, not wanting to leave them lying there. But the soil was too thin to bury them. And Nike could never carry them all.

"They belong to the jungle now. Likely the starshade will grow back here. So they'll be in a good place, right?" asked Ripred.

"I guess," said Gregor. But he did not really feel any better about it.

"On your bat now," said Ripred, nudging him toward Nike. Gregor and Luxa climbed on Nike's back. "Don't forget the crawler. He may have saved us all," said Ripred, scooting Temp up behind them.

"If he did, it wouldn't hurt if you spread that information around," said Gregor. Then maybe the warmbloods wouldn't be such snobs about the bugs.

"If he did, I will become the biggest bore in the Underland, as I will talk of nothing else," said Ripred. "Fly you high, boy."

"Run like the river, Ripred," said Gregor. And Nike lifted into the air up over the vines and headed out of the Vineyard.

It was a surprisingly short trip back to the pool in the nibblers' land, where Aurora had taken Hazard and Boots. They had barely touched down when the words were coming out of Hazard's mouth. "Where's my father? Where's Frill? Will they be here soon?"

Luxa gave Gregor a sad glance. It occurred to Gregor that no one knew better than Luxa what Hazard was about to face. She slid off Nike's back and took Hazard's hands in hers. "They are not coming back, Hazard. We had to battle to try and save the starshade. Hamnet and Frill died fighting the cutters. I am sorry."

Hazard just looked at her for a moment, uncomprehending. "But...they couldn't have," he said. "They wouldn't leave me here alone."

"They did not want to. I promise you that," said Luxa. "Only they could not help it. Sometimes, you cannot help the things that happen."

"Oh," said Hazard. His large green eyes filled with tears. "Like when my mother left me. She didn't want to go, either. But she had to." He tilted his head down, and the tears slid down his cheeks and onto the stones. Boots came over and tugged on Gregor's shirt. "Gre-go, he's crying." She was always thinking he could fix things he couldn't.

Gregor picked Boots up in his arms and gave her a squeeze. "I know," was all he could say.

Luxa knelt before Hazard and wiped his tears with her fingers. "The same thing happened with my parents. They both died, too," said Luxa. "My mother and your father were brother and sister. Did you know that?"

Hazard shook his head. "I don't have a sister."

"I do not have a brother, either. But I was thinking, that if you would come back to Regalia with me, it would be like I did," said Luxa. "Will you come?"

"To Regalia?" said Hazard. He seemed so lost. "I live here in the jungle."

"But who will you live with now, Hazard? Who will take care of you?" said Luxa.

"I want my father! And Frill!" said Hazard, beginning to sob. "They take care of me!"

"I know. I know. But they are gone," said Luxa. She wrapped her arms around the little boy, and he clung to her. "Oh, Hazard, Hazard. Please say you will come with me. It is not so very bad in Regalia."

"My grandfather...lives in Regalia. He said... I could visit...any time I wanted to," Hazard choked out.

"Oh, yes! Vikus will be very glad to see you," said Luxa, stroking his dark curls. "Everyone will."

"And you'll be my sister?" said Hazard. He looked over at where Gregor was holding Boots. "Like she's his sister?"

"If you will have me," said Luxa.

"All right," said Hazard. His tears didn't stop, but he wiped his nose on his sleeve. "Can I ride on your flier?"

"Any time you wish. And when we get back, maybe you will meet a flier of your own to bond with," said Luxa. "Would you like that?" Hazard nodded. "Let us go home, then."

They took only a few minutes to drink from the pool and wash their wounds. There was nothing with which to bandage the cuts from the mandibles. Everything had been destroyed. But at least the lilac goo the ants had doused the field with did not seem harmful to them. It didn't burn like the acid from the yellow pods, and it rinsed off easily in water. No, it seemed it was only destructive to plants.

A trio of mice appeared and dropped a few dozen plums at Luxa's feet as they were about to go. "Thank you," she said. "I will never forget your kindness to myself and Aurora. Know while I have breath, you will always have a friend in the Underland." She removed the band of gold from her head and laid it on the stone before them. "If ever you have need of my help, present my crown to one of our scouts, and I will do whatever is within my power to come to your aid." Then Luxa laid her hand on each of their heads, and they squeaked out good-byes to her in high-pitched English.

Neither Nike nor Aurora was in very good shape, but both insisted they could make the journey home. Luxa took Hazard with her on Aurora, and Gregor, Boots, and Temp climbed upon Nike's back.

Gregor couldn't wait to get back. What if the cure was there, in Neveeve's lab, but it was still a secret? Then his mom, Ares, his friends...if they were still alive, every second was precious.

The bats lifted high over the vines and sped toward Regalia. Gregor thought of the agonizingly slow progress they had made on foot and shook his head. He guessed it hadn't been realistic to fly in. The rats would have been too heavy to haul very far, let alone Frill, but still. How much time could they have saved? He could have been to Regalia and back ten times.

"What did you do up here, Nike, while you were waiting for us to catch up with you?" asked Gregor.

"I went in circles. Both in the air and in my head, as I was trying to break the prophecy," said Nike.

"It's broken now, though, don't you think? That we're right about the humans starting it?" asked Gregor.

"As Ripred says, I must hope we are. But Gregor, when the rest of the warmbloods learn the plague was the humans' fault, it will be very ill indeed," said Nike.

"What will they say?" said Gregor.

"Most humans and their allies will be ashamed. Their enemies will say it only confirms what they suspected all along. That humans lie and will do anything to get what they want," said Nike. "The awful thing, is...no one will truly be surprised."

Although he hadn't been born in the Underland, Gregor felt a natural kinship to the humans down here. He was still mad at them for putting him and Ares on trial when they hadn't killed the Bane, but he had chalked that up to being a misunderstanding. When Nerissa had explained the truth, the humans — at least the majority of them — had listened. Gregor's view of the rats was very different. He had always thought of them as essentially the bad guys, with a few exceptions like Twitchtip and maybe Ripred. The idea that the humans could be as bad as the rats, or even worse, threw him for a loop. But was he truly surprised? He remembered the council's attempt to deny the rats the flea powder. No. He couldn't say he was.

Boots and Temp chatted back and forth in Cockroach while Gregor mulled the whole thing over, trying to make sense of it. After a while, he realized they were coming in for a landing. Shining his light down on the ground, he saw the piles of skeletons stretched out around the Arch of Tantalus.

"We're stopping here?" he asked Nike.

"Do not worry. It will only be for a brief time. But Aurora and I must rest," said Nike.

"Oh, sure, of course," said Gregor. He was impatient to get back, but they needed to give the bats a break, especially since they were both hurt.

They had no water, but plenty of plums. The seven of them gathered in a tight circle and ate. Four kids, two bats, and a cockroach. Gregor thought they must look like an easy meal, and kept a close eye on the jungle.

Luxa was so lost in thought, she did not even seem aware of their surroundings. She held an uneaten plum in her hand while she stared

fixedly at the skeleton of some large rodent.

"Luxa? You going to eat that thing?" asked Gregor.

She snapped back to reality. "Why? Do you want it?"

"No, you should eat it. But we can't stay here very long," said Gregor.

Luxa nodded and took a bite of the plum, but her face was troubled. "I have been thinking of what Ripred said. About the value of such a destructive weapon. He was right. Having the plague at our command would give the humans total control over all the warmbloods."

"So you think I'm right? You think Neveeve started the plague?" said Gregor.

"It still seems impossible to believe. But there is one way we will know for sure," said Luxa.

"What's that?" said Gregor.

"If during your absence she has come up with a cure, then you will be right. For the cradle and the cure will be one, and no other cure will exist now that the starshade is gone. There will be no argument left," said Luxa.

Aurora said the bats were ready to fly, so they all mounted up. Nike suggested that Gregor sleep on the way back. He lay down with Boots, who soon drifted off, but he could not sleep. In the quiet dark tunnels, the battle was beginning to come back to him. He could remember more of it than the time he'd fought the squids, now almost a complete blank. This time, he could call up very specific images of his sword as it severed the life of ant after ant. Who were the ants, anyway? Not just animals, not just a natural force. Ripred had talked about them as intelligent creatures that had formed a clever battle plan. Did they all have names? Did they have parents and children and friends? Who exactly had he killed?

He could not sort out his feelings. At the time, he had only thought of protecting the starshade. His own life had been at risk as well — look at what had happened to Hamnet and Frill. But on the battlefield, Gregor had not been fighting for his own life as much as he'd been fighting to save what he'd believed to be the cure. Sometimes you had to fight...Even Hamnet had agreed to that...and he must have thought today was one of those times. Gregor had done what he had to do...But still...he felt horrible when he envisioned the twisted bodies of the ants in the field. And even though Gregor had raged, they had not succeeded in saving the starshade. Hamnet had fought, too, when backed against the wall, but Gregor knew he hadn't wanted to. That he didn't really think it was a solution to anything. Maybe if

they had all taken that approach, they could have still deciphered the prophecy, and there wouldn't be all those corpses waiting to be covered by vines. But what would the peaceful alternative have been? It had been too late to think of one when the ants were marching in on them. A solution would have needed to have been thought up a while ago. And so many parties — the humans, the rats, the ants — everyone would have had to agree that it was for the best.

All of this was complicated by the fact that if Gregor was correct about Dr. Neveeve, the loss of everyone's life today was utterly pointless. Because the thing they'd all gone to battle over — the starshade — had never been the cure at all.

The more he thought, the more his mind reeled in confusion. We were right to fight. It was wrong to fight. We had to fight. It was pointless to fight. He simply did not know where he stood, and it made him feel crazy. No wonder Hamnet had run off to the jungle. After several hours of tormenting himself with the events of the day, flickers of light began to appear in the distance. Regalia was just ahead. A squad of four Underlanders on bats materialized to block their way. Then they saw Luxa.

"Queen Luxa!" burst out one guard in disbelief. "You live!"

"Yes, I live, Claudius," said Luxa. "And I must have immediate access to the council regarding the cure to the plague."

"Yes, by all means," stammered Claudius. "But there are several checkpoints meant to screen those who would bring the plague into the city."

"We must bypass them in the interest of time. Believe me, even if I carried the plague, that would pale in importance to the news I bring," said Luxa.

"Yes, but we have very strict orders..." said the guard.

"Which I overrule now," said Luxa. "Clear my passage to the city. It is a direct order for which I take full responsibility."

Claudius looked at the other guards in hesitation, then called out, "Clear the queen's passage to the city!" He flew with them, waving aside any resistance they met. "The queen! The queen returns!" he cried out, and the Underlanders fell aside.

As they flew across the city of Regalia, Gregor could see people on the ground pointing up at them and shouting. He guessed they recognized

Aurora by her beautiful golden coat, and were hoping that Luxa might be on her.

As the exhausted bats skidded on their bellies across the High Hall, two female guards ran up to help.

"Get Aurora and Nike to the hospital at once," said Luxa. "Both are injured. Is the council in session?"

"Yes, Your Highness. They have only just convened," said one of the women. Then she quickly placed her hand over her mouth as if suppressing some great emotion. "Oh, Luxa, you are back."

"It is good to see you, too, Miranda," said Luxa with a half smile. "We must make haste, Gregor." She took Hazard by the hand and headed off.

Gregor scooped up his drowsy little sister and he and Temp followed Luxa through the hallways to the council room. The full council was there, including Solovet and Vikus, and Nerissa presided at the head of the big, stone table. Doctor Neveeve was in the process of addressing them. Before her sat a large, square rack that held hundreds of glass vials filled with an orange liquid.

When the five of them walked in, Neveeve stopped speaking mid-sentence and a gasp went up around the table. People were rising, starting to move toward them, but Luxa raised her hand.

"Please, I have a matter of great urgency that takes precedent over my own happenings. Sit and let me speak," she called. Confused, everyone returned to their seats. Still holding Hazard's hand, Luxa crossed to the table directly across from Dr. Neveeve.

"We have been to the Vineyard of Eyes and found the starshade. The entire field was destroyed by an army of cutters. The cure is lost," said Luxa. "What say you to this, Doctor Neveeve?"

"It is tragic news, indeed. But we have been working night and day in the labs to try and create a cure of our own. These vials you see before me are the fruit of our labors," said Neveeve, gesturing to the glass vials.

Luxa looked down at the vials for a moment, then took a deep breath before her next question. "And have they been tried on the plague victims yet?"

"The patients in the hospital are responding favorably. Both the Overlander's mother and his bond have shown improvement," said Neveeve.

Gregor felt his knees go weak with relief. "Oh!" The sound came out of him on its own. They were alive! Somehow they had hung on!

Neveeve gave him a smile. "Yes, we have much hope that this remedy may be effective."

There were murmurs of approval and appreciation around the table. The cure was working. Neveeve was a hero.

Luxa's voice cut through the others like a knife. "I expect it shall be highly effective. I expect it will cure the plague."

"I hope we may deserve your confidence," said Neveeve, but she gave Luxa a nervous look.

"Oh, I think we both may be confident. Certainly you look well enough," said Luxa. "And if the cure works for you, why should it not work for the rest of us?"

Neveeve flushed bright pink. "I do not know what you mean."

"I mean that you started the plague in your lab. That was the cradle. So it makes sense that the cure came from it as well," said Luxa. There were exclamations and objections from around the table, but Luxa forged ahead.

"Do you deny, Doctor Neveeve, that Ares was infected in your lab while you were breeding the plague germ?" said Luxa.

Now the color drained from Neveeve's face, leaving her pale as a ghost. "I...I...did not..."

"Was he or was he not infected in your lab?" insisted Luxa.

"There was an accident....It was no one's fault...." said Neveeve. "He was there for something else entirely...."

"And you led others to believe that the cure was in the Vineyard of Eyes, all the time knowing that you had it in your hands?" continued Luxa.

"I could not...reveal that....The research was secret and..." said Neveeve.

"So, to conceal that secret you let it spread and kill and sent an unsuspecting party on a deadly fool's errand. Is that it?" said Luxa.

Now Neveeve was wildly looking around the room. "I was told to study the plague! My assignment was to find an antidote so that we could use it as a weapon.... I was only doing what I had been told to do!" Neveeve cried out.

Most of the council members looked stunned. But Gregor couldn't help notice a few faces that reflected Neveeve's fear. "Some of them knew," Gregor thought. "Some of them knew exactly what was going on."

Vikus rose shakily from the table and nodded to a pair of guards. "Take Doctor Neveeve into custody. And alert the tribunal that their services will be needed."

Guards took Neveeve by the arms. She did not even put up any resistance. "I was only following orders," she said softly as they led her away.

"Contact the lab to find out how many doses of the cure they have. And take these down to the hospital immediately," said Vikus, indicating the vials of orange liquid.

"No," said Luxa, her face as hard as flint. "Our first act will be to send aid to the gnawers. I gave Ripred my word. And it will be done."

No one in the room dared to object.

CHAPTER 26

After this announcement, a wave of fatigue seemed to wash over Luxa. She looked down at Hazard, who had never let go of her hand. "You must be hungry," she said. He gave a nod. "Have food sent," she said to the guards on her way out of the council room.

They did not go far. There was a small chamber just across the hall with a couple of couches. Luxa sank into the corner of the nearest one, drawing Hazard down beside her. She rested her elbow on the arm of the couch and leaned her head into her hand. Gregor collapsed on the couch across from her with Boots on his lap. Temp sat at their feet.

"You did great in there, Luxa," said Gregor.

She made a noncommittal sound in her throat. He could see she was upset. Vikus and Nerissa appeared in the doorway. Vikus came to Luxa and gently laid his hand upon her cheek.

"How will we survive this, Vikus? The retaliations from our enemies...and our shame," said Luxa.

"We will survive it together," said Vikus. "If we are attacked, we will defend ourselves. But we will first try and temper the anger with apologies and aid. Give back land, supply food and medicine. As for our shame, we can only hope to learn from it." He lifted her chin. "It is so very good to see you again."

"And you," said Luxa. Her eyes went to her cousin. "How did you enjoy the throne, Nerissa?"

"You can well imagine," said Nerissa with a quivery laugh. She took the small golden crown off her head and settled it on Luxa's. "I think this fits you better."

Luxa sighed and gave the crown a little shove back on her head. "It seems I only lose one of these to find another. Thank you for standing in for me."

"It is a truly dreadful job. I do not know how you bear it," said Nerissa. She reached out and touched Hazard's hair. "And you must be Hazard."

"Luxa says I can live here and be her brother," said Hazard uncertainly. His eyes traveled around the room, taking in the unfamiliar surroundings. Gregor realized he had probably never even been in a building before.

"You are most welcome," said Vikus. He looked at Luxa and said softly, "Hamnet...?" Luxa just gave her head a small shake.

"He died. He won't come back now," said Hazard. "Right, Luxa?"

"No, he will not. So we shall have to hold him very carefully in our hearts," she said, wrapping an arm around him.

Vikus gazed at Gregor, his wounds, the sword at his waist. "So, Gregor the Overlander, how fare you?"

"I'm still here," said Gregor. He wasn't the least bit interested in talking about himself right now. "So they're alive? They're getting better?"

For the first time, Vikus smiled. "Come and see."

The food was just arriving. Nerissa stayed with Hazard, Boots, and Temp so they could eat while Gregor and Luxa went with Vikus down to the hospital.

"They have been receiving Neveeve's cure for several days, so they are in recovery. Of course, they worsened after you left, Gregor," said Vikus as they walked down the hospital corridor that led to the plague wing.

Just before they turned the corner to the hall of glass walls, Gregor caught Luxa's arm. "They're going to look really bad. Just so you know."

"I have seen many disturbing things, Gregor," said Luxa.

"Okay, but the first time I saw Ares...I threw up," he said. "Your aunt told me people faint and stuff. It's a shock."

A flicker of doubt crossed Luxa's face. "Well, what can I do? I must see them."

"I don't know. Here, hang on to my hand, and if you feel sick or something, just squeeze it," said Gregor.

Luxa looked down at their hands and intertwined her fingers with his. "Let us go then."

They rounded the corner and immediately caught sight of Ares through the glass wall. He looked dreadful. Most of his fur had fallen out and he was still covered with big purple bumps. But Gregor grinned because his bat was actually up out of bed. "Hey, look, Ares is on his — ow!" Luxa had squeezed his hand so hard he was sure she'd broken at least three of his fingers. He turned to tell her to ease up and saw her pale white skin had an undeniably green tinge. "It's okay, Luxa. Really, he's a lot better than when I left."

She couldn't speak. She just stood there, clutching his hand, her eyes taking in the ruin that was her friend.

"Truly, Luxa, he is mending," said Vikus. "And the sight of you two will be like a tonic." He rapped on the glass, and Ares turned his poor wreck of a head in their direction. His wings fluttered and he took a few hops toward them, but then he had to stop and rest to catch his breath.

"Smile at him, Luxa," said Gregor through his teeth, attempting to follow his own advice. "Aurora's — down — there!" Gregor mouthed the words slowly and pointed down the hallway to indicate she was in the hospital, too.

Ares's head bobbed up and down a few times to show he understood.

"Come, we are tiring him," said Vikus. He gave Ares a wave and moved down the hall. In the next room, Howard and Andromeda lay asleep in their beds. They both were covered in the purple bumps as well. One of Howard's burst as they were watching and Gregor lost the feeling in the tips of his fingers as Luxa, impossibly, tightened her grip. "We almost lost Howard the day before Dr. Neveeve began to administer the cure. But he is gaining in strength each day," said Vikus. "Let us see your mother, Gregor, and then you two need medical care yourselves."

His mom was in bed, but she was not asleep. The fingers of one hand were compulsively stroking a purple bump on her cheek. She stopped when she saw Gregor. They just stared at each other, as if no one else existed. After a long time he saw her lips form the word, "Boots?" He nodded and pretended to spoon food into his mouth to show that his sister was eating. His mom closed her eyes, but he could see tears slipping from under her lashes.

"She looks really sick," said Gregor.

"So she is, but now she will heal," said Vikus. "Come, you two, and let us heal you as well."

"How many others are here?" asked Luxa, glancing down the corridor.

"More than a hundred," said Vikus. "We have lost about thirty so far. The Fount was hit harder. Eighty have died there."

Luxa did not let go of Gregor's hand until they were directed into separate bathrooms to wash. Before her fingers left his, she whispered, "Thank you, Gregor. For warning me."

Gregor bathed, reopening the cuts the ants had given him. Or maybe they had never closed over at all — some of them were pretty deep. He lay on a hospital bed while a whole team of doctors went to work on him. Besides his battle wounds, he had the vine scratches on his arms and raw,

acid-eaten toes. Apparently, he needed stitches — a lot of them. One doctor gave him a light-green liquid to swallow and that was the last thing he remembered for a long time.

When he came to, he was swathed in white bandages from head to toe. For about ten seconds, he thought it was kind of cool to look like a mummy. Then he wanted to rip them all off. As he started to tug at one on his wrist, a voice stopped him.

"No, Overlander, you will open the wounds again," said Mareth. The soldier was sitting in a chair by the bed, his crutch by his side.

"Hey, Mareth, how you doing?" asked Gregor.

"I cannot complain. How are you feeling?" said Mareth.

Gregor shifted around. "Kind of sore. How long have I been asleep?"

"Some sixteen hours. They roused you once to administer the plague cure, but you never really awoke," said Mareth.

"The plague cure? Why did I need that?" asked Gregor.

"Everyone is being given a dose as a preventative measure," said Mareth. "There were thousands and thousands stored in the caves off Neveeve's lab. Just sitting there, while so many suffered." Mareth shook his head in disbelief.

"Man. So was I right? About the broken container?" asked Gregor.

"Yes. Neveeve confirmed it. When Ares was in her lab to receive treatment for his bites, he accidentally upset the container with his wing. It broke, the infected fleas escaped, and both Ares and Neveeve were bitten. She said she could not tell Ares what had happened but that she intended to find some way to give him the cure the next day when she treated his wounds. Only he never appeared. He had gone to look for Luxa and Aurora in the Labyrinth. That is when he unknowingly spread the plague to the gnawers," said Mareth.

"Where is Neveeve?" asked Gregor.

"Gone. She has been executed. The tribunal passed judgment while you were sleeping and she was found guilty of high treason. It all happened very quickly," said Mareth.

"You mean...she's dead?" Gregor had thought they would lock her up in the dungeon, not kill her. What good did that do?

"Yes. It was the most serious of crimes," said Mareth.

"Did Luxa go to the trial?" asked Gregor. He knew the queen could stop executions.

"No, she was asleep as well. But she would have been excluded from the proceedings, anyway. You see, Neveeve was under orders to produce the plague as a weapon. She revealed Ares's accidental infection to no one, so that blame was hers alone. But others knew the plague was there." It was hard for Mareth to even get out the next sentence. "Solovet...for one. And as she is related so closely to Luxa by blood, the queen could not be involved in the trial."

"Solovet gave the order to make the plague?" asked Gregor.

"Apparently, she heads a highly secretive weapons committee that approved the research," said Mareth.

Gregor felt sick when he thought about Solovet being behind the plague. Not only because his family and friends had been victims. It was too evil a weapon to inflict on anyone.

"Are they going to execute Solovet?" said Gregor.

"I doubt it will come to that. But she and the rest of the committee are being confined and questioned," replied Mareth.

Another thought struck Gregor. "Vikus didn't know, did he?"

"No, but he has always been so vehemently opposed to this sort of weapon that...no one is taking this harder than he," said Mareth.

"I'll bet," said Gregor. The news that his wife had been instrumental in such a catastrophe for the warm-bloods must be crushing the old man.

A doctor came by, checked on Gregor, and ordered food for him. Mareth stayed and ate, too. It was bland, but the simple soup and bread tasted good.

The food energized Gregor and he suddenly felt too restless to stay in bed. "Is Luxa still here in the hospital?" She was probably having a bad time with the news about Solovet, too.

"They wished her to stay, but she insisted on leaving to be with Hazard," said Mareth.

"He's a nice kid," said Gregor.

"So was his father," said Mareth sadly.

Not being a queen, Gregor wasn't sure he could get the doctors to let him leave the hospital, so he just slipped out when they weren't watching. He had to admit it might not be the best idea. His whole body hurt inside and out. But his muscles loosened up a little as he moved, even if his stitches tugged more.

It must be the middle of the night. No one was in the nursery, but he knew Dulcet would have made sure that Boots was in good hands. He wandered around until he found a guard and asked for directions to Luxa's room. The guard looked a little unsure, but led him through the palace to the royal wing. It was, as Gregor expected, very ornate and had several sets of sentries posted around. After waiting for a few minutes, he was allowed to enter.

He'd never seen where Luxa lived. She greeted him in a big living room with a fireplace, and he could see that several rooms led off of it. It was like she had a big fancy apartment to herself. He thought of his bedroom, which was actually a storage space, at home. "Wow, is this whole place yours?" he asked.

"Since my parents were killed," she said. She adjusted one of her many bandages as her eyes swept the room. Gregor suddenly felt incredibly grateful for his apartment, which was over-packed with people he loved. "But now, Hazard will live with me here." Her face brightened at the thought.

"How's he doing?" asked Gregor.

She waved at Gregor to follow her to a doorway. It was a bedroom, softly lit by candles. Hazard and Boots were snuggled together like puppies on the giant bed, sound asleep.

"It is very hard for him. He is so unused to living indoors. And then, of course, Frill and Hamnet were his whole world..." said Luxa.

"Yeah, I know," said Gregor. "He's got you, though."

"Do you know what he said just before he went to sleep? He said, 'My father ran away from here to the jungle. He ran away from all the fighting. But it followed him, anyway,'" said Luxa.

"Like my grandma said to me about the prophecy. I could try and run away from it but it would find me," said Gregor.

"Vikus says that wars find everyone," said Luxa. She picked up something from a dressing table and held it out for Gregor to see. It was a crystal. Pale blue. Shaped like a fish.

"From your first flight with Hamnet?" he asked.

"Yes. It really does look remarkably like a fish, does it not?" she said.

It did. But Gregor couldn't think of anything else to say about it. Nothing good, anyway. The little chunk of rock was a reminder of so much tragedy.

They went back and sat in the living room. Gregor wondered if his next question might be a little too personal, but he asked it, anyway. "Is Vikus okay?"

"No," said Luxa. "He is devastated by what Solovet has done. Still, he organizes the aid missions, conducts diplomatic matters. The rats are beside themselves with fury, of course. Vikus does what must be done, and I do the same. You must be getting on with your life, too, Gregor. You must be getting home."

"Yeah. I guess we'll go back in a few days. You know, as soon as my mom's well enough to go home," said Gregor.

"To go home?" said Luxa in a surprised tone. "But Gregor, that will not be for many months."

CHAPTER 27

He could hear Luxa calling after him as he sprinted down the hall but he couldn't stop to explain now. Many months? They were planning to keep his mom down here for many months! Well, that just couldn't happen!

As he bounded down the stairs, he could feel stitches popping open, but he ignored it. He scrambled around the hospital until he found a guy who looked like he was in charge, and it turned out he was because the doctor gave one terse order and suddenly Gregor was literally being carried back to his bed. No one was particularly paying attention to what he was saying about his mom; they were far too concerned about the damage he'd done to his wounds. Blood was starting to stain the white bandages. "Listen," he said, "my legs are fine but I need to talk to someone about my mom staying —" He was cut off by an Underlander pressing a dose of medicine against his lips. Taken off guard, he swallowed. The drowsiness began almost immediately. "No...no...you don't understand...." he insisted as the world slipped away.

When he awoke, who knew how much later, it took him a moment to recollect what had happened. He bolted up when he remembered, but a hand appeared on his chest. A very weary-looking Vikus pressed him back down into the sheets. "Stay, Gregor, or they will have to restrain you."

"What's that mean?" asked Gregor.

"Tie you to the bed," said Vikus. "You need to let the wounds heal over. It is for your own good."

"Luxa's out of bed. She's upstairs, I saw her," objected Gregor.

"Luxa is not running wildly through the palace — and she did not fight on the ground. Her wounds are fewer and more shallow," said Vikus.

"Please, Gregor, it will not be so long if you will only cooperate."

Gregor stopped resisting less because of what Vikus said than how he looked. Which was terrible. He had big bags under his eyes, which were bloodshot, and his whole face seemed to sag. Gregor didn't want to give him any more trouble. "It's just my mom," he said, settling back in bed. "Luxa said you're going to keep her here for months. And you can't."

"We must. She is too ill to travel, even the short distance to your home. And once she was there, who could care for her? This is an Underland plague. If she is not completely healed of it here, she may carry it home

with her. What if it began to spread in the Overland? Your doctors would have no idea what it was, let alone how to cure it."

"But I thought she was getting better," said Gregor.

"So she is, but the plague has not yet been eliminated from her blood. She must become fully well. And you must help me to convince her of that, Gregor, because you know how badly she wants to return home," said Vikus.

"The thing is...we need her, Vikus," said Gregor, suddenly feeling closer to Boots's age than his own.

"I know this. And you will have her back. Only not quite yet," said Vikus. "Will you help me?"

Gregor nodded. What was the alternative? They couldn't take his mom back and risk starting a plague epidemic at home.

"Thank you. This is one less worry on my mind," said Vikus. Man, he looked bad!

"What's going on with Solovet?" asked Gregor tentatively.

"She is confined to our home while the investigation takes place. As you might guess, things are not easy between us," said Vikus.

"Why did she do it?" said Gregor.

"To have the plague in our control...it would have given us total domination over the warmbloods," said Vikus, searching for words to explain. "From a military standpoint, it is a highly desirable weapon. Lethal. Unstoppable to those without the cure. Such a deadly weapon...such a seductive one..." He rubbed his eyes, and Gregor was afraid he was going to start crying, but he didn't. "We are very different people, Solovet and I."

"Yeah. It's kind of weird to me that you're married," said Gregor, and then wondered if that was a really obnoxious thing to say.

But Vikus only smiled. "Yes. It has always been something of a puzzle to both of us as well."

Gregor had to spend the next two days confined to his bed. He had plenty of visitors, but it still drove him crazy. He kept thinking of the jungle and everything that had happened there. He thought a lot about the prophecy, too, and one thing still confused him. When Nerissa came by to sit with him, he asked her about it.

"Hey, Nerissa, you know what I can't figure out about 'The Prophecy of Blood'?" he said. "How come we had to go on that whole search for the

cure at all? Neveeve had the cure to the plague right here. She'd even started to treat people before we got back."

"The prophecy does not say the plague will destroy the warmbloods, Gregor. It says, 'If the flames of war are fanned, / All warmbloods lose the Underland,'" said Nerissa.

"So...so, what?" said Gregor.

"Say the quest for the cure never happened. Then we would have never known the truth about Neveeve. She would have produced the cure, yes, but do you think it would have been given to the gnawers?" asked Nerissa.

"Probably not. You guys weren't even giving them the yellow flea powder," said Gregor.

"Exactly so. The minute the gnawers found out about the flea powder, they were determined to get it. Now imagine if it became known that the humans had the actual cure for the plague and were not giving it to the gnawers. What do you think they would have done?" asked Nerissa.

"Attacked you. I mean, what would they have to lose if they were going to die of the plague, anyway?" said Gregor.

"Yes. There would have been a war. And *that* is why Sandwich was saying the warmbloods would not survive," said Nerissa. "War has been averted...for now."

The longer Gregor stayed in bed, the more restless he became. He had to see his mom! When he was finally given permission to get up and visit her, the doctors said he had to walk slowly and quietly. He agreed.

His mom was propped up in bed with a tray of food before her. Not much of it seemed to be getting in her. Gregor came up to her bedside.

"Hi, Mom," he said.

"Hey, baby," she said hoarsely. The purple bump on her face looked a little smaller, but she seemed almost too weak to hold her spoon. "How you doing?"

"Oh, I'm good," said Gregor. That was not really true but he didn't want to add to her worries. He tried to think of some funny anecdote to tell her from the trip to the jungle, but absolutely nothing came to mind. "You seen Boots?"

"Not awake. I didn't want her to get scared seeing me like this. A girl brought her and held her up at the window, though, while she was asleep," said his mom. "The girl didn't look so hot herself."

"That must have been Luxa," said Gregor, and for some reason he felt himself blush.

"I liked her. I could tell she's got real attitude," said his mom.

"I thought you'd say that," said Gregor. He scooped up a spoonful of broth and held it up to her mouth. "Come on, Mom. You're not going to get better just looking at it."

She allowed him to feed her a little broth before she spoke again. "Have they told you I can't go back now?"

"I've been thinking, maybe Boots and I can just stay down here with you until you're better," said Gregor.

Distress contorted his mother's face. "Oh, no, you can't! I want you out of here. You take my baby and go home now!"

He had to promise he would go, over and over again. His mom made sure he knew she thought he had broken that promise once before, when he had left for the jungle instead of New York City. There was no cure to seek now, though. He knew he had to do what she asked.

A few hours later, he and Boots were saying goodbye in the High Hall. Luxa, Hazard, Nerissa, Mareth, and Temp had come to see them off. He had made the rounds in the hospital already, telling everyone he'd see them soon. He would, too. Vikus said they could come and visit his mom as often as they wanted.

As difficult as his own life must be, Vikus took the time to personally fly Gregor and Boots home on his big gray bat, Euripedes. He had arranged for their father to meet them at the laundry room instead of the Central Park entrance. The currents were in full force, and Euripedes barely flapped his wings as they rode the misty white vapors up, up, up to the world above.

And there was his dad, arms extended for Boots, then pulling him into the laundry room. And there was Lizzie, her little face pinched with the strain of the last few weeks, but smiling, too, at the sight of them.

"Fly you high!" he heard Vikus call as Euripedes dropped back into the mist.

"Yeah, fly you high, too, Vikus," he called back. The old man needed all the good wishes he could get at the moment.

Boots was delighted to be back home and ran to get her poison arrow frog toys so that she could tell Lizzie about the real ones she'd seen. While she prattled on about "I see red, I see blue, I see yellow fogs!" and hopped around the living room, Gregor tried to catch up some with his dad. It was

all still pretty hard to talk about. The plague, the jungle, the battle, the deaths, and the huge hollow in the apartment that his mom usually filled.

It was after midnight on Friday night. He had been down less than two weeks. All that had happened in less than two weeks.

There was no argument when his dad told them it was bedtime. Gregor gratefully crawled between his covers and fell asleep at once. In his dreams he kept looking for someone but it wasn't until he woke the next morning that he realized he'd been trying to find his mom.

While he was still lying in bed, Lizzie peeked around the corner of his doorway. "Hey, Liz, come on in." He pulled back the blanket, and she happily curled up next to him. She held out an envelope to him. "What's this?" Inside was a handmade card that read, "Happy Birthday, Gregor!" in bright marker. His birthday. It had been sometime last week. He must have turned twelve in the jungle.

"Wow, that's beautiful, thanks, Lizzie," he said.

"Dad said we could get you some presents when you got home and make a cake, too," said Lizzie. "But, Gregor, I don't know what's going to happen now about money."

Their mom made the money, but she was too sick to even come home.

"Dad says he's going back to work, but his fevers have started coming back in the afternoons, so I don't think he can," said Lizzie.

"He's sick again?" asked Gregor.

"I read the paper they sent that time from the Underland. It said people can have re-lap-ses. The dictionary says that means it comes back again," said Lizzie.

His dad had seemed okay last night, but afternoons had always been when he was the sickest. Gregor began to feel worry gnawing inside him, but tried not to let it show. "Well, Vikus said he had them pack some more money from the museum. That should get us by for a while." He hoped. "Don't worry, Liz, it will work out okay. It's Saturday morning, right? I better get over to Mrs. Cormaci's." They would need that forty bucks.

"You had another flu," said Lizzie.

"What?" said Gregor.

"You had another flu. That's what I told everybody who asked about you," said Lizzie. "Mrs. Cormaci said you better get a flu shot next year. Oh, and Larry and Angelina brought over your homework." She pointed at

a stack of books on his windowsill, the sight of which made Gregor feel kind of sick for real.

"Man, two weeks of homework," said Gregor.

"We had two snow days, so it's really only eight school days," said Lizzie encouragingly.

"Okay, then things are looking up," said Gregor and poked her in the stomach. It was nice to see her laugh.

The cold snap was over, and when he opened the window a crack there was a soft, springy smell to the air. Gregor pulled on a pair of baggy pants over his bandaged legs and found a long-sleeved sweatshirt. It wasn't until he'd put on his socks that he realized he had no shoes except the Underlander sandals he'd left Regalia in. His boots had been destroyed by acid in the jungle. His last pair of sneakers had disintegrated before Christmas. Not knowing what else to do, he put on the sandals over his socks and tugged his waistband down to his hips so his pant cuffs would help hide his strange footwear.

He tiptoed in to give his grandma a kiss while she slept and tucked a blanket up around Boots. Around her on the pillow were the plastic poison arrow frogs. "I better come up with some way to get rid of those," he thought. His dad was still asleep on the pullout couch. In the daylight, Gregor could see what Lizzie had said was true. The strange tone to his skin, the tremor in his hands...He was sick again.

At ten o'clock, Gregor was knocking on Mrs. Cormaci's door. She eyed him closely, said he looked washed out, and gave him a big plate of scrambled eggs. Before she handed off the list of errands for the day, she made him come sit in the living room so she could give him his birthday present.

"You didn't have to get me anything," he said, turning the gift over in his hands.

"I figure I owe you these, much as I make you run around," she said with a wave of her hand.

He opened the box to find a pair of sneakers. Not any sneakers, but great sneakers, cool sneakers, the kind he never really even imagined owning because he knew they cost too much. "Oh, they're fantastic," he said.

"Why don't you try them on, because if they don't fit I've got the receipt, and we can go back and exchange them," she said.

But Gregor didn't move. Because to try them on would mean to take off his weird sandals, which he had carefully tucked under the coffee table, and then he'd have to explain those. And he couldn't. He couldn't because his mind was too preoccupied with his mom being miles under the ground with the plague and his dad relapsing and Lizzie's worried face and the impossibility of managing all that. What were they going to do? If his mom was gone for months, if his dad got bad again and couldn't even take care of them let alone go back to work and even if he could go back to work, then who would take care of his grandma and Boots and where was the money for all this going

357 to come from, anyway? And whoever he was in the Underland, in the real world Gregor was just an eleven — no, a twelve-year-old kid who had no idea what to do.

"Gregor? You going to try on the shoes?" said Mrs. Cormaci. "If you don't like them, it's okay to say so. We can exchange them for another pair."

"No, they're perfect," he said. "It's just that..."

"What's the matter, honey?" she said.

He was going to need help. His whole family was going to need help if they were going to keep going. But Gregor was not good at lying, and he was so very, very tired.

"Gregor? What is it?" said Mrs. Cormaci. She sat in a chair across from him. "Something's wrong, I can tell."

Gregor fingered the laces of the shoes, took a deep breath, and made a decision. "Mrs. Cormaci?" he said. "Mrs. Cormaci...can you keep a secret?"

**GREGOR
AND THE MARKS OF SECRET
BOOK FOUR OF THE BESTSELLING
UNDERLAND CHRONICLES**

SUZANNE COLLINS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

PART 1

The Crown

CHAPTER 1

Gregor sat on his bed tracing the scars with his fingertips. There were two different kinds. The thin lines crisscrossing his arms had been left by the treacherous vines that had tried to drag him into the Underland jungle. And the deeper marks — the ones made by the mandibles of gigantic ants during a battle — they could be found on most of the rest of his body, although his legs had borne the brunt of the attack. The scars had flattened out a little, but the silvery white color made them far too noticeable for him to wear short sleeves or cutoffs. While none of this had mattered when it was cold out and he had had to wear warm clothing, in the ninety-plus temperatures of July it was a real issue.

He made a face as he took a small stone jar off his windowsill and unscrewed the lid. The fishy smell of the ointment immediately filled the room. It had been prescribed by the Underlander doctors to help diminish the scarring, but he hadn't been very responsible about using it. Hadn't even thought about it much really until that day in May when he'd walked out into the living room in shorts and his neighbor Mrs. Cormaci had gasped, "Gregor, you can't go outside with your legs showing like that! People will start asking questions!"

She was right. There were about a zillion things his family couldn't afford... but questions topped the list.

As he smeared the gunk from the jar on his legs, Gregor thought longingly of the local basketball court, the wide, grassy lawns in Central Park, and the public swimming pool. At least he could go to the Underland. Knowing that gave him some comfort.

How ironic that the Underland, which had always been a place to dread, had become a place to escape to this summer. Their steamy apartment was crowded with Gregor, his bedridden grandma, his sick dad, and his two younger sisters, eight-year-old Lizzie and three-year-old Boots. And yet there was always the sense that someone was missing ... the empty chair at the kitchen table ... the unused toothbrush in the holder ... sometimes Gregor would catch himself wandering from room to room aimlessly looking for something and then realize he was just hoping to find his mom.

She was better off in the Underland in a lot of ways. Even if it was miles beneath their apartment and she missed them all so much. The human

city of Regalia had doctors and plenty of good food — the temperature was always comfortable. The people down there treated his mom like a queen. If you could get around the fact that the city was always on the brink of war, it wasn't a half-bad vacation spot.

Gregor went into the bathroom to scrub his hands with the only thing that seemed to be able to cut through the fish ointment. Scouring powder. Then he headed on into the kitchen to get breakfast going.

A pleasant surprise awaited him. Mrs. Cormaci was there already, scrambling eggs and pouring juice. A big box of powdered doughnuts sat on the table. Boots sat in her booster seat with a ring of white sugar around her mouth, munching on a doughnut. Lizzie was pretending to nibble her eggs.

"Hey, what's the special occasion?" asked Gregor.

"Lizzie goes to camp!" said Boots.

"That's right, young lady," said Mrs. Cormaci. "And we're making sure she gets a big breakfast before she goes."

"A beeg breakfast," agreed Boots. She poked a sticky paw into the box of doughnuts and held one out to Lizzie.

"I've got one, Boots," said Lizzie. She hadn't even touched her doughnut. Gregor knew she was probably too nervous to eat, with camp and all.

"I don't," said Gregor. He caught Boots's wrist, directed the doughnut toward his mouth, and took a huge bite. Boots burst into giggles and insisted on feeding him the whole doughnut, coating his face with sugar.

Gregor's dad came in carrying an empty tray.

"How's Grandma doing?" Gregor asked, carefully watching his dad's hands for signs of the tremors that meant a bad day was ahead. Today they seemed steady, though.

"Oh, she's doing just fine. You know how she loves a good doughnut," he said with a smile. He noticed the nearly untouched breakfast on Lizzie's plate. "You need to get some of that in your stomach, Lizzie. Big day today."

The words tumbled out of Lizzie as if a dam had broken. "I don't think I should go! I don't think I should go, Dad! What if something happens here and you need me or Mom gets sicker or what if I come back and everybody's gone?" Her breathing was short and rapid. Gregor could see she was working herself into a state.

"That's not going to happen, honey," said his dad, kneeling down and taking her hands. "Now listen, everybody here's going to be just fine, and you're going to be just fine at camp, too. And your mom's getting better every day."

"She wants you to go, Liz," said Gregor. "She told me to tell you about twenty times. Besides, it's not like you're going to go see her and —"

A look from his dad cut Gregor off. Stupid! What a stupid thing to say! Lizzie had tried again and again to work up the courage to go down to the Underland to see their mom, but she never made it farther than the grate in the laundry room before a full-blown panic attack hit her. She'd end up crouched over on the tile by the dryer, gasping for air, trembling and sweating. Everyone knew how badly she wanted to go. She just couldn't.

"I mean, sorry, I just meant..." Gregor stammered. But the damage was done. Lizzie looked devastated.

"That's because your sister's the only one in this family with any sense," said Mrs. Cormaci. She straightened Lizzie's braids although they were neat as a pin. "You wouldn't get me down in that Underland for a million dollars. Not me."

In a moment of desperation last spring, Gregor had decided to confide the bizarre family secret to Mrs. Cormaci. He'd told her the whole story, beginning with his dad's mysterious disappearance three and a half years ago. He'd talked about chasing Boots through a grate in the laundry room last summer and how the two had fallen miles beneath New York City to a strange, dark world known as the Underland. It was inhabited by giant talking animals — roaches, bats, rats, spiders, and a whole slew of others — and a race of pal-skinned, violet-eyed people who had built a beautiful stone city called Regalia. Some creatures were friends and some were enemies, and often he had trouble telling the difference. He'd been down three times: that first time to rescue his dad, the second to deal with a white rat named the Bane, and just a few months ago to help the warmbloods in the Underland find a cure for a horrible plague. Gregor's mom had gotten the plague, and no one knew when she would be well enough to come home. Finally, he'd told Mrs. Cormaci that there was a string of prophecies that called him a warrior — not just any warrior, but the one destined to save the Regalians from extinction — and that, after a few violent encounters, he had also been designated a rager, which was a term reserved for a handful of particularly deadly fighters.

Mrs. Cormaci didn't interrupt once, didn't make any comment. When he was done, she simply said, "Well, that takes the cake."

The amazing thing was, she seemed to believe him. Oh, she asked some questions. She insisted on double-checking the story with his dad. For a long time, though, she'd suspected that something very odd was going on with his family. The truth was almost a relief to her. It explained the disappearances, Gregor's scars, and the way Boots went around saying hi to cockroaches. As to the fantastical nature of the Underland, Mrs. Cormaci could accept that. After all, this was a woman who had a sign posted by the mailboxes offering to read your future with tarot cards. Still, that first night, when Gregor had taken her down to the laundry room to meet a huge talking bat, even Mrs. Cormaci was a little bit thrown. She exchanged polite chitchat with the bat, commenting on the weather and such, and when some dryer fluff blew over and stuck in the creature's fur she didn't hesitate to brush it away, saying, "Hold still. You've got lint on your ear." Once the bat was gone, though, Mrs. Cormaci had to sit in the stairwell for a while and catch her breath.

"Are you okay, Mrs. Cormaci?" asked Gregor. The last thing he'd wanted to do was give her a heart attack or something by dragging her into all their mess.

"Oh, I'm fine. I'm fine," she said, patting his shoulder absentmindedly. "It's just the whole thing wasn't quite real until I saw that bat... and now it's a little more real than I was counting on."

From that moment on, Mrs. Cormaci had made it her business to care for Gregor's family. And they let her because they needed her help so much.

Now she finished arranging Lizzie's braids. "So, your camp clothes are all packed. They'll feed you lunch first thing when you get there. How about I wrap up your doughnut for the road?" she asked.

"No, I'm sorry. I won't eat it," said Lizzie. "I want Gregor to give it to Ripred."

"Okay, Liz," said Gregor. He had an echolocation lesson with the big rat today. While Gregor didn't really like the practice of taking Ripred Lizzie's food, it was important to her and it always put the rat in a better mood.

Mrs. Cormaci shook her head. "There's a whole world of creatures down there having a hard time; they had the plague, they don't have enough to eat, somebody's attacking them.... How come you're giving your

doughnut to some smart-alecky rat who's the only one who can take care of himself?"

"Because I think he's lonely," said Lizzie softly.

Gregor suppressed a sound of exasperation. Leave it to Lizzie to turn that irascible, lethal grouch Ripred into someone to feel sorry for.

"Well, you've got an awful big heart for such a little girl," said Mrs. Cormaci, giving her a squeeze. "Go brush your teeth so you don't miss the bus."

Lizzie left the room, happy to escape breakfast. Mrs. Cormaci looked after her and shook her head. "Her, I worry about."

"Maybe camp will be good for her," said Gregor.

"Sure. Sure it will," said his dad. But no one really seemed convinced.

For better or worse, Lizzie was on the bus fifteen minutes later, off to the summer camp for city kids.

Gregor had about an hour before he had to leave for his lesson with Ripred. He sat down with his dad and Mrs. Cormaci to discuss what they called the family business.

Down in Regalia, the humans had a museum full of things that had fallen with their unfortunate owners from New York City. This had been going on for several centuries, so there was quite a collection. Because of his family's financial situation, Gregor was granted permission to take anything that might be of value. At first, he had combed through the old wallets and purses and scraped up every bit of money he could find. For a while, this kept them afloat.

But Mrs. Cormaci had bigger ideas. "I know this man, Mr. Otts. He buys and sells antiques." She gave Gregor a suitcase and instructed him to fill it up on his next trip. So, he did. Some of the items were worthless, but there was a ring with a big red stone that had paid the bills for two whole months. Now the money from the ring was about to run out, so they were in the process of planning their next sale. Everyone agreed it should be an elegant old violin Gregor had found under a saddle at the back of the museum. It was undamaged, still in its case. You could tell just by looking at it that it was worth a bundle.

Although Gregor was grateful for the income the items brought in, he did not enjoy his scavenging trips to the museum. Did not enjoy thinking about the wallets, the ring, the violin ... the people they had belonged to, and what tragic ends they had met in the Underland. Only a few of the

owners would have been rescued and taken to Regalia. The rest would have died from the fall or been hunted down and eaten by the rats in the tunnels. So, it made him sad, "the family business."

However, today's trip to the Underland did not require raiding the museum. He planned to see his mom, hang out with his friends, and stay for a nice big dinner. In fact, today should be fun ... once he finished his echolocation lesson with Ripred.

"You better get going if you want to meet that rat on time," said Mrs. Cormaci.

"Come on, Boots. Want to go see Mama?" asked Gregor. He took a flashlight from one of the coat hooks by the front door and hung it on his belt loop.

"Ye-es!" said Boots. "I get my sandals!" She ran off excitedly. Unlike Lizzie, Boots was a big fan of the Underland.

Mrs. Cormaci offered to escort them down to the laundry room to act as their lookout. First she made them stop by her apartment for a minute. She opened the fridge and dug out a half-eaten bowl of macaroni salad. "Here," she said. "You may as well take it down to the rat."

Gregor held up Lizzie's doughnut, which he had wrapped up in a paper napkin. "I've got Ripred covered."

"What, it's going to break your arm to carry this, too?" asked Mrs. Cormaci.

"No. I just don't see any point in giving him a perfectly good bowl of macaroni salad. He can catch his own dinner," said Gregor.

"I was about to throw it out, anyway. I think the mayonnaise is starting to turn bad. But I doubt he'll care," said Mrs. Cormaci. "Wait, let me find a paper bag. I don't want that rat licking my bowl."

Gregor shook his head. "You're worse than Lizzie." She could make her little speech to Lizzie about the doughnut, but Gregor knew better. Practically every time he went down to the Underland, Mrs. Cormaci made him drag along some dish for Ripred because it was "starting to turn bad."

"Well, maybe she's right. That rat, what's he got? No real home, no family, he has to fight all the time. You know, everybody needs a little joy in their life. For goodness' sake, take him the macaroni salad," said Mrs. Cormaci.

"Fine," said Gregor. He didn't know why he put up so much resistance to taking Ripred a snack. Yes, he did. Gregor wasn't good at echolocation,

and Ripred's impatience with his lack of improvement had made him at first insecure and then defiant. He had basically stopped trying to master the fine art of navigating in the dark, and Ripred knew it. So the echolocation lessons had deteriorated into two-hour sessions of Ripred telling him what a weak, lazy loser he was. And the idea of rewarding Ripred with food drove Gregor crazy.

Down in the laundry room, Mrs. Cormaci made sure the coast was clear before she gave Gregor the thumbs-up. He opened the grate in the wall, gave a whistle, and almost instantly Nike's head appeared. Boots ran up and stroked the black-and-white stripes on the bat's face.

"Greetings, Princess," Nike purred.

"Greetings, Piness," Boots said back, and then they both laughed. This had only happened about fifty times now, but it still cracked Boots up. Gregor thought Nike laughed mostly because his sister thought it was so funny. "We are both pinesses!" Boots exclaimed to Gregor.

"Yeah, that's ... still a good one, Boots," he said with a grin. Being the daughter of the bat queen, Nike actually was a princess. The cockroaches called Boots "Princess" because they were nuts about her, but it was really just a nickname. "Come on, Pinesses, or I'll be late." He scooped up Boots and turned to Mrs. Cormaci. "So, we'll see you tonight?"

"Sure. You kids have a good time. I'll keep an eye on things," she said. Suddenly Gregor felt bad that he'd made a fuss about the macaroni. How could he argue with Mrs. Cormaci about a silly sack of pasta when she was the only thing holding his family together right now? "Okay, thanks a lot, Mrs. Cormaci."

She waved at him dismissively. "What else have I got to do that's so important? Now you better get going."

The ride down the tube, through the dark stone tunnels, and to the brightly lit palace in Regalia was uneventful. But his disagreement with Mrs. Cormaci over feeding Ripred had put him behind schedule. The minute they landed in the High Hall, Gregor had to run to his lesson. There was not even time to pop his head in and see his mom as he sprinted down the steps past the hospital level.

Deep in the palace, Gregor removed four thick stone bars that secured a heavy door and slipped through it, leaving the door slightly ajar for his return. His feet carried him down multiple sets of stairs. The Regalian council had reluctantly agreed for his lessons to take place here where he

was theoretically still inside the city limits, but where Ripred's presence could remain unknown to almost all of the people. The rats and humans had been warring on and off for centuries. Very few humans could deal with the idea of a rat prowling around so close to their home.

Ripred was waiting for Gregor in their usual meeting place, a large circular cave off a set of stairs. The rat was lounging against a wall, gnawing on some kind of bone. He squinted when Gregor's flashlight beam hit him and gave a snarl. "Get that out of my eyes! How many times do I have to tell you?"

Gregor redirected the beam but didn't bother answering. Even in the shadowy light, he could see Ripred's nose working.

"What's that smell?" he asked.

"Lizzie sent you this," Gregor said, and tossed the doughnut at the rat.

Ripred easily caught it in his mouth and rolled it around, savoring the sweetness. "Lizzie. Why is it I never get to spend time with the nice members of your family?" asked Ripred. "And the bag?"

"It's from Mrs. Cormaci," said Gregor.

"Ah, La Bella Cormaci," sighed Ripred. "And what does the enchantress of the kitchen send me today?"

"See for yourself," said Gregor. He was about to send the macaroni salad sailing after the doughnut when he heard a scuffling in the adjacent tunnel. The sound startled him. No one was ever down here except him and Ripred.

"I told you to stay put!" Ripred barked in the direction of the tunnel.

There was a slight pause, as if the creature was considering retreat. Then came a sullen reply: "I smelled food." On the word "food" the low-pitched voice broke into a squeak. Gregor thought of his cousin Rodney, who everybody had teased when he'd become a teenager and his voice kept cracking between his kid voice and what was to be his man's voice.

"Who's that?" asked Gregor.

"That's your little friend the Bane," said Ripred. "After he maimed his last two babysitters, the job fell to me."

"The Bane?" said Gregor in surprise. He had not seen the Bane in months. He remembered the soft bundle of white fur that had huddled in his arms in fear. Last December, Gregor had been sent on a mission to kill him, but when he'd discovered the Bane was only a baby, he simply couldn't do it. He'd delivered the pup to Ripred instead.

"Can I come in?" the voice said from the tunnel.

"Oh, why not?" said Ripred. "Come on in and you can personally thank the warrior for saving your life."

Gregor turned his flashlight beam to the mouth of the tunnel, expecting a slightly larger version of the rat baby. Instead, he found himself looking up at an eight-foot mountain of white fur.

CHAPTER 2

Gregor's mouth dropped open. "Geez!" In a matter of months, the Bane had gone from a pup Gregor could carry to the massive rat before him.

"And he's not even full-grown yet," said Ripred. "We're expecting another two to four feet by Christmas."

"Like snow," Gregor thought. "'We're expecting another two to four feet to pile up on that big white mountain.'"

"You've met, but allow me to reintroduce you." Ripred pointed to Gregor with his tail. "This is Gregor the Overlander, the warrior who refused to kill you when he had a chance." Then Ripred gestured to the Bane. "And this is the rat we call the Bane, although his mother gave him a much sweeter name ... Pearlpelt." Because his pelt, his coat, was white as a pearl. It did have a strange iridescent quality, like a pearl, too. When patches of it caught the light, Gregor saw glimpses of color, pink and blue and green. In the Underland, it was not uncommon for mice and even bats to have white coats. But there was only one white rat. That's how everyone had known Pearlpelt was the snowy rat mentioned in "The Prophecy of Bane."

"Hey," said Gregor to the mountain.

The white rat shifted uneasily but didn't answer.

"So, what do you like to be called?" Gregor asked.

"It doesn't matter what I *like* to be called. Everyone just calls me Bane or the Bane except Ripred. He makes fun of my name," said the Bane. "Calls me Pearlpelt or Pearliegirlie."

Ripred just shrugged. "It's a hard name to say, Pearlpelt. Practically a tongue twister. Try to say it three times fast. Go on. Pearlpelt, Pullpet, Purput. See? It's impossible."

"Pearlpelt, Pearlpelt, Pearlpelt," said the Bane rapidly. He locked eyes with Ripred. "He can say it. He just wants to humiliate me."

Gregor knew the Bane was right about that. Ripred was a master of humiliation. He hadn't been too bad to Gregor until that trip in the jungle, but he'd been awful then and it had continued right through the echolocation lessons. If the Bane was with Ripred full-time, he was probably a constant target. Gregor felt a twinge of sympathy.

"Ignore him. That's what I do," said Gregor.

"It's different for you. You're a rager," said the Bane. "I wish I was a rager. Or at least full-grown. Things would be different then."

"And tell us, please, how things will change when you're full-grown," yawned Ripred.

"I'll be king, for one thing," shot back the Bane.

Gregor felt a stab of uneasiness at the words. The reason he had been ordered to kill the Bane was to keep the white rat from coming to power. A prophecy had warned of the Bane's potential for evil. And here he was already talking about becoming king. That wasn't good.

"Oh? And who's been telling you that?" said Ripred. "Twirltongue?"

The Bane shifted his glance to the ground. "Maybe."

"She's very persuasive, isn't she? But I wouldn't put too much stock in what Twirltongue says. She once convinced me I was well liked," said Ripred.

"And my other friends," said the Bane.

"Your friends," said Ripred with loathing. "Anyone can be your friend if they give you a few fish. And they whisper their little words in your ears ... how you're so strong and so brave ... how one day you'll be king ... and you greedily gulp down the fish and the lies ... you big white fool... . You have no idea who your real enemies are."

"You're my enemy, I know that!" spat out the Bane. "You're every gnawer's enemy. Making deals with wretched humans and fliers and nibblers, when you should be thinking of ways to kill them off! Twirltongue told me how you turned on Gorger because you thought you could lead us. As if any decent gnawer would ever follow you. To the rest of us, you're nothing but a joke! I should, I should —"

"You should what? Kill me? You know you're always welcome to try, Pearliegirlie," said Ripred.

And then, to Gregor's amazement, the Bane let out a roar and attacked Ripred. There were very few rats with the guts to do this. Ripred was just too deadly. The Bane might be a few feet taller and a few pounds heavier than Ripred, but how could he possibly think he could take the older rat on? Gregor took a running leap for the stairs to avoid the flying claws and teeth. The Bane was fighting furiously, but he couldn't even touch Ripred, who was knocking him around the cave without any apparent effort. Still, watching them go at it, Gregor felt afraid of the Bane for the first time. It wasn't his size or what any prophecy had said about him; it was his

willingness to battle Ripred. He was either very brave or very stupid or just very deluded about his own power. Any one of those qualities was frightening in an animal that people thought might one day be responsible for destroying the Underland.

"All right, all right, settle down," said Ripred. "I'm getting bored, and when I'm bored, I'm dangerous."

But the Bane bellowed and lunged for him again.

"I said knock it off," said Ripred, deflecting the Bane so his head smacked into the wall with a loud thud. It was enough to stun the white rat for a moment. "You can't ever stop until you hurt yourself."

Apparently crashing his head into a stone wall had hurt, because the Bane gave up. He sat hunched over, running his paws over his eyes. Then to Gregor's surprise, he began to cry. Not just sniffles, but deep, body-shaking sobs.

"Oh, wonderful. Here comes the flood," said Ripred.

Seeing the Bane cry was somehow awful. All traces of the giant attack rat were gone. He seemed like an oversized, bullied child. "Why don't you lay off him, Ripred?" said Gregor.

"Because he hates me!" wept the Bane. "He's always hated me. He made me come with him. He made me leave my friends. I've spent my whole life as his prisoner."

"Is that what they tell you? Those wonderful friends of yours?" said Ripred. "And did they also tell you I spared your life and raised you from a pup? Were you fed? Did you get the plague? Are you here now to complain about me?"

"You didn't raise me," said the Bane. "Razor did. He's the one who cared for me."

"Yes, he's the one who cared for you, and how did you repay him? Tell the warrior here, before he starts feeling too sorry for you. Go on; tell him!" shouted Ripred.

But the Bane did not continue. Instead, he trapped his long pink tail between his front paws and began to suck on the end of it.

"Oh, boo hoo hoo, the poor little abused Bane. But Razor treated him as his own pup. Went hungry so he could eat, protected him, tried to teach him to survive. And where is Razor now? Dead. And why? Because Pearlpelt here killed him over a crawler carcass," said Ripred.

"I didn't mean to," whimpered the Bane. "I was hungry. I didn't think it would kill Razor."

"For you to knock him off a cliff? Well, that is the usual result," said Ripred.

"I didn't think he'd go over the cliff. I didn't hit him that hard," said Bane, his words garbled by his tail.

"And then you tried to eat his body to conceal the evidence." Ripred turned to Gregor in disgust. "That's how we found him. Soaked in Razor's blood, chewing on his liver."

Gregor felt his stomach tighten in response to the gruesome image. He looked at the Bane with a new sense of alarm.

"No, no, no, no," said the Bane. Along with sucking, he began to gnaw on his tail, drawing blood.

"Yes, yes, yes, yes. Just in the past week you blinded Clawsin in one eye and ripped off Ratriff's foreleg. Why? You can't even tell me why! So now I've got to drag you around with me because no one else can bear you. Stop sucking on your tail!" Ripred burst out in frustration. "King, indeed! Do you really think anyone will take orders from someone who sucks on his tail?"

"Maybe they already do," the Bane hissed back at him. "You don't know anything! Maybe they do!" And with that, the white rat bolted out of the cave and disappeared.

"You wait where I told you to wait!" Ripred hollered after him. But there was no reply but the faint scraping of the Bane's claws as he ran away. "If he can find it," the rat sighed. "He gets lost if he blinks."

Ripred slumped against the cave wall a few feet from Gregor and waited a bit before he spoke. "There, he's out of earshot. Well, you've seen him now, Overlander. What's your opinion?"

It took Gregor a while to answer. In a few minutes he had experienced shock at seeing the Bane, discomfort at his kingly ambitions, fear at his boldness, pity at his obvious emotional instability, and revulsion at his murder of his caretaker. "He's a mess," said Gregor finally.

"He's a dangerous mess, and we let him live," said Ripred. "You because you couldn't kill a pup. Me because I thought killing him would forever shut the door on any hope of peace. When you said no one would follow me if I killed him, you were right."

Suddenly it occurred to Gregor that he did not really know Ripred's plan. The very first time they'd met, the rat had made it clear he'd wanted to

overthrow the reigning rat king, Gorger. Gregor had helped Ripred do that. But what was he after now?

"Do you want to be king yourself, Ripred?" Gregor asked.

"Not really," the rat almost sighed. "But I want the warring to end for good. And do you think the Bane is the one to put a stop to it?"

"No," said Gregor.

"Well, he wants that crown and there's no reason to think he won't get it. So what do you think we should do?" asked Ripred.

"Do?" Gregor had no idea what to do about the Bane.

The rat's voice was filled with urgency as he leaned in toward Gregor. "I thought maybe you were right. That I could teach him to be something other than what he was fated to be. But I got him too late. His father had already left his mark."

"His father?" said Gregor.

"Snare. You met him. You watched him and the Bane's mother fight to the death," said Ripred.

"Oh, yeah...." Gregor remembered the horrible rat-fight in the maze between Goldshard, the Bane's mother, and the gray rat, Snare. But it had never occurred to Gregor that Snare was the Bane's father. There was nothing paternal about him.

"Snare was a vile creature by anyone's account. Why Goldshard ever agreed to be his mate is a mystery. I warned her against it. She didn't listen. But she regretted it. Didn't you wonder where the rest of the Bane's litter was?" asked Ripred.

"No," said Gregor. But now that he thought about it, it was strange that the Bane had been the only pup.

"Snare killed them. Right in front of Goldshard and the Bane. He didn't want them competing for the Bane's milk," said Ripred. "It was totally unnecessary. Any number of families would have taken those pups."

"That's awful," said Gregor.

"The Bane remembers it, too. And that Snare beat him. And that his parents killed each other," said Ripred. "You would have thought he'd been too little, but you need only mention Snare's name if you want to watch him tremble."

"Do you really think he could end up as king?" asked Gregor.

"He will find followers, because he's the Bane. He's got the white coat, and the size, and enough hatred brewing inside him to wipe out the

Underland as we know it. Most rats will overlook the fact that he's unbalanced, because he'll be telling them exactly what they want to hear. They've been starved too long, and then so many died from the plague ... especially the pups. No, the gnawers won't care who he is or what he does if he brings them revenge," said Ripred.

A chill had been rising up Gregor's spine as Ripred spoke. Gregor tried to connect the giant white rat — sullen, vicious, violent, pathetic — with the baby he had spared. Remembered the Bane nuzzling his dead mother, trying to get her to respond. "Maybe if Goldshard had lived," said Gregor, "maybe he would have been okay."

"But she didn't, so we'll never know," said Ripred. He shook his head and sunk back against the cave wall. "Razor took good care of him, though. And whatever conclusions you may draw from today's little drama, I was not unkind to him as a pup." Ripred's eyes burned into the darkness. His claws agitatedly groomed the fur on his chest, smoothing it down around the edges of the big scar he'd received on the journey to save Gregor's father. Ripred's shoulders hunched as if some heavy burden rested upon them. He looked miserable.

Gregor thought about what Mrs. Cormaci said about everyone needing some joy in their life. He held out the bag of macaroni salad. "Here."

Ripred took the bag and stuck his snout into it. After a few bites, he balled up the paper sack and ate that, too. The food seemed to shift his mood. His muscles relaxed, and he made a sound of resignation. "Hrm. Well, I guess there's nothing else to be done. Waiting won't make it easier. We may as well get it over with."

"What?" asked Gregor. "What do we have to do?"

"Haven't you been listening to me?" said Ripred.

Gregor had, but he was still at a loss. "I know the Bane's a problem..." he began. Ripred laid a paw on Gregor's shoulder, cutting him off. Gregor could see his reflection in the rat's shiny black eyes. Tiny and distorted.

"We have to kill him, Warrior," whispered Ripred. "And the sooner the better."

CHAPTER 3

"Kill him?" asked Gregor in shock. He was thinking more along the lines that the Bane needed some sort of counseling or to be placed under some kind of watch. Yes, he was a mess, maybe even a little crazy, but look what he'd been through. And Gregor didn't believe the Bane had intended to push Razor off that cliff. Not with all that crying and tail sucking. Of course, the cannibalism part was sickening, but for all Gregor knew, rats ate rats. On his first quest, they'd watched one spider eat another, and Ripred hadn't had a problem with that. As to the Bane's hurting the other rats ... well, the rats fought all the time. Did the Bane just need someone to help him learn to restrain himself? To Gregor, who was a rager who had not yet "learned to control his powers," condemning the white rat to death seemed pretty harsh.

"Yes, kill him. And we can't afford to wait long," said Ripred.

"But... I already had a chance to kill him. I didn't do it, remember?" said Gregor.

"Things were different then," said Ripred.

Gregor's brain could not process what Ripred was saying this quickly. He tried to stall. "If you want him dead so bad, why don't you just kill him yourself?"

"Because of the prophecy," said Ripred.

Prophecy? As far as Gregor knew, there was no prophecy. In fact, one of the few things that had made his life easier of late was that there had been no prophecy hanging over his head. No warning from Bartholomew of Sandwich, the founder of Regalia, who had carved a roomful of dire prophecies in the palace hundreds of years ago. As the warrior, Gregor had been mentioned in three prophecies so far. It wasn't impossible that there were more. Then again ...

"I haven't heard of any prophecy," said Gregor. Maybe this was just another of Ripred's half-truths, like the one he had used to lure Gregor into the Underland to search for the cure to the plague.

"We all thought you could use a break after the last two hit you back-to-back. But trust me, it's there," said Ripred. "It's called 'The Prophecy of Time.'"

"And it says I kill the Bane?" said Gregor.

"That's my interpretation, yes. But don't worry; I'll be there to help you," said Ripred. The rat began to pace as he worked out his plan. "Listen, we'll do it tomorrow during your lesson. Bring your sword," he said. "And don't tell anyone about this!"

Gregor didn't like the sound of that. "Not even Vikus?" The old man was the head of the Regalian council, grandfather to his friend Luxa, who was the reigning queen of Regalia. Most important, he was one of the few Underlanders who Gregor was sure was looking out for him.

"Especially not Vikus. He'd be beside himself if he knew I'd brought the Bane down here. The council doesn't even want *me* down here. Anything you tell Vikus now, he'll feel obligated to tell the council. He's become practically useless to us because he's so guilt ridden over his wife's involvement with the plague," said Ripred. "So tomorrow, same time, same place. You bring your sword and we'll dispose of him."

Gregor pressed his lips together. To argue with Ripred now would be pointless. The rat had obviously worked through the whole necessity of killing the Bane already. It was better not to put up any resistance until he could figure out what to do. Because if there was one thing he did not feel right about, it was secretly teaming up with Ripred in some cave and basically murdering the Bane.

"I'll see you then," was all Gregor said.

"I'm glad you understand, Gregor. We simply have no choice." With that, Ripred melted into the shadows.

Gregor slowly made his way back up to the city, his head in a whirl.

"Overlander!" The voice brought Gregor back to attention. He had automatically gone to the hospital floor. He saw Howard standing outside his mom's room. Gregor could never look at his friend without comparing him to the preplague Howard, who had been healthy and stocky, with unblemished skin. Several months after he had barely evaded death, he was still twenty pounds under his normal weight. The purple scars that pitted his skin would never leave, although the doctors were optimistic that they would fade some.

The illness had set Howard on a new path in life. The Regalians had put him to work in the hospital, which was still overflowing with plague patients, and he was training to become a doctor. Howard was young and strong and had bounced back faster than most of the victims. But many

were still struggling, like Gregor's mom, and Howard was committed to helping them.

"Overlander, we have a surprise for you!" said Howard.

"I hope it's a good one," said Gregor, thinking that one really horrible surprise from Ripred was about all he could handle that day.

"Come and see for yourself," said Howard, waving him into the room.

Gregor found his mom sitting up in a chair. His face broke into a grin. "Now what do you think you're doing out of bed?"

"Me? I've been up since six. Cooked a big breakfast, went for a ride on a bat, and now I'm thinking about rearranging the furniture in this room. Getting kind of tired of the decor," she said.

Gregor laughed. Of course, she had done none of those things. This was the first time she had even been out of bed since she had fallen ill. "Maybe you ought to save the furniture for tomorrow."

"Yes, in fact, we should get you back to bed," said Howard. "We do not want to overdo on the first day." He reached to help her up.

"No, Howard, let me try it myself first," she said. With great determination, Gregor's mom got herself to her feet. The bed was only about five paces away, but she barely made it, collapsing on the covers at the last moment.

Howard and Gregor hurried to help position her in bed. "This is most excellent," said Howard encouragingly. "Every day a little more and you will have your strength back in no time. Now I must make my rounds with the medicine."

"That's a good boy, that Howard," said Gregor's mom when he had gone.

"He's the best," said Gregor.

"He'll make a fine doctor," said Gregor's mom. "Maybe you'll be a doctor someday."

Gregor nodded, but he had never even thought about being a doctor. He had no idea what he wanted to be, really. Since he'd fallen to the Underland, it seemed like he already had a job. Warrior. But it was not a job he liked or wanted, and it was certainly not a job his mom approved of for her twelve-year-old son. She knew that the Underlanders considered him the warrior in their prophecies, but she looked upset whenever anyone mentioned it.

"Where's Boots?" he said, to change the subject.

"Oh, she visited with me, then Luxa took her down to the field to get some exercise," said his mom. "Did Lizzie get off okay?"

Gregor gave his mom the update from home. Lizzie off to camp. Plans to sell the violin. The heat wave. She nodded, eager for every crumb of information. He tried to think of more details to stretch it out, but his mind was largely occupied by his encounter with Ripred and the Bane.

"Your head is somewhere else today," said Gregor's mom. Her fingers found a purple scar on her cheek. This was something she did when she started to worry. Rub that scar. "What's the matter, Gregor?"

"Not a thing," he said.

Her look said she didn't believe him, but fortunately, Howard came in at that moment with her medicine and a suggestion that she needed rest.

"I'll see you soon," said Gregor, grateful for an out. He headed off to find his friends. If Luxa had taken Boots to the field in the arena, there must be a game or a training session scheduled. He hoped they weren't using the blood balls for target practice. Even on good days, he disliked watching the wax balls burst open, spraying bloodred liquid as the sword blades hit them. At the moment it was a little more violence than he could handle.

When Gregor arrived, he found a much more benign sort of training in progress. The toddlers were learning to fly on bats. At first glance, it looked like little kids were raining from the ceiling. But none of the raindrops ever reached the ground. The bats would fly a toddler high up in the arena and then flip over, letting them fall into the air. The kid might drop five feet or twenty yards before they would be swept up by a second bat and flown back up into the air.

Mareth was directing the exercise. The soldier stood in the center of the field, leaning on a crutch. The doctors had fashioned a prosthetic device made of fishbone and leather for his missing leg, but he was still in the process of learning to use it. Regalia's queen, Luxa, was assisting him, if you could call it that, because at the moment they were both laughing helplessly at the scene above. Mareth was pointing up at Boots, who was trying out the somersault Luxa had been teaching her. When a bat dropped her, she would curl up in a ball and rotate a few times through the air. But inevitably she'd lose control of the move and go careening toward the ground, flapping her arms wildly like they were wings. "Me!" she called out, as if to remind the bats she needed a lift.

"Stay tucked up, Boots!" Luxa called through her laughter. "Hold your knees!"

"I hold my knees!" confirmed Boots. She launched into another somersault that quickly deteriorated into her baby-bird routine. "Me!"

"Almost, Boots! Try once more!" called Luxa encouragingly. Gregor stopped watching the kids and the bats for a moment and just focused on her. He had not gotten used to the sight of Luxa looking happy.

Being stranded in the jungle for three months with her injured bat, Aurora, and a colony of mice had changed Luxa. She was so glad to be home, and her people were almost ecstatic to see her. It was as if for the first time they had recognized how lucky they were to have this twelve-year-old girl on deck as a ruler. Luxa would not have the full powers of a queen until she was sixteen, but at twelve she had great influence and could now cast votes at the council meetings where policy was decided. While she was stubborn and gave the council fits with her attitude, Luxa was smart, strong, and unquestionably brave. A mutual appreciation had blossomed between the young queen and her subjects.

This all contributed to Luxa's happiness, but Gregor knew the real source of her joy was Hazard, her six-year-old Halflander cousin, with his lime-green eyes and black curls, who had been discovered living in the jungle. When his father, Hamnet, had been killed by an army of ants, Hazard had been orphaned. Luxa had brought him back to Regalia, and true to her word, it was as if they were now brother and sister. He lived with her in the royal chambers, ate with her, followed her like a puppy. And Luxa had allowed herself to love him.

Gregor spotted Hazard flipping off a bat high over his head. Hazard was older than most of the kids, but riding on bats was still a new skill for him. While the boy was allowed to participate in flying exercises, Luxa had strictly forbidden anyone to train him in weapons. His father's dying wish had been for Hazard to be anything but a warrior, and Luxa had promised to fulfill it. While the other kids his age studied combat training, Hazard was developing his already extraordinary talent with languages. Ordinarily, the Regalians made no effort to learn other creatures' tongues. But Hazard had been raised in the jungle, where he'd tried to speak to anything that would speak to him. He'd come to Regalia with a fluency in Lizard and an ability to get by in several other animal languages. Vikus, who was Hazard's grandfather as well as Luxa's, had arranged for a group of tutors. Showing

far more patience with the quick, willing Hazard than he ever displayed with Gregor, Ripred was teaching him to squeak in Rat. Temp, the cockroach who had rescued Boots from several disasters, taught both Hazard and the "princess" the clicking dialect of the crawlers. And Purvox, a beautiful red spider, had been shipped in to tutor him in her strange vibrating means of communication. In his spare time, Hazard would try to talk with the bats, although some of their sounds were simply too high-pitched for human ears.

As he walked toward his friends, a voice behind Gregor purred, "Jump." He took one step and leaped as high as he could in the air, stretching his legs out to the sides. The next second he was riding on Ares's back. Gregor always felt a sense of security with Ares. They were bonds, a human-bat team who had taken an oath to defend each other to the death. And after facing a string of impossible difficulties together, they were real friends, too.

"How's it going, man?" Gregor asked.

"Well. It goes well," said Ares.

Gregor ran his hand over Ares's neck. A brand-new layer of glossy black fur was beginning to conceal the purple plague scars. Gregor's bat, who had been the first victim of the plague, had not only managed to survive it but had also made an extraordinary recovery. Within a few weeks of receiving the cure, he'd been begging the doctors to discharge him from the hospital. Afraid that he would fly back to his remote cave outside of Regalia before he had fully healed, the doctors released him into Luxa's custody. So now he lived with her and Hazard and Aurora, in the royal wing of the palace. Gregor thought Ares probably preferred being with his friends to living in that lonely cave anyway.

"How soon do we eat?" said Gregor as his stomach rumbled. Mareth whistled, bringing the bats and their small charges down to the field.

"It must be now, for the training ends," said Ares.

Ten minutes later, they were seated around a big table loaded with food. Besides Gregor, Luxa, Hazard, Boots, Ares, and Aurora, there was a young bat that Hazard had taken a shine to. Thalia. She was a soft peach color with white streaks like a tabby cat, only about half-grown, and had a love of jokes that Gregor found unsettling. He had modified some Overland jokes for her. "Why did the bat cross the river? To get to the other side." Something like that could make her laugh for, no kidding, ten minutes.

Today he told the old standby: "Why is six afraid of seven? Because seven ate nine." Unfortunately, she'd had a mouthful of food when the punch line came and nearly choked to death as she cracked up.

"Do you think she'll grow out of that?" Gregor whispered to Luxa.

"I hope so. Hazard has his heart set on bonding with her," she whispered back.

Gregor ate a hearty meal of grilled fish, marinated mushrooms, and fresh bread. He contributed little to the conversation, though, because he kept wondering about Ripred and the Bane. After dinner, when the others went back to Luxa's apartment to play games, Gregor said he had to make a trip to the museum. He really just wanted some time to think. Despite Ripred's warning, Gregor's impulse was to track down Vikus and tell him everything. But it was true that Vikus might go to the council. And most of the council members were jerks. If only he could find out what was in the prophecy Ripred had mentioned ...

Nerissa! Gregor spun on his heel, heading away from the museum and to the stone room that housed Sandwich's prophecies. Nerissa spent much of her time there. If anyone could tell Gregor what awaited him, it was that girl. She was part of the royal family, Luxa's cousin, and had even worn the crown for the few months when everyone thought Luxa had been killed by the rats. But unlike her resilient cousin, Nerissa was thin to the point of emaciation, psychologically fragile, and had the ability to see glimpses of the future ... sometimes. She was no more able to control her visions than Gregor was to manage his powers to fight as a rager. She often had no idea if an incident she saw was about to occur in an hour or had happened a century before. Still, when she was right, she was dead right. As he had hoped, Gregor found Nerissa sitting alone in the prophecy room. Her physical state had deteriorated back to her prequeen days. Long tangled hair fell to her waist, and she was huddled in layers of mismatched clothing. "Greetings, Overlander," she said with her ghostly smile.

"Hey, Nerissa," he said, and decided to get right to the point. "Look, I was wondering about the prophecies. About me. Are there any more of them?"

"Yes," said Nerissa. "One in particular."

"Am I supposed to kill the Bane again?" asked Gregor.

She looked at him quizzically. "It is unclear. Possibly he will die," said Nerissa. "Why are you asking this, Gregor?" He didn't answer because that

would mean exposing Ripred. "Someone has been putting ideas in your head about the Bane again. But you may tell this 'someone' that the prophecy of which you speak lies in the future, not our present time."

"How do you know?" said Gregor.

"Because events reported in it have not yet come to pass. It is possible they never will. As I suspect this 'someone' well knows. Perhaps he believes he can control fate, but he cannot," said Nerissa.

"She knows it was Ripred," thought Gregor. "Will you show the prophecy to me?" he asked aloud.

"No. It can be of no use to you now. In truth, I imagine it would be quite damaging. For your own safety and that of those you love, I believe you should avoid knowledge of it at all costs. Of course, if you would like to ask Vikus about it, there is nothing I can do to stop you," said Nerissa.

After a warning like that, what could he say? Besides, Gregor had already ruled out asking Vikus, so he just shrugged, like it didn't matter. "No, if you think it would just throw me, never mind."

On the one hand, he was relieved by the idea that at least temporarily he didn't have to deal with the issue of killing the Bane. From what Nerissa had said, it might never come up. On the other hand, Gregor realized that Nerissa's opinion would do little to sway Ripred. The rat, like many others, expressed a low opinion of her prophetic abilities.

Although he had racked his brain, Gregor found himself without much of a solution when his lesson time rolled around the next day. As he unbarred the stone door, he tried to review his plan. He would meet Ripred and try to talk the rat out of killing the Bane. Gregor had little confidence in his ability to do this, though, so as a backup he went ahead and hung a sword at his belt in case he had to try to protect the white rat's life. The idea of taking on Ripred was ludicrous, but maybe Gregor could distract him long enough for the Bane to escape.

Knowing that if they fought, Ripred would try to take out his light immediately, Gregor had duct-taped a flashlight to his forearm. Instead of a torch, which would require a hand to hold, he had chosen a large glass oil lamp similar to the ones they had carried in the jungle. He could set it on the floor, if need be.

He mentally braced himself as he neared the circular cave, trying to sort out his argument for keeping the Bane alive. But when Gregor reached the meeting place, it was empty. No Ripred. No Bane. No one at all. He waited

ten, maybe fifteen minutes. It was not like Ripred to be late. If anything, he had a way of popping up before you expected him..Just when Gregor was about to head back to Regalia, he heard a faint scratching noise in the tunnel the Bane had come from the day before.

"Ripred?" he called softly. There was no answer. "Pearlpelt?" The faint scratching came again. "Is somebody there?" Gregor set down the oil lamp and adjusted the flashlight on his arm. As he crept down a long tunnel toward the sound, he had the feeling it was receding, leading him away from the lamp, the stairs, and the city above. "Hello?" He entered a small cave. Another sound, a muffled laugh, came from his left. An unpleasant tingle ran up the back of Gregor's neck. Suddenly he knew he had made a terrible mistake.

He spun around, preparing to sprint for the door. Three rats emerged from the shadows, blocking his way. Gregor didn't recognize a one of them.

CHAPTER 4

Gregor's sword was in his hand in an instant.

The rats fanned out, making any movement back toward the palace impossible. But they did not assume attack positions. Instead they lazily flopped on the ground as if they were all about to enjoy a fun day at the beach.

Two of the rats had the unexceptional mud-gray fur that was most common in their species. But the coat of the one directly in front of Gregor was a beautiful silvery hue. This rat spoke first.

"So, at long last, we meet the warrior. Ripred is so possessive, the rest of us can't get near you." Gregor could tell it was a female by the pitch of her voice. And what a voice! Silky and low, with an unmistakable friendliness. Charming, that was the word for it. "You can lower your sword, Gregor, as you can see none of us are in a fighting vein."

Gregor didn't move his sword. "Who are you?"

"This is Gushgore and Reekwell," said the silver rat. Both rats gave a polite nod at their name. "And I'm called Twirltongue."

Twirltongue. So this was the rat who had been telling the Bane he should be king. What had Ripred called her? Very persuasive?

"You're the Bane's friends," said Gregor.

"You've met the Bane?" asked Twirltongue.

"Yeah, I met him when —" Gregor stopped himself. Why was he telling this rat anything? He knew Ripred didn't trust her. The question had been so casual, Gregor had almost told her the Bane had been here. "When he was a pup."

Twirltongue laughed. "It's all right, Gregor. We already know he's been here. His scent is everywhere. Not to mention his blood."

For a moment Gregor thought Ripred had killed the Bane without him. "He's dead?"

"Probably wishing he was. I would be if I were on a road trip with Ripred," said Twirltongue. The rats laughed. "No, we found some drops of his blood. Been gnawing his tail most likely. Why would you think he was dead?"

"Because ... you mentioned blood," said Gregor. Something about this rat kept him off-balance.

"Of course. So, you haven't seen him?" said Twirltongue.

"Not recently," said Gregor.

"Well, if you do, please tell him his friends are looking for him. Frankly, we're concerned. The Bane's barely more than a pup and Ripred is, to put it politely, somewhat delusional," said Twirltongue. "Not to mention dreadful company, but I don't have to tell you that after your jungle trip, do I?"

"No, you don't," said Gregor.

The rats cracked up and Gregor allowed himself a smile. After all the abuse, it was a relief, really, for someone to acknowledge how awful Ripred could be.

"I once spent four days holed up in a cave with him hiding from an army of cutters. By day three I'd begun to consider slipping out. I thought, 'Yes, I'll be torn apart by mandibles. But would it really be worse than listening to Ripred make up poems about me?'" Twirltongue began to recite:

*" twirltongue the gnawer
Believes she's a clawer,
But Twirltongue is more of pup for
She can't fight a cutter
Although with some butter
She'd happily eat one for supper. "*

Gregor couldn't help joining in the rats' laughter.

"Not very witty, but it served its purpose," said Twirltongue. "I felt demeaned by both the poem's content and its inferior quality."

Gregor could feel himself nodding. Twirltongue had just nailed the way Ripred operated. "Like you were too worthless to even make up a decent insult about."

"Yes! Yes!" cried Twirltongue. The rats happily began to swap stories of Ripred's abuse, one-upping one another.

Gregor's sword arm relaxed and he let the tip rest on the stone. Sometimes he had to wonder about Ripred. How well did Gregor know him? Maybe Ripred really was delusional about leading the other rats, about the threat the Bane posed, and about Twirltongue and her friends. Maybe Ripred was nuts.

The idea gave Gregor a jolt. Because if Ripred was crazy, then why was Gregor doing what he said?

Just then, Twirltongue rolled on her back, giving a luxurious stretch. "Oh, Overlander, oh, Warrior. How I wish I'd met you before Ripred did,"

she said. "But since I didn't, I think *now* would be a good time."

Gregor was completely unprepared for the attack. He just had time to dive to the right of Reekwell's lunge before the rat's claws scraped the ground where he'd been standing.

"No claws, Reekwell. And no blood. We need him to disappear without a trace," Twirltongue said pleasantly. "Break his neck."

There was no time to ask why they wanted him dead. Probably because he was the warrior. Shoot, his being a human was a good enough reason for most rats.

Gregor made it to his feet as both Reekwell and Gushgore came at him, whipping their thick tails at his neck. He backed up against the cave wall, fending off the blows with his sword. He began to sidestep his way along the wall, heading for the opening that led back to the city. If his blade made contact with the rats' tails, they pulled them back reflexively before they could be cut off. Gregor could not take a full swing and sever a tail because he always had another to block.

When the rager sensation began, Gregor felt his spirits lifting. Now he would at least have a fighting chance. His vision altered, zooming in on points of attack; his arm became indistinguishable from his sword. He could feel the rats beginning to hesitate and was just about to go on the offensive when it happened.

Gushgore's tail smashed the glass of Gregor's flashlight and the world went black. He lost his bearings instantly. Up, down, right, left had no meaning. There was only darkness and the sound of ugly laughter, so different from the kind that had followed Twirl tongue's poem.

The rager feelings evaporated. Gregor's knees went weak and his heart began to race. This was it! The moment Ripred had always warned him about. Being trapped in a cave with rats without a light. Ripred had not exaggerated. It was the reason he had been so relentless about the echolocation lessons. Gregor was as helpless as a baby without the use of his eyes. Gregor swung the blade wildly in front of him now but met empty air. He heard the whistling the instant before the tail knocked him upside the head and sent him sprawling sideways. He landed on his hands and knees and began to crawl frantically through the blackness, his sword clanking along the stone. "Ripred! Ripred!" he called desperately. Where was the rat?

Another blow caught Gregor on the seat of his pants and launched him several feet into the air before he slammed onto his stomach.

"It's over," Gregor thought. "This is it."

But as he lifted his head, a glimmer of light caught his eye. The last hit had thrown him into the opening of the tunnel, where he could just see the glow from the glass lantern he'd left on the floor of the circular cave. He was on his feet in a flash, running toward the light as fast as his legs could carry him. The rats took a moment to regroup, and then he could hear them behind him. He had a head start, but would it be enough?

The brightening light gave him hope, even as the rats closed in. He flung his sword behind him, and one of the rats cried out. With his hands free, Gregor pounded across the last ten yards to the lantern. In one motion, he swept it up and spun around. Just as Twirltongue leaped into the cave he smashed the lantern on the floor before her. The spilt oil ignited and a narrow wall of fire sputtered into the air, blackening the fur on her muzzle. He didn't wait to see what happened next. He just bolted up the stairs to the palace.

Gregor burst through the stone door, slamming it behind him. His hands were shaking so hard, he could barely get the bars in place. When the last one was secured, his knees gave way and he sat on the floor, leaning against the door for support.

No sound came from behind the door. The rats had not followed him. Slowly he calmed down. As his fear faded, it was replaced by an overwhelming sense of embarrassment. He remembered himself crawling around on the stone floor. Calling for Ripred. Ready to give up. The warrior. In all his glory.

Gregor couldn't believe that Twirltongue had gotten him to doubt Ripred so quickly! Sure, he argued with the big rat a lot. But Ripred had saved his life repeatedly and he had only known Twirltongue for a matter of minutes. Ripred had not been kidding about her powers of persuasion. And if she could manipulate Gregor so easily, what could she do with the Bane? When Vikus touched Gregor's shoulder, he nearly jumped out of his skin. "Pardon, I did not mean to startle you, Gregor."

Gregor hopped to his feet. "No, no problem. What's up?"

"I have been looking for you. I had a message from Ripred. Your lesson today has been canceled," said Vikus.

"Canceled?" said Gregor. "Oh, yeah, I went down to meet him, but he wasn't there. Did he say why?"

"He said he had misplaced something and had to go find it. You will resume lessons on his return," said Vikus.

Misplaced something. The only thing Ripred had to misplace was the Bane. Had the white rat run away? He had certainly been upset when he left the cave. He must have run away and now Ripred was hunting him down. Twirltongue and her pals must have just missed them.

"You know, Vikus, if Ripred can get down under the city, other rats probably can, too. All they'd have to do is follow his scent," said Gregor. "Are you sure this door's solid?"

"It has withstood four hundred years of attacks," said Vikus. Gregor gave it a couple of approving slaps. "Good."

"Why does it concern you all of a sudden?" said Vikus.

If Gregor was going to tell Vikus about the rats, now was the time. But Ripred had warned him not to mention the Bane, and doubting Ripred had brought him enough trouble for one day. It was better to keep it a secret.

"Just crossed my mind," said Gregor.

For the moment at least, he had avoided having to confront the issue of killing the Bane. And after all, the Bane might escape entirely. If Ripred did find the white rat out in the tunnels somewhere, wouldn't he just go ahead and kill him? Or maybe Ripred would have a change of heart and try to help the Bane. That seemed the most unlikely outcome of all.

Gregor could imagine any number of similar scenarios, but as he lay awake that night, he knew he didn't believe any of them. There was a prophecy that no one wanted to tell him about. And that prophecy was about Gregor and the Bane.

CHAPTER 5

During the next few weeks Gregor traveled down to the Underland almost every day, but there was no word from Ripred. Gregor didn't know how to interpret this. Had Ripred just killed the Bane and moved on with his life? Or had he run into some kind of trouble? The rat was the most resilient animal in the Underland, but as the silence continued, Gregor began to wonder if something had happened to him.

Gregor could tell that Vikus was concerned as well. "It is not like Ripred to leave me in the dark so long," he confided in Gregor, who constantly fought down the temptation to tell Vikus all he knew. But he couldn't. Not only because Ripred had advised silence but also because the old man was so burdened by his wife Solovet's upcoming trial, Gregor didn't want to add to Vikus's cares. At first it had looked as though she might simply be reprimanded and perhaps dismissed from her position. However, as the actual death tolls from the plague became known, there had been growing pressure from not only the rats but the humans, too, that she be put on trial. People were saying that Dr. Neveeve, who had carried out the research and had been executed for her role in the epidemic, had only been a scapegoat. That it was Solovet, as the head of the Regalian military and the person who had given orders to develop the plague as a possible weapon, who should accept the ultimate responsibility for the plague.

So Gregor kept his thoughts to himself and tried to focus on the good things about his summer vacation. Like how his mom was getting better every day, and how Lizzie's letters said she actually seemed to be enjoying camp, and how there were really a lot of fun things to do in the Underland if you weren't being attacked. Swimming, exploring caves, playing ball games on bats. Sometimes there were even parties.

One morning, just as he and Boots had landed in the High Hall, *Hazard* came running up to Gregor excitedly with a small scroll in his hand. "It's an invitation! To my birthday party! For turning seven! You will come, won't you?" he burst out before Gregor even had a chance to open it.

"Sure, we'll come," said Gregor. "So what do you want for your birthday?"

"I don't know," said Hazard. He looked to Luxa for guidance.

"Maybe he would like something from the Overland. Something we do not have here," she suggested.

Hazard nodded vigorously. "Yes, something I've never seen!"

"Hmm, I'll have to think about that...." said Gregor. But he already knew what he wanted to get Hazard.

The violin from the museum had brought a good price. Enough to live six months. At the moment, every penny did not have to be counted. So, on the morning of the party, Gregor and Boots took the subway to the big toy store downtown to shop for Hazard's gift. Gregor found what he wanted at once. It was a plastic disc with animals around the outside of the ring. You spun an arrow around and pointed it at an animal, pulled a lever, and it played the sound the animal made. Since Hazard was such a whiz at imitating creatures in the Underland, Gregor was pretty sure he'd get a kick out of the toy. Boots found a little set of jungle animals to go with it, and then, because she'd been really good about not pestering him about it, Gregor told her she could pick out something for herself.

This was a big treat and Boots took it very seriously. She tested almost every toy in the preschool section before she saw it — a princess dress-up set. It had three pieces. A plastic tiara studded with jewels, a gauzy pink skirt with an elastic waistband, and a scepter that lit up when you pressed a button. Boots was overcome by the costume's beauty. "I can get this, Grego? Because I am a princess?" she asked hopefully.

"Okay, Princess. Put it in the basket," he said.

But she couldn't let it go. She carried it all the way home, hugging it tightly to her chest and occasionally murmuring, "P is for princess." The second they got to their apartment, Boots had to put on her princess outfit, which was, in fact, fabulous, and they headed off to the party in the Underland.

Mrs. Cormaci had one of those cameras where you took a picture and it popped out of the camera and developed on the spot. She made Gregor stop by the apartment to get it. "I want pictures. And take some for the birthday boy so he can remember his special day."

Luxa had gone all out with the preparations. The arena was festooned in swaths of bright-colored cloth. Long banquet tables were piled with food. A huge cake, decorated with bats, cockroaches, and other animals, sat in the place of honor. And there were about fifteen musicians playing cheery music.

Hazard dashed up to them the moment they arrived, and Gregor let him have his presents then and there. He was so fascinated by Gregor's gift that he sat right down on the moss to play with it, pulling the handle again and again to hear the horse neigh and the turkey gobble and the dog bark. After several minutes, Luxa gently reminded him he had guests to attend to.

The place was packed with excited kids, swirling bats, and even a dozen cockroaches. The bugs immediately surrounded Boots, speechless with admiration for her princess outfit. Boots climbed up on her friend Temp's broad black shell and gave a demonstration of how the scepter worked, flashing it on and off.

"What on earth is that child wearing?" Gregor turned and saw his mom, bundled up in blankets, sitting in a chair near the banquet table. She was shaking her head in amusement at Boots.

"She's a princess, Mom," Gregor said. "You can't expect her to show up at a party in hand-me-downs." He gave his mom a big hug. "How's it feel to be out of the hospital?"

"Just like heaven," said his mom.

Gregor pulled out Mrs. Cormaci's camera to get some pictures. No one understood what he was doing until he got Hazard and Thalia to stop running around for a minute and snapped a great shot of the two of them with their arms and wings wrapped around each other. As the image slowly came into focus, the Underlanders were amazed. They had never seen photographs of themselves. The whole thing seemed like magic to them. When he rounded up a bunch of little kids for a group shot they stood up very straight, arms stiff at their sides, serious looks on their faces. Gregor made them say "cheese" about ten times, until they were giggling and had forgotten how important it was to be in a picture.

Luxa made an announcement that the dancing was about to begin, and Gregor quickly took a seat next to his mom. He was not much of a dancer even in the Overland, and the last thing he wanted to do was strut his stuff in front of a bunch of people ... doing what? Minuets or something? Something with steps.

But all the Underlander kids and quite a few grownups streamed into the middle of the field to join in. The first dance was called "Bat, Bat" and required a partner. A small chorus of people sang with the musicians, but a lot of the kids knew the words, too. Boots, who must have learned the

routine in the nursery, was right in the thick of things, dancing with Hazard and singing: "*Bat, Bat,*

Come under my hat, i will give you a slice of bacon, And when I bake, I will give you a cake, If I am not mistaken. "

One person flew around like a bat and their partner had to coax them to their side by pretending to offer them food. There were specific steps and hand gestures that went with the words, as Gregor had suspected.

"It's weird. I think I know the words to that song," he told his mom.

"It's in Boots's nursery rhyme book at home," she said. "I used to read it to you when you were little, too. It's from hundreds of years ago."

"Oh, right," said Gregor. He'd read the book to Boots, too, but hadn't made the connection. It was strange to think that he and Luxa might have been hearing the same nursery rhymes when they were Boots's age.

The musicians did a few more songs, one about spinners making a web, another about being in a boat, and then there was a short break.

Flushed and breathless, Luxa, Howard, Hazard, and Boots came over to join Gregor and his mom.

"Why aren't you dancing, Gregor?" asked Hazard.

"I don't know any dances, Hazard," said Gregor.

"Sure you do," said his mom. "You know the Hokey Pokey."

"The Hokey Pokey? What is that? Will you show us?" begged Hazard.

Gregor held up the camera. "Sorry, I'm taking the pict—" he began.

"Of course he will!" said his mom, grabbing the camera.

And then to Gregor's horror, he was being dragged out to the middle of the field to teach about two hundred people the Hokey Pokey. Not only did he have to do the motions he also had to sing the words until the musicians had picked up the tune and the general idea of the lyrics. Fortunately, Boots was beside him, enthusiastically shaking it all about, because Gregor just felt like sinking into the moss and disappearing. It didn't help that he could see Luxa and Howard off to one side, laughing hysterically at his obvious discomfort. The Hokey Pokey was doing nothing for his warrior image.

The song was a big hit with the Underland kids, though, and they learned it so quickly that by the time they'd repeated the number, Gregor was able to slink back to his chair.

"Thanks a lot, Mom," he said.

"My pleasure," she said.

When the next number was announced, the kids began to shout, "Who will be the queen?"

"Luxa, of course!" said Hazard, and ran to get her. She protested as he pulled her into the middle of a large ring of children, but she didn't really seem to mind. Why should she? Luxa looked as natural dancing as a bird did flying. As the children clasped hands and circled in one direction, Luxa spun in the other.

*"Dancing in the firelight,
See the queen who conquers night.
Gold flows from her, hot and bright.
Father, mother, sister, brother,
Off they go, I do not know
If we will see another. "*

Next about a dozen kids joined her in the middle of the ring and mimed being nibblers, which was what the Underlanders called mice.

*"Catch the nibblers in a trap. Watch the nibblers spin and snap.
Quiet while they take a nap.
Father, mother, sister, brother,
Off they go. I do not know
If we will see another. "*

For the final verse, as near as Gregor could figure, everyone went around pretending to serve cake and pour tea for one another.

*"now the guests are at our door
Greet them as we have before.
Some will slice and some will pour.
Father, mother, sister, brother,
Off they go. I do not know
If we will see another. "*

The words did not entirely make sense to Gregor, but all the dancers seemed to know just what they were doing. He guessed a lot of kids' songs in the Overland were kind of confusing, too. Especially those old ones.

"Hey Diddle Diddle" ... "Ring Around the Rosie" ... "Sing a Song of Sixpence." What did any of those mean?

A little while later, Gregor was at the buffet table ready to load up his plate when Luxa came up and grabbed his hand. "Come, Gregor. Hazard says you must be my partner for this dance."

"Luxa, I can't dance, okay? I think I've made that clear," Gregor said.

"But this is a simple dance, and the words tell you exactly what to do. Come, or Hazard will think you do not like his party," she pleaded.

Gregor sighed and reluctantly put down his plate.

"All right, but just this one dance." He let Luxa lead him out onto the field. Another circle was forming, but this time everyone had a partner.

"Start by bowing to me, and then just follow the words," said Luxa. Suddenly the music began and Gregor found himself bowing like some character out of a cartoon.

"Join the dance and come be merry.

Take my hand and do not tarry.

One, two, three steps up,

One, two, three steps back.

Turn around

Off the ground

And set down what you carry. "

He didn't do too badly. That last part about "off the ground and set down what you carry" was a bit tricky. He was supposed to lift Luxa up, spin her around, and set her back down. He did it, about four beats behind everyone else, and then suddenly Luxa was gone and he was weaving around the circle, catching one person's hand and then the next, until he found himself back face-to-face with Luxa, bowing again.

"Join the dance and conquer sadness.

Take my hand and banish madness.

One, two, three steps up,

One, two, three steps back.

Turn around

Off the ground and give yourself to gladness."

Off he went again, making his way around the circle. By the third verse, while he would never admit it, Gregor was actually beginning to enjoy himself.

"Join the dance and be lighthearted.

Take my hand lest we be parted.

One, two, three steps up,

One, two, three steps back.

Turn around

Off the ground

And finish what you started. "

At this point, people stepped back from their partners for one final bow. As Gregor straightened up he found himself looking into Luxa's violet eyes. Her cheeks were pink from the dancing. She was laughing, but not at him.

"You did very well," she said.

"Yeah, right," said Gregor.

At that moment two unexpected things happened. Gregor realized that he thought Luxa was pretty. And a gold crown dropped out of the air and landed on the ground, squarely between them.

CHAPTER 6

Gregor automatically raised his head to see where the crown had come from. A big orange-and-black-speckled bat was circling above them. Gregor recognized him as one of the bats who frequently delivered messages.

"For you, Your Highness," said the bat. "Sent by a nibbler I encountered at Queenshead. She said that you would know its meaning."

Luxa laughed. "It means I was again forgetful of where I laid my crown, Hermes. I thank you for your trouble."

The bat flew off. Luxa picked up the crown and began to head off the field. Her hand lifted in the air to signal Aurora. Puzzled, Gregor ran a few steps to catch up with her. "Hey, isn't that the crown you gave the mice in case they—"

Luxa clenched his arm and spoke in a hushed voice. "Please, Gregor, tell no one what I said that day. And do not let Hazard or Nike know the crown has been returned. They, too, may remember its meaning and speak of it." She looked anxiously around the arena. Hazard was happily pointing out the animals on his cake to Howard. Nike had been around earlier, but she was nowhere in sight now.

"So? Why can't anyone know?" asked Gregor.

"I will explain after the party. I beg you, keep your silence until I have a chance to speak privately with you," said Luxa.

"Okay," said Gregor in confusion.

Luxa took a few steps and leaped into the air onto Aurora's back.

Gregor scanned the crowd to see if anyone had noticed the odd sequence of events. Even if they had, only Gregor, Aurora, Nike, Hazard, and Boots had been present when Luxa gave the crown to the mice. They had been in the jungle, preparing to return home. To thank the mice for their kindness in keeping both herself and Aurora alive, Luxa had given them her crown and said ... what was it? He remembered. "If ever you have need of my help, present my crown to one of our scouts, and I will do whatever is within my power to come to your aid."

Well, the crown was here, so the mice must be in trouble. But why was Luxa so insistent on keeping that a secret? If the mice were really in danger, shouldn't she be alerting guards or something?

She was back in less than a minute, flipping down off Aurora's back and landing beside Hazard with a cheerful, "Is it not time to slice this cake?"

Gregor looked up to see Aurora and Ares landing side by side in the stands. They huddled together, their heads touching as they exchanged some sort of information. What was going on?

A few minutes later Boots ran up to Gregor chirping, "Gre-go! Mama says we can do sleep-over!" So, apparently they were spending the night.

"That's great, Boots," he said, and swung her up on his hip. He went over to check the news with his mom.

"Luxa suggested it. I guess there's a special family dinner tonight for Hazard and he wants you two to come. You might as well spend the night. We sent a bat up to the laundry room with a note for your dad," said his mom.

"Sounds good," said Gregor, but he knew something was up. He tried to catch Luxa's eye, but she seemed determined to avoid him. For hours. All through the rest of the party, through the family dinner, he could not get her attention.

Ares was no help, either. "What's going on with Luxa and that crown?" Gregor asked him as they flew to dinner.

"I cannot say," the bat responded. Which could have meant either "I don't know" or "I can't talk about it here." Gregor suspected the latter.

It was not until Hazard and Boots had been tucked in bed in the royal chambers and were fast asleep that Luxa opened up. They gathered around the fireplace in her living room, just Gregor, Luxa, Ares, and Aurora. Even though the guards outside her apartment were a good distance away, Luxa made everyone speak in whispers.

"The nibblers are under some threat. It must be significant if they sent back my crown, for they are resourceful creatures and have handled many difficulties on their own," she began.

"So let's go tell Vikus and get some help," said Gregor.

"No!" the other three responded as one.

"He would have to tell the Council, Overlander," said Ares. "On so little evidence, and with so much chaos in the wake of the plague, they would not sanction action."

"But they would put me under guard," said Luxa unhappily. "Knowing this answer would not satisfy me. Knowing of my affection for the nibblers

and that I consider myself to be in their debt. I would be watched constantly to make sure I did not leave Regalia."

"Even though you're the queen?" asked Gregor.

"Especially because she is the queen. They do not wish to risk putting her in danger again," said Ares.

"That is why we must divine the nibblers' situation on our own," said Aurora. "Perhaps with more knowledge, we can make a case to help them."

"Whoa! Okay, hang on a minute. So, 'we,' meaning the four of us, are going to do what?" asked Gregor.

"Fly tonight to Queenshead," said Luxa.

"Is that where the mice live? In the jungle?" asked Gregor. The name sounded vaguely familiar, but he couldn't place it.

"No, it is merely a landmark in the territory west of here. But that is where Hermes said he encountered the nibbler who gave him my crown," said Luxa. "I am sure she will still be waiting at Queenshead, expecting me to meet her. Will you come, Gregor?"

On the one hand, Gregor knew this was a bad idea. Not informing Vikus and the council. Sneaking around behind his mom's back. Man, if she knew he was flying around the Underland after hours he'd be grounded the rest of the summer. Not in Regalia. In his apartment.

On the other hand, nobody seemed to feel it was safe to confide in Vikus these days. Maybe the mice were really bad off. The other three would go, and if Gregor didn't, he'd be letting down not only his friends but also his bond. What if they ran into danger and Ares needed him? If they left right away, just to talk to the nibbler who'd sent the crown, could they be back before his mom even woke up?

"How far is Queenshead?" he asked.

"A short flight. We could be there and back before we were missed," said Luxa quickly.

"I guess that could work. But how do you plan on getting out of the palace without being spotted?" asked Gregor.

Luxa and Ares exchanged a look. "Henry knew a way," said the bat. "Aurora and I will meet you at the drop."

"Yes. Just give us a few minutes to ready ourselves," said Luxa.

They dressed in dark clothing. Luxa had torches, but they made a quick trip to the museum so Gregor could duct-tape a flashlight to his forearm. It was not supposed to be a dangerous trip, but after his encounter with

Twirltongue and her friends he was so scared of being without light that he took all the precautions he could. They stopped by one of the palace's many armories to get a couple of swords. Luxa chose a light weapon with a long, thin three-sided blade that came to a deadly point. She had told Gregor once that she preferred this sort of sword because it was good for the acrobatic form of fighting she excelled at. Gregor picked a version of the heavier sword Mareth had been encouraging him to use in training. Its blade was flat, about an inch wide, and razor sharp. Then they tiptoed through the halls, avoiding the occasional guard, to a part of the palace that Gregor had never seen.

The entrance to the secret passage was in a nursery that had fallen into disuse after the large, cheerful one Boots played in had been built. The old place was a little spooky, actually. Sandwich had spent time in it as well as in his prophecy room, carving a menagerie of animals into the walls. It should have been cozy. But in the flickering light from their torches the stone creatures appeared threatening, their eyes too bulging, their fangs too prominent. Gregor felt trapped, not comforted. Even if you filled it with children and toys, it would not be a happy place.

"I have never cared for this room," said Luxa with a frown.

"Fortunately, they had built the new nursery by the time I was born. But this is where Henry spent his early years."

"Maybe that's why he was so messed up," thought Gregor, but he didn't dare say it aloud. Luxa could speak about Henry more easily now. The wounds from her cousin's betrayal were beginning to heal. But the subject was still painful and nothing she could joke about.

"Here is the entrance," said Luxa. She stopped in front of a large stone turtle that sat up against the back wall. It reminded Gregor of the big metal turtles Boots loved to climb on in Central Park. Except it had a furious expression on its face and the mouth was opened as if it was about to inflict a vicious bite.

"Yikes," said Gregor. "Bet the kids loved that."

"No, they avoided it. Except for Henry, who rode on its back and made up fearsome tales about it. And one day, while the others napped, he found the courage to do this." Luxa stuck her arm into the turtle's mouth, felt around, and twisted something. There was a click and one side of the turtle's shell popped open ever so slightly. "He closed the shell before anyone could know of his discovery, but that night he returned to the nursery and opened

it." Luxa lifted up the turtle's shell to reveal a stairway. "He showed me this when I was eight. It was our special secret, Henry and I." Sadness flashed across Luxa's face and then was replaced by resolve. "Let us go."

Gregor had to turn sideways to inch himself along the narrow staircase. The air smelled old, as if it had been trapped back in Sandwich's day and hung there ever since. Gregor had been wearing his sword in a belt, but when it first clanked against the stones Luxa made him remove it and carry it in his hand. "We are inside one of the palace walls," she whispered. "We must not be discovered."

It seemed to take forever to make their way down to the bottom of the stairs, where another turtle awaited them. This one appeared to be laughing. But the leering grin was even more unsettling than the angry turtle in the nursery. Luxa unlatched its shell in the same manner. When she lifted the shell open, a gush of cool, damp air hit Gregor in his face. He looked down through the hole. Nothing was visible, but he could sense a large open space. Instinctively he took a few steps back.

"What's down there?" he asked.

"The Spout. It is a lake fed by a spring. It provides much of the cold water in Regalia," said Luxa. "We must drop."

Before he could react, Luxa stepped through the hole and vanished.

"Hey!" he said in surprise, and leaned over the opening. There was no corresponding splash. He could not see Luxa, but the light from her torch reflected off the water about twenty yards below.

"Drop, Overlander," he heard Ares purr. Oh, great. Another chance to hurl himself into a dark void. "May as well get it over with," Gregor thought. He slid his sword back in his belt and got a firm grip on his torch. He balanced for a moment on the edge of the rim, then took a small hop and began to fall. Ares had him in seconds.

It took about an hour to fly to Queenshead, which turned out to be a large rock formation in the center of a cavern. The rock did vaguely resemble a woman's head with a crown on it, but only if you weren't being too particular.

As they coasted down to its base, he heard Luxa cry out excitedly, "Look, there is Cevian, Aurora! There she is!"

Gregor spotted a small furry form crouched at the base of the rock. It was a mouse who had apparently fallen asleep as it waited for them. "That's a dangerous place for a nap," he thought. "Anything could find you."

"Cevian!" called Luxa. "Awaken! We have come!"

Ares landed before Aurora, so it was Gregor who reached Cevian first. It was almost like he knew before he touched the cold, stiff frame and noticed the indentation on her head where a blow had fallen. Gregor turned and caught Luxa by the shoulders as she ran up. He hated to tell her but didn't want her to make the discovery herself.

"She's not waking up, Luxa," said Gregor. "She's dead."

CHAPTER 7

"What?" Luxa shoved him aside and rushed to the mouse. "Cevian?" But as she touched the body she became still. "Oh, Cevian ..." she said, and knelt down. Her hand came to rest on the creature's paw.

"It was Cevian who found us in the jungle," said Aurora. "We would have been lost but for her."

Gregor knew when Aurora said "lost" she didn't just mean lost in the jungle; she meant dead. Luxa and Aurora had been separated from their friends in a rats' maze during the quest to find the Bane. Completely outnumbered in a battle, they had held off the rats long enough to allow Temp to escape with Boots and then fled themselves. After several hours of being trapped in the maze's twists and turns, they had managed to find an exit. Unfortunately, it had led straight into a sinister jungle where Aurora had lost the use of her wing. The mice had taken them in and saved their lives.

"When my pain was very bad, she would sit beside me and tell me stories or play word games to distract me," said Aurora. "She was so determined I should not give up hope "

"I trusted her," said Luxa softly. The words hung in the air. Gregor thought this might be the highest praise Luxa could ever give someone. The list of those she trusted, especially since Henry's deception, was almost nonexistent. Aurora. Ares. Nerissa maybe. Gregor doubted even Vikus made the cut and was sure he didn't. Certainly Luxa hadn't trusted him a few months ago in the jungle when she'd been willing to let him sink to his death in quicksand because he'd showed up with a couple of rats.

Cevian must have been someone very special to be on Luxa's list.

"I'm sorry about your friend," said Gregor.

"I, too," said Ares.

Aurora gave a small flutter of her wings in reply, but Luxa had not seemed to hear them.

"Who killed you, Cevian?" asked Luxa, stroking the mouse's soft ears. "For what reason? And why did you send me my crown? You are so full of secrets tonight."

Luxa rose and buried her head in Aurora's golden fur. The bat wrapped her wings around the girl. It was not a long embrace.

"This is not the time or place for mourning," said Luxa.

"We must go to the jungle," said Aurora.

Gregor was unprepared for this. "Right now?"

"Cevian is killed. We know not why. Only that she came to Queenshead because the nibblers are in great jeopardy. Since she cannot speak, we must go to the jungle to find those that can," said Aurora darkly. "We must discover what threatens the nibblers. We must avenge Cevian's death."

This was quite a strong speech for Aurora. She didn't talk much around Gregor, and then only in brief, quiet sentences. Despite three journeys with her, Gregor didn't know Aurora very well.

"Go back if you do not have the stomach for this. Aurora and I will manage the jungle on our own," said Luxa. If he didn't have the stomach for this? Did she mean if he was afraid? Gregor bristled at the comment because, in fact, when he was upset the first thing that reacted was his stomach.

"You and Aurora in the jungle? That didn't work out so well last time," said Gregor.

Luxa glowered at him. "Go home, Overlander. We no longer want your help," she said. She swung onto Aurora's back. "After you return him, you know where we shall be, Ares."

Aurora lifted into the air and sped off, away from Regalia.

Man, Luxa could get under his skin! She knew he'd help her out in the jungle if she asked. Why did she have to turn the whole thing into an insult? A dare?

Ares shifted uncomfortably. "There are many dangers in the jungle."

"Uh-huh. I've been there," said Gregor.

"Even the plants will attack," said Ares.

"Got the scars to prove that," said Gregor.

"Luxa speaks with an edge because she is in pain," said Ares.

Gregor turned to his bat in exasperation. "Look, Ares, we both know we're going! Let's just give it a few minutes so it looks like it was hard for you to talk me into it, okay?"

Ares gave one of his rare laughs. "Huh-huh-huh."

Gregor shook his head but then laughed, too. He stopped when his eyes fell on the mouse. "Should we do something with Cevian? I hate to leave her sitting out here. Something's just going to come along and eat her."

"We had best let Luxa and Aurora decide. She was their friend," said Ares.

"Yeah, I guess you're right," said Gregor. He noticed a crevice at the base of the big rock. "We could at least scoot her back in that crack. Hide her a little."

Together, they slid Cevian back into the hole. It actually did a lot to conceal her.

When Gregor turned away from the mouse, his torchlight fell on a mark on the ground. He had not seen it before, because Cevian had been lying right on top of it. Gregor squatted down and examined the mark more closely. It had been roughly scratched into the chalky rock. And recently, too, by the look of it. There was a straight line. At the top, going off to the right side, was a thin, slightly curved appendage. It reminded him of a flamingo's beak. "Look at this," he said to Ares.

"Do you think Cevian made this mark?" asked his bat.

"I don't know. Maybe. Maybe she was trying to write a word. Do the mice know how to write? Ripred said something about the rats not being able to hold a pen," said Gregor.

"Both gnawers and nibblers can scratch out a word if they wish," said Ares.

"Well, it kind of looks like Cevian started to make a *P*, but she couldn't finish it," said Gregor, tracing the mark with his forefinger. "P is for Piness," he heard Boots say in his head.

"Perhaps she was trying to write a name. A *P* could also become an *R* or a *B*," said Ares.

Gregor felt a pang of guilt. *R* is for Ripred. *B* is for Bane. They were both running around out here someplace. Could one of them have attacked Cevian?

"It is strange. I believe Cevian died instantly when her head was struck. She must have made this mark before she was attacked," said Ares.

"She could have seen her killer coming and started their name," said Gregor. "If she recognized them." Both Ripred and the Bane were famous in the Underland.

"And then been attacked, yes," agreed Ares.

They both stared at the mark for a while longer in silence, but it gave them no more information.

"Has enough time passed for me to have convinced you to go to the jungle?" asked Ares.

"Seems about right," said Gregor. He swung onto Ares's back and they sped off.

In about thirty minutes, they'd caught up to Aurora and Luxa. When they did, Gregor and Luxa exchanged a glare and then ignored each other for the rest of the trip to the jungle.

The first thing Gregor noticed was the heat. The humid air hit him like a wall, and he knew that the ground below him had changed from barren stone to thick vegetation. Then he could smell the decaying plant life and hear the mechanical chatter of the insects. Gregor had nothing but bad memories of the place, with its poisonous frogs, flesh-eating plants, and stretches of quicksand. He hoped they could get in and out of it as soon as possible.

Their destination was a spring deep in the heart of the jungle. Gregor had arrived there some months before, severely dehydrated and caked in quicksand. A group of mice had lived in the area and, under their protection, Luxa and Aurora as well.

"Do not dismount yet," said Luxa when the bats touched down at the spring.

They sat quietly, surveying the area. The only good thing about the jungle was that it always had some light that was provided by the small volcanic eruptions on the floors of a network of streams. At least Gregor could not be thrown into total darkness here.

Nothing seemed amiss. "Nibblers! It is Queen Luxa! Will you show yourselves?" Luxa called out.

There was a ripple of reaction in the vines at the sound of her voice, but no mice appeared.

"We must check the caves," said Luxa, sliding off Aurora's back. She drew her sword. "I will lead. Then Aurora and Ares. The Overlander will cover your backs."

The Overlander, not Gregor. She was still mad at him for ... whatever. Not showing immediate enthusiasm for the jungle trip or something. And who put her in charge? He was doing this as a favor.

Gregor tried to decide if it was worth an argument. One of them did have to lead and one of them did have to take the rear, and since she knew the area better, this lineup made sense. But it was only when he

remembered that she had just lost a friend that he pulled out his sword and got behind Ares.

The path was familiar. Gregor knew it led between the spring and the cave where he had first seen Aurora lying crippled in pain from her dislocated wing. It was more overgrown than he remembered it, as if it had not been recently traveled.

When they reached the cave, Luxa called out again to the nibblers but received no response. With her sword, she cut away the heavy thatch of vines that concealed the mouth of the cave, and peered inside. "No one," she said in a puzzled voice. "It is deserted."

They wound their way down paths and checked several other caves. Luxa called out repeatedly, but there was no sign of the nibblers anywhere.

Luxa sat on a large flat rock at the center of a clearing, her eyes fixed on the mouth of an abandoned cave. "I remember we had not slept in several days when Cevian led us to this colony."

"Or eaten," said Aurora.

"Or eaten," agreed Luxa. She gazed up at the dome of vines that enclosed them. "At best I expected to find the nibblers as we left them. At worst suffering the aftermath of a battle. But that they have vanished without explanation is most disturbing."

"Maybe they moved somewhere," said Gregor, sitting beside her.

"The gnawers already drove them out of their home in the tunnels of stone. They barely managed to survive here," said Luxa.

"Perhaps they decided to join the nibbler colony near the Fount," said Ares.

"No, my uncle who governs the Fount forbade any new arrivals. He said the land would support no more. Besides, it is nearly an impossible journey to make on foot," said Luxa.

"Is there anyone around here we could ask?" said Gregor.

Luxa gave a wry smile. "Hazard could. He can speak the tongues of several jungle creatures. I regret none of us share his skill."

There was nothing to do but fly home. As they rose to go, something caught Gregor's attention. It was a small movement, almost a shiver, in the vines above him. He shot his flashlight beam up into the canopy but could make out nothing but the tangled mess of greenish-gray vines.

Suddenly Ares stiffened beside him. "Something is here," said the bat. "To our right."

"To our left, also," said Aurora.

"What? I do not see anything," said Luxa, flashing her light around.

"Look here," said Gregor. He shone his light on a patch of vines above them that had begun to undulate. "It's the vines. They're moving."

"But I know these vines," said Luxa. "They are harmless."

On his previous trip to the jungle Gregor had been attacked by carnivorous yellow pods and later drugged and lassoed by sweet-smelling tendrils that wanted his blood. He assumed anything with roots was dangerous. "We've got to get out of here. Now."

The four of them hurried toward the path that led out of the clearing, only to find that the vines had woven together to close it off.

"Use your sword!" said Luxa. Gregor's arm was already in motion and their two blades sliced into the greenery simultaneously. Something sprang straight for Gregor's eyes. At first he thought it was a vine with a thick arrowhead-shaped leaf on the end. But then the mouth opened and he could see the deadly pointed fangs.

His blade severed the head from the body just as he cried out a warning to his friends.

"Snakes!"

CHAPTER 8

Gregor, Luxa, Ares, and Aurora retreated quickly to the flat rock. Their attack had brought the entire canopy to life. It was a writhing, hissing mass of snakes. They were a variety of sizes. Some as thin as pencils. Others as fat as baseball bats. So closely did they resemble the vines that Gregor could still not distinguish them from the plants unless he saw the heads. And there were plenty of heads to see. The decapitation of the first reptile had triggered a full-scale attack. Snake heads were shooting out at them from all sides. Flicking tongues, flashing fangs. Suppressing his fear, Gregor gritted his teeth and counterattacked with his sword. He thought of the blood-ball training back in Regalia. It was the same principle. Incapacitating the missile before it struck you. What he couldn't hit with his sword he deflected with his torch.

Only the largest snakes could cover the distance to the rock, but it was all Gregor and Luxa could do to keep them at bay.

With relief, Gregor felt the rager sensation begin buzzing through his body. He welcomed the adrenaline rush, the heightening of his senses, the giving over to his instincts. Ripred had been right when he'd said that there would be times that Gregor would be glad of the gift of being a rager. Maybe he was getting a better handle on the phenomenon, because today he was able to fight without losing awareness of his actions and without fear at his transformation.

Now, for instance, he was quite cognizant of the fact that Ares was trembling behind him. The bats were utterly helpless. Trapped in the dome, they could not take to the air to flee or even to fight with their claws.

"Make yourselves small!" Luxa ordered them. Ares and Aurora pressed tightly together. "The twisters cannot reach you with Gregor and me here!"

He hacked off head after head, but the onslaught only increased. Smaller snakes had joined in as well.

"The jungle!" cried Aurora. "It is shrinking!" She was right. The snakes were closing in on them. The dome was still intact but several feet closer on each side. Soon every snake would be able to reach them, and there would be no way to fight them all off.

"To the cave!" Luxa shouted to the others. "There is only one entrance; we can defend that!"

Moving as one unit, the four of them inched their way to the mouth of the cave. Gregor caught a glimpse of Luxa's blade and torch, whirling in some crisscrossing pattern as she held off the snakes while Aurora and Ares fluttered inside. Gregor and Luxa stood angled out, shoulders touching, backs to the opening, as the assault continued. For every snake they killed, another two seemed ready to take its place. It was only a matter of time before one broke through, one set of fangs made contact, and their defenses fell.

"This is no good!" shouted Gregor over the hissing. "They'll just keep up until we're beat!"

If only Ripred were here! Much as the rat infuriated Gregor, there was no better companion in a fight. Ripred would know how to get out of this alive!

Ripred ... Ripred ... what would he do? Gregor tried to picture the big scarred rat beside him at this moment. But he couldn't. Ripred wouldn't be standing in the cave mouth swatting at snakes. He would be, he would be ...

"I'm going to try something!" yelled Gregor. "Get the bats out if you can!"

And before Luxa could object, Gregor was slashing his way back to the rock. He had no more than an image in his head. The image of Ripred, fighting off the humans in the arena, shredding the plants that held the yellow pods, in battle with the ants. When he was far outnumbered, Ripred always relied on the same fighting technique. He spun. He spun in a circle so fast that no matter what adversary reached him, they would encounter his claws. Gregor had only one sword, but he had a torch and he was a much smaller target than Ripred. If he could just spin quickly enough ... !

The second Gregor's feet hit the rock they began to turn him in place. He spun with his sword in front, his torch straight behind his back. Faster and faster until there was only a blur of shooting heads, spurting blood, and twisting bodies. He stopped thinking, abandoned himself, and let his rager senses completely take over. At some point, the number of snakes lessened, but he did not let up. It was Luxa's sword, thrust out to block his own, that finally brought him back to reality. The clash of metal as their blades made contact had such force that he broke hers in two. The second he stopped spinning, he was reeling wildly around the clearing, overcome with dizziness. He crashed into the vines, which were entangled with headless snakes, and grabbed hold of anything he could as the world careened

around him. It was one of the worst feelings he had ever experienced. He thought he vomited but could never clearly recollect the moment.

Then a pair of claws lifted him into the air and deposited him on Ares's back. "No," Gregor said. "Too dizzy."

"Hold fast to my fur!" ordered Ares. "We must be gone from here!"

Gregor clutched Ares's fur and just wished for the whole thing to be over.

Time passed. The world steadied. Ares landed somewhere and Luxa helped Gregor off the bat's back. Gregor sat on the ground and tried to get his bearings. Luxa held up cupped hands filled with water to his mouth, and he eagerly drank. His heart slowed down. He was all right. They were no longer in the jungle. Gregor gratefully felt the stone floor of the tunnel beneath him. He dipped his whole face into the cold stream, less to drink than to clear his head. When he sat up, feeling refreshed, the other three were staring at him uneasily.

"Are you ill?" asked Ares.

"No, not now," said Gregor. "I just got a little dizzy spinning around."

"Your mind ... it is calm?" asked Luxa tentatively.

"Think so," asked Gregor. "Actually, I feel pretty good." He did. Like when he'd run miles in track and then gotten a buzz. Only this was a much deeper sense of well-being. "Why?"

No one answered.

"What's wrong?" he said.

"When you fought, it was as if something had possessed you," said Aurora. "Your face changed. You made sounds that were not human."

"I was fighting off about a zillion snakes. It was just that rager thing," said Gregor.

"I have never seen it before," said Aurora. "Except when you hit the blood balls, but that was not the same."

When Gregor thought back, he realized that was true. Aurora had never been around when he was actually in battle. "Well, that's how I always get. Tell her, Luxa."

"No, Gregor, it was different this time," said Luxa. "Not like when I saw you fight the cutters."

"How?" asked Gregor. It had not felt that different to him. He'd felt a little more in control for a while.

Luxa chose her next words carefully. "You seemed ... to be enjoying it."

"What? Well, I wasn't!" Gregor said. "And that's a really rotten thing to say."

"I did not mean to —" Luxa began.

"Let's just go home," he said. They scrubbed the gore from their skin in silence and mounted the bats. Not until he was up on Ares's back, away from Luxa and Aurora, did Gregor dare to ask, "What did I do?"

"You fought magnificently. You will one day be every bit the warrior that Ripred is," said Ares.

"See, that's what I was thinking about. How would Ripred get us out of there? That's how I came up with the spin!" said Gregor excitedly, and then stopped. Why was he excited? The whole thing had been a terrible, bloody encounter. It must just be the relief of having survived it. Or was it something else? "Why did Luxa say that about me enjoying it?"

"Because, as the fight progressed, you began to smile," said Ares.

"I smiled?" said Gregor. His skin crawled at the thought. At home, he never got involved in fights unless he was forced to. He had never liked physical violence and had a low opinion of kids who did. It sickened him to hit another person. "I smiled?"

"Overlander, do not make too much of this. Everyone knows being a rager is not a choice," said Ares. "Only it took us by surprise to see you so. As we know you do not revel in death."

Gregor didn't say another word the rest of the trip to Regalia.

They had left the torches in the jungle. Gregor ripped the duct tape off his arm and returned the flashlight to his belt, flipping it off. He wanted darkness to hide in while he tried to understand this new thing that had happened to him. But he didn't understand it. His postbattle exhilaration drained away, leaving him feeling empty and quietly afraid of himself.

He had a desperate desire to see Ripred, to talk to the only other rager he knew about what he had just experienced. But he had no idea where to find the rat. Ripred had taken off after the Bane; they could be anywhere....

It was only when Gregor and Luxa were climbing back into the old nursery that he realized he had another problem.

"Listen," whispered Luxa, grabbing his arm. Footsteps were coming down the hall. They had been gone all night and well into the day. Both Gregor's mother and the Regalian council would freak out if they knew about the secret trip.

"Lose your weapon," Luxa told Gregor. They both quickly unhooked their belts and set them down on the stairs. Luxa flipped the turtle's shell closed, shoved Gregor onto an old pallet, and dove onto one about ten feet away. "Sleep," she told Gregor, and immediately pretended to do so herself.

Gregor had just flattened out and shut his eyes when the footsteps stopped at the door.

"Did Mareth have them check the old nursery?" he heard Vikus's voice say.

"I do not think this wing was checked at all. It is so rarely used," Howard replied.

"I believe I see a light," said Vikus. Gregor had switched on his flashlight so he and Luxa could climb into the nursery and never thought to turn it off. Too late now, though. He could hear Vikus and Howard entering the room.

Vikus gave a chuckle of relief. "Ah, here they are. Slept the whole night here by the looks of it. Luxa, awaken," he said softly.

Gregor felt Howard's hand give his shoulder a shake. "And you, Gregor. Before the council sends out the army to find you."

"What?" said Gregor in his best sleepy tone. He sat up and gave a fake yawn. "What's going on?"

Luxa rubbed her eyes and blinked up at her grandfather in confusion. "Oh. Have we been here all night? I was showing Gregor the nursery. He started telling some endless tale about his bravery in the Labyrinth. I must have dozed off."

It took Gregor a second to realize she was trying to capture their normal banter. Trying to act as if they had not experienced the awful night behind them. He could play along.

"Yeah? You should hear yourself go on about how rough it is to be a queen," said Gregor, stretching. "What time is it, anyway?"

"Nearly luncheon," said Vikus.

"Good. I am famished," said Luxa.

"Come then, and eat. And I shall instruct Mareth to call off the search for you. What would you have me tell the council, Luxa?" said Vikus.

"Something very dramatic. Tell them I sneaked out at night, evaded the guards, and ran off to the jungle," said Luxa.

Gregor shot her a look, but she knew what she was doing.

"Yes. Very witty. See that you take better care where you sleep tonight, Your Highness," said Vikus. Then he left the nursery.

Howard remained behind. He was examining them closely. A little too closely. "That was a lively story. About the jungle. And it would have explained one thing," said Howard.

"What's that, Howard?" said Gregor, suddenly feeling cautious.

"This," said Howard. He reached his hand up to Luxa's hair and removed a piece of vine. It was small, only a couple of inches long, with three tiny greenish-gray leaves. Gregor had not even noticed it. Unfortunately.

"Oh, that?" Luxa coolly took the vine from Howard's hand and curled it around her finger. "I must have picked it up when I visited the fields yesterday morning. The council has asked me to familiarize myself with the maintenance of the crops, so that when I am queen I may quickly distinguish a good year from a bad one."

"Really? I know of no crop we grow that resembles that vine, Cousin...." said Howard. "What is it?"

"Well, I am not yet an expert, Howard. That is why I must visit the fields," said Luxa matter-of-factly.

Howard's eyes moved back and forth between them. "You two look tired. You should get some rest." He gave them a smile and left.

Before he went to lunch, Gregor washed up in the bathroom and put on fresh clothes. The dark fabric and dim light in the nursery had concealed the fact that his garments were splattered with dried snake blood. Then he went to see his mom. By the time he got there, Vikus had been to see her, so after a brief scolding about being irresponsible, Gregor was allowed to go eat.

When he reached the dining room, he found Vikus, Howard, Luxa, Hazard, and Boots gathered around the table. The servants began ladling stew and passing bread.

They were just starting to eat when Mareth appeared at the door, speaking in a rapid, breathless voice. "Vikus, pardon the intrusion, but there is an occurrence of which we can make no sense," said Mareth.

"What is it, Mareth?" Vikus asked.

"Our scouts were patrolling the river that runs from the Fount," he said. "They pulled this from the water. It was wedged between two rocks along the beach." Mareth gestured to someone in the hallway. Two Underlanders came in hauling a large, round basket between them. It was covered with a

tight-fitting lid. Water still dripped from its woven exterior. They set the basket carefully on the floor, and Mareth eased the lid off.

Inside the basket were half a dozen squirming baby mice.

CHAPTER 9

The mice were about the size of full-grown house cats back home. Their pink bodies were covered in a downy layer of gray fuzz. The sudden light seemed to pain their eyes, and they buried their faces in one another's sides. They were squeaking in fear and distress.

"Ooh, baby mouses! *M* is for mouses!" cried Boots. She wiggled off her chair and hurried over to crouch beside the basket and pet their fur. "Hi! Hi, you!"

"They are hungry," said Hazard. He took a loaf of bread from the table and sat beside Boots.

The two kids broke off bits of bread and fed the mice, who gobbled down the food ravenously. Hazard made soft squeaking sounds that were indistinguishable from the babies' noises. Boots giggled as a little muzzle rubbed against her palm. "You tickle," she said.

But no one else was laughing. The Underlanders' faces expressed deep concern.

"You say this basket was pulled from the river?" asked Vikus.

"Yes, to the north of us," said Mareth. "It is one of our own making."

Vikus fingered the woven lid. "We send gifts of grain to the nibblers near the Fount in such baskets."

"How could someone have done this?" said Mareth. "Putting these pups on the river in this frail vessel. It is a miracle they survived."

Gregor had to agree. He had been on that river in a small boat. The current was so powerful, it churned the water to a white froth and carried along large boulders like they were Ping-Pong balls.

"If someone wanted to kill them, this seems an elaborate way to do it," said Vikus. "Who would go to the trouble to place them in the basket and set it on the river?"

"It was their mother," said Hazard simply. He fetched a bowl of stew from the table and fed the mice bites. "She put them in here and told them to stay quiet."

"Oh, Hazard, can you understand what they are saying?" said Vikus.

"Some of it. They talk like babies," he said.

"Ask them why their mother did this," said Luxa.

Hazard squeaked back and forth with the mice. "I can't tell exactly. Something bad was happening and all the nibblers were very afraid."

"Tell them that they are safe here with us. That no harm will come to them," said Vikus. "Put them in the old nursery. Have Dulcet care for them. And Hazard, perhaps you could visit with them from time to time so that they may communicate with us." He shook his head. "I must alert the council of this."

Gregor, Luxa, Hazard, and Boots accompanied the guards and the mice to the old nursery. Dulcet, the really nice nanny who usually looked after Boots, arrived almost immediately. She instructed the guards to bring in plenty of torches, and when the room was brightly illuminated it at least seemed less creepy. The stone animals were not so intimidating, and now Gregor could see that each creature had a fun little song carved next to it, like "Bat, Bat" or the thing about the nibblers. Except the evil turtle. Sandwich hadn't given it a song. Dulcet cleared out an alcove in the room and fashioned a large, comfortable nest out of blankets. Then she sat cross-legged in the middle of the nest and spent a few minutes with each mouse, talking to it in a soft voice, cuddling it, and giving it bites of what looked like carrots. Soon they were all vying for her attention, trying to sit on her lap, rubbing their noses under her hand so she would stroke their heads. You would have thought that she'd been a mouse nanny her whole life. Of course, Boots and Hazard had to get into the nest, too. Soon the two kids and six mice were all snuggled around Dulcet in a comfortable heap. She began to quietly sing the children's songs from the walls. It did not take long for the exhausted mouse babies to fall asleep.

Luxa pulled Gregor into the hallway where they would not be overheard. "We must go to the nibbler colony by the Fount," she said.

"No. No, thanks," said Gregor, and started off down the hall. He did not want to go on any more secret adventures with Luxa or even talk to her, really. Not after what she'd said about him enjoying the slaughter.

"We must find out what provoked a mother to place her pups on that river," Luxa said, following him.

"Maybe she was crazy. I can't think of any other reason," said Gregor over his shoulder.

"You can think of no reason you might place Boots in a basket and leave her to the fate of the waters?" Luxa insisted. "Gregor!" She grabbed his arm and swung him back around.

"No!" said Gregor, wrenching his arm back. "Will you just back off?"

"You did as much in the jungle," said Luxa.

"What?" said Gregor.

"In the jungle. You sent Boots away with Aurora, who was wounded, and Hazard, who was but six. When the cutters came," said Luxa.

"Yeah, because she would have been killed if I hadn't!" said Gregor. Luxa's meaning was beginning to dawn on him. Something very frightening had been happening when the babies had been placed in the basket. The mother had had no choice... .

Inside the nursery one of the mouse babies had begun to cry out in its sleep.

"So you think the snakes attacked the colony near the Fount, too?" Gregor asked.

"No, the twisters cannot live outside the jungle. It is too cold for them," said Luxa. "We do not know that they attacked Cevian's colony, either. Only that they attacked us. The nibblers may have left for reasons that had nothing to do with the twisters, who then took advantage of their absence to occupy the land."

"I guess so, Luxa," said Gregor. She was holding out hope that her friends were still alive, but it seemed like a long shot to him.

"Something is very wrong if both the nibblers in the jungle and the ones at the Fount are in trouble. Perhaps every nibbler in the Underland is in peril. I need your help, Gregor," said Luxa. She looked so unhappy. Less than a day ago they had been dancing. Now Cevian was dead. The rest of the jungle colony had probably been eaten by snakes. The basket of baby mice had arrived indicating more tragedy, this time for the nibblers by the Fount.

Gregor could feel himself weakening. "Maybe we should just let the council handle this."

"They will do nothing. Not without days of deliberation," said Luxa. "I do not know if Aurora and I can face this alone. Please."

Whatever remnants of resistance Gregor had melted away with that word. "All right," he said. "Let's check out the colony." There was no way to leave until the next morning. For one thing, Aurora and Ares were exhausted from the jungle excursion and had to rest. For another, Gregor and Luxa couldn't sneak out through the nursery now that the baby mice were there, so they had to leave by a legitimate route. Luxa decided the best

thing would be to tell everyone they were going on a picnic, which would allow them to take along food for the long trip to the nibblers' colony by the Fount.

Gregor got permission from his mom to stay over a second night. Since he hadn't slept in two days, he was ready to go to bed as soon as supper ended, but he made one last visit to the museum to prepare for the next day's travels. As a precaution, Gregor kept a fresh supply of batteries in the museum at all times. He put them, along with three flashlights, some duct tape, and a liter bottle of water, in a backpack. These things were now standard supplies on any long trip. After a moment's consideration, he added a pair of binoculars he'd found when he was digging around looking for things to sell. They were real binoculars, not the toy kind, and seemed like a cool thing to have on a trip. Since most of the Underland was in darkness, he wasn't sure when he'd get a chance to use them. What he really needed was a pair of those infrared night goggles, but Central Park drew a lot of bird-watchers, not commandos.

As arranged, he met up with Luxa, Aurora, and Ares in the High Hall early the next morning. Luxa's eyes were reddened and somewhat puffy. He wondered if she had slept at all or spent the night weeping for her friends.

A couple of servants finished securing a huge picnic hamper on Ares's back, and left.

"I told the cook you eat like a shiner," Luxa told Gregor, giving the hamper a nod. "Shiner" was the Underlander word for firefly. Gregor had met two fireflies, Photos Glow-Glow and Zap, and they were both absolute gluttons and unbelievably obnoxious.

"Thanks," said Gregor. "So do you go around thinking of ways to insult me, or do they just come to you naturally?"

"It was the only way I could justify asking for such large quantities of food," she said, and attempted a smile. "Do you want to spend half the trip hungry?"

"No, I want to spend it eating like a shiner," said Gregor. He had swung a leg over Ares's back when a voice behind him made him turn his head.

"Going on a picnic?" said Howard. He was seated on Nike, who was just coasting in for a landing. The two had been spending a lot of time together in training lately, although they were not officially bonds. Howard's sword was in his belt. A hamper sat behind him.

"That was our intent," said Luxa.

"Nike and I had the very same idea," said Howard. "Shall we all go together?"

"Do you not have duties at the hospital, Cousin?" asked Luxa.

"I am free until the night shift," said Howard. "Surely you are planning to return by then."

What could they say? What could they possibly say to prevent him from coming along?

"Of course. But I am unable to invite you to join us, Howard," said Luxa. "Because ... because ..." She looked at Gregor for help.

Only one thing came to his mind. "Because this is kind of like a date," said Gregor.

"A date?" said Howard. The word was clearly unfamiliar to him.

"You know, when you hang out with just one girl. Not your friends," said Gregor. It was such an outrageous statement, he couldn't believe he had uttered it. With really just the right touch of embarrassment, too. The expression on Luxa's face was indescribable. He decided to go with it.

"Okay, see, now Luxa's mad because I wasn't supposed to tell anyone."

Luxa flushed bright pink, but she had no choice but to go along with him. "Yes. Yes. I thought it was a private matter."

"Well, it is. But do you want Howard coming along on our date?" said Gregor. Like he knew anything about dates! Not only had Gregor never been on a date but his mother would probably never even let him ask a girl out until he had finished high school. Once he had gone to a party at his friend Angelina's home and he'd been too shy to ask anyone to dance. But here he was. The date guy.

For just a moment, Howard actually seemed like he might be buying it. Then his eyes rested on the hamper. "That seems like an awfully large hamper for one ... date."

It was ridiculously large. For two people. On a date.

"It is none of your business, Howard," said Luxa in a dangerous tone. "Go and let us be."

"I cannot. Though it be at the risk of intruding," said Howard. "You see, Nike and I, we know about the crown."

There was a pause.

"Hermes mentioned he delivered the crown to you in passing," said Nike. "And I told Howard its meaning. Of how you gave the crown to the

nibblers in the jungle and instructed them to send it to you if they ever had need of your help."

"Oh!" Luxa literally stamped her foot on the ground. "You cannot come!"

"Let them come, Luxa," said Gregor. "We might need their help."

"Stay out of this!" said Luxa.

"I tried to, remember?" said Gregor.

"Here are your choices. You take Nike and me along on whatever mad scheme you have cooked up, or I go directly to Vikus," said Howard.

And as if on cue, Vikus appeared, an armful of scrolls rattling under his arm. "Did I hear my name? What is all this, then? A pleasure outing?"

"A picnic," said Gregor, Luxa, and Howard in unison.

"A picnic?" asked Vikus. "I wish I had time to join you. That's quite a basket. How many are you expecting?"

A flutter of peach-colored wings drew everyone's attention, and Thalia landed in the High Hall. That could only mean one thing. And there they were — Boots, decked out in her princess attire, and Hazard running in to meet the bat. Temp pattered along behind them.

"Hazard, I thought you and Boots were with the nibbler pups," said Luxa.

"We were. But it is time for flying at the arena," said Hazard. His face lit up as he spotted the basket. "Oh, are we going on a picnic? You didn't tell me."

"It was meant to be a surprise," said Luxa. "I was just about to send for you."

"Well, mount up, then," said Vikus. He lifted Boots up onto Ares behind Gregor.

"Now what?" thought Gregor. It was bad enough that they were sneaking off to the nibbler colony on their own, but if his mom found out he'd taken Boots along ... well, he'd rather face another round of snakes than that.

Temp skittered up next to Boots as Vikus settled Hazard on Thalia's back. "Enjoy yourselves and be home for supper," he said.

"Yes. Supper. Off we go!" said Luxa, taking her seat on Aurora.

"Pic-a-nic! Pic-a-nic!" sang Boots, drumming on the back of Gregor's head with her scepter. The whole princess costume thing had been a mistake. Next time he'd get her a coloring book.

They soared out over the city and then made a U-turn and headed to the north. Beneath them lay fields of grain, illuminated by an elaborate system of gas lighting. Underlander farmers were harvesting the grain with long curved blades attached to poles. The blades were like something people used in movies about olden times.

Once they had cleared the fields, a terrible fight broke out among them. Luxa laid into Howard for interfering, at Nike for telling Howard about the crown, at Gregor for taking Howard's side. She was probably furious about the date thing, too, although she didn't mention it. And she was absolutely determined to go on, even with Boots and Hazard along.

Gregor had plenty of misgivings about that part, but Luxa brushed off his concerns. "If there is danger, we will send them directly on to the Fount."

"The Fount? Where are we going?" asked Howard. Gregor filled Howard and Nike in on all that had happened regarding the nibblers and on their plan to journey to the colony by the Fount.

"It is most troubling. But Luxa is right. Appealing to the council for help would be worthless. We must go ourselves," said Howard.

The trip to the nibblers' colony took at least twelve hours. For most of it, they flew up the wild river that flowed from the Fount down past the colony, past Regalia, and then emptied into the vast Underland sea known as the Waterway. About halfway, Thalia, who was still several months from being full-grown, ran out of steam, and they had to rearrange everyone so she could ride on Ares's back. Luxa took Hazard, Boots, and Temp on Aurora, and Gregor joined Howard on Nike.

It was during this leg of the journey that Howard brought up the whole date subterfuge. "Gregor, as Luxa has no older brother, I feel I must speak for her. As I would speak for one of my little sisters. I know you used what you called a date with her as a cover, but in the future you must think of an alternative."

"Why?" said Gregor, although he could guess.

"Because she is a queen, because you are an Overlander, because you are both too young, and because even if you were not, such a pairing could have no happy future," said Howard. "The process of finding a spouse in the Underland is a long and delicate one."

A spouse? This was getting entirely out of hand. "Howard, it wasn't a date in the first place," said Gregor.

"I understand. But for you to even mention it as a possibility shows how little you know of the Underland," said Howard. "Remember, too, that you expected me to believe your lie. And ask yourself why you thought it was a plausible one."

That pulled Gregor up short. He could feel himself blushing as deeply as Luxa had. At the time, he guessed he had expected Howard to at least entertain the possibility that he and Luxa might like each other. And worse still, there had been that moment when Howard looked like he was buying it.

"Dates aren't a big deal in the Overland," Gregor said lamely. They would be for him, but he knew kids his age who sort of dated. Went to movies. For pizza. Which was kind of like a picnic. Except inside.

"Well, they would be monumental here," said Howard. "Especially with my cousin."

"Got it," said Gregor, who was really ready to drop the whole subject.

As they neared their destination, Howard and Gregor flew ahead to scout out the area. The nibblers' colony began with a large open area just off the river. A honeycomb of small caves and a network of narrow tunnels flanked it. With its access to the river for fishing and clean water and its natural nesting places, it seemed an ideal location for the mice.

But there were no mice around today. Luxa's greetings were met with silence. The bats could pick up no signs of life through echolocation, either. For closer inspection, they had to land on the beach.

"This area officially belongs to the Fount, but my father allowed the nibblers to use it. He has always been sympathetic to their plight," said Howard.

"What exactly is their plight?" asked Gregor.

"They have great difficulty finding a home," said Howard. "They have been driven out of lands by cutters, by spinners, and most often by gnawers, who particularly hate them as they have always been our allies. They have ended up scattered in colonies around the Underland, trying to carve out a life."

"Well, then it seems weird they'd leave here," said Gregor.

"That is just the point," said Howard. "I do not believe they would leave here on their own. They must have been driven out again."

"We must check the caves," said Luxa.

What they found inside was spooky. Half-eaten meals. Rumpled nests. A pattern of small stones on the floor suggested a game had been in progress. It was as if one second before they'd entered the colony it had been alive and bustling with nibblers, and then *poof!* They had all vanished without a trace. As to where they had gone or what had compelled them to go, there was no clue.

By the last cave, Luxa seemed about ready to lose it. "What can have happened to them? There is no rhyme or reason to any of this!"

Just then Hazard gave a sharp cry from the back of the cave. They all ran to him, certain he must be injured, but he was backing away from something on the wall. When Luxa reached him, he wrapped his arms around her and held on tight.

"Hazard, what is it?" she said, running her hands over him to search for injuries. "Are you hurt? Why do you tremble?"

The boy pointed to the cave wall. Howard held his torch to the wall, and in the flickering light Gregor could see a mark had been hastily scratched into it. A familiar mark. A straight line with a thin beaklike appendage.

"Ares and I found this same thing under Cevian's body. We thought she was trying to make a letter, a *P* or a *B*. To spell out someone's name," said Gregor.

"No, no!" said Hazard in a shrill voice. "It is one of the marks of secret."

"What's that?" asked Gregor.

"A secret means of communication. An old collection of symbols that you could use to pass information to your allies but that were unknown to your enemies," said Howard.

"But, Hazard, no one has used the marks of secret for centuries. They have lost all meaning," said Luxa.

"Not in the jungle," said Hazard. "We use them. Frill taught them to my father and he to me. That is the scythe."

"And that means something bad?" said Gregor, nodding to the mark.

"It means death," said Hazard, and he was starting to cry.

"It means someone will die?" said Luxa, holding him close.

"Not just someone," said Hazard. "It means us! It means we who see it will die!"

PART 2

The Marks

CHAPTER 10

Despite many reassurances from Luxa, it took Hazard quite a while to calm down. Even when they had left the cave and assembled on the shore of the river, he was still traumatized by what he had seen. Gregor couldn't think of any symbol that would be so scary in the Overland, but then compared to Hazard, he'd led a very safe life.

"What is a scythe, anyway?" Gregor asked.

"It is a tool used for harvesting grain. The farmers were using scythes today as we flew over the fields," said Howard.

Gregor remembered the tools then, being swung from side to side. "So, why do those mean death?"

"Because they cut down life. In old scrolls from the Overland, sometimes the figure of Death, in a hooded black robe, also carries a scythe. To cut down humans' lives," said Howard.

"Oh, yeah. That's where I've seen it," said Gregor.

Howard built a small fire to try to cheer things up. Unfortunately, in the ghost town that was the mouse colony the shadows the flames threw against the stone walls only made the place feel more eerie.

Boots, who was puzzled by the whole situation, squatted next to Hazard and patted him on the leg. "Hazard is crying. Hazard is sad," she said.

"It's okay, Boots; everybody is fine," said Gregor, picking her up for a hug.

"No, we are not fine. We have seen the scythe," said Hazard.

"And yet we still live," said Luxa, stroking his curls.

"Yes, perhaps that mark was meant for someone else," said Howard.

"Or they made it during the plague," said Luxa. "Before the cure was found and all warmbloods were as good as dead."

Hazard quieted a minute to consider this. "I don't know," he said. "In the jungle everyone dreads the mark."

"Did you ever see it yourself? In the jungle, I mean," said Gregor.

"Once. There was a swarm of flying insects. Their bite brought quick death," said Hazard.

"But you did not die, Hazard," said Howard encouragingly. "Or you would not be here to tell us of it."

"My mother died," said Hazard wanly. "Frill outran them, but my mother was bitten first."

There was nothing to say after that. No explaining to Hazard that they were safe. Around any corner could be another swarm of stingers. Another plague. Another way to die.

Some mouse had scratched that mark in the cave wall. Cevian had made the same mark at Queenshead. Why? What threat was upon them? Gregor didn't believe it had to do with the plague. Or the snakes.

"Hazard, when you lived in the jungle, how did the nibblers get along with the snakes?" asked Gregor. "The ones that look like vines."

"You mean the twisters?" said Hazard. "They avoided each other. The twisters eat the nibbler pups, and the nibblers eat the twister eggs," he said.

"It is true," said Luxa. "The twisters never came near the nibblers when I was there. I believe neither thought it was worth the risk."

"So you think the twisters only moved in after the mice had left?" asked Howard.

"That is my hope," said Luxa. "But also my fear. It would mean that not one but two colonies of nibblers have left their homes because of an unknown threat."

"It sounds as if they have a lot of enemies," said Gregor. "The spinners, the cutters —"

"Those were land disputes. Once the nibblers had left their regions, neither the spinners nor cutters had any interest in pursuing them. I can think of only one animal that would do that," said Howard.

No one had to mention the rats. They all knew who Howard was talking about.

They had snacked from the picnic baskets on the flight, mostly eating whatever was on top. Now Howard laid out the delicacies the cook had prepared. Spicy fish salads, a dozen kinds of cheese, pickled vegetables, roasted chicken, sliced beef, stuffed eggs, several loaves of bread, and a variety of sweets. It was an amazing spread, but no one really enjoyed it except Boots. She ate until her belly stuck out like a basketball. "See?" she said to Gregor, pulling up her shirt. He poked her stomach and shook his head. "Talk about eating like a shiner!" he said. She was probably about to hit a growth spurt. At least, he hoped so.

By the time the picnic was over, everyone was dropping from fatigue. Except Boots, who'd had a nice long nap on the trip and was ready to play.

They broke up guard duty into two-hour shifts. Gregor and Temp volunteered for the first watch.

Gregor dug in his backpack for something to keep his sister quiet. Since he hadn't planned to bring her along, he hadn't come prepared to entertain her. The best he could do was the binoculars.

"Look, Boots, magic glasses," he told her. He had to take a few minutes to show her how to look through the binoculars. She was fascinated by the magnified images. She peered into the eyepieces and then dropped them down repeatedly. "Temp is big. Temp is small. Temp is big. Temp is small."

"Shh. Everybody's going to sleep," said Gregor.

"Temp is big. Temp is small. Temp is big. Temp is small," whispered Boots.

Gregor was glad to get a little time with the cockroach. Temp rarely spoke in large groups, although in private he'd chatter along with Boots and Hazard in that bizarre mixture of English and Cockroach the three had developed. Most of the time, it was easy to forget Temp was there.

"So, Temp, what do you make of this thing with the nibblers?" asked Gregor when the others were asleep.

"Hate the nibblers, the rats do, hate the nibblers," said Temp.

"Well, we don't know if the rats are involved yet," said Gregor.

"It be too late, the knowing, it be," said Temp.

"Too late for what, Temp?" said Gregor.

"For the doing," said Temp.

"Doing something to help the nibblers, you mean?" asked Gregor, and the roach nodded.

By the time Gregor's watch was over, Boots had worn herself out. He lay down with her, and she soon drifted off. It took him a little longer. He kept thinking about what Temp had said, about it being too late for the doing. Gregor glanced unhappily around the empty colony, afraid that the cockroach might be right.

No one felt satisfied with the idea of returning to Regalia the next morning.

"What we have seen will not be enough to incite the council to action," said Luxa.

"Perhaps telling the story of your crown will aid our case, after all," said Howard.

"No. As Cevian was not able to tell us the reason she sent it, it will be assumed the twisters drove the nibblers out of the jungle and have gone in search of a new home," said Luxa.

"What about the marks of secret?" said Hazard. "That would be enough in the jungle."

"But we do not know specifically why they were made, so the council will not be able to justify sending soldiers after the nibblers," said Luxa.

"In truth, Cousin, I believe the most likely scenario is that the rats drove the nibblers out of both of their colonies. But we have no evidence of that. And even if we did, we have never sent an army to prevent the nibblers' relocation before," said Howard.

"We should have," said Luxa grimly.

"What about that basketful of baby mice?" said Gregor. That somehow disturbed him more than anything else.

"The council could say, like you did, that the mother was mad. Or, if something drove the nibblers out, that she did not believe the babies could make the journey. They will reason all of this away. Yet when I add it up, the crown, Cevian's death, the baby mice, two empty colonies, and the marks of secret, I know in my heart that a grievous wrong is occurring," said Luxa. "We must find more substantial proof."

"That will be hard to get, since we will all be restricted to quarters the instant we return to Regalia," said Howard.

"My mom will send Boots and me home," said Gregor. "I doubt she'll let us come back again."

"For how long?" asked Hazard.

"Maybe forever, Hazard," said Gregor. His family was only waiting for his mother's return. The second she could manage it, she'd pack them all up and take them to Virginia.

"You mean, we will not see you after this trip?" said Luxa.

"Probably not," said Gregor. It didn't seem quite real that by tomorrow he might never see the Underlanders again. But his mom would never trust him down here, especially since he'd taken Boots on this "picnic."

"We would not have allowed you to come if we knew this!" said Luxa. She was always running off on dangerous adventures, and there were never any real repercussions. But Gregor was not a queen and the Underland was not his home. "But wait, you must be wrong, Gregor. What of 'The Proph
—'"

Luxa cut herself off, but Gregor could complete the phrase. What of "The Prophecy of Time"? The prophecy no one wanted to tell him about. The one about him "possibly" killing the Bane one of these days. He thought about pursuing the subject, but Nerissa had said knowledge of the prophecy might be damaging to him or people he loved. Was she afraid that if he knew what it said he'd run off and do something stupid? He remembered how obsessively he had thought about "The Prophecy of Blood" as he tried to work out its meaning ... that hadn't helped anything ... but the idea of this new one kept nagging at him. He decided not to ask Luxa about "The Prophecy of Time," but when he got back to Regalia he was going to confront Vikus about it. What did it say exactly? Was it definitely about Gregor? Because if it was, he would have to stay in the Underland to fulfill it, and his mom would never agree to that. For now, he would pretend he hadn't heard Luxa's comment.

"Look, me leaving ... it was going to happen pretty soon, even if I didn't come here," said Gregor. "But I wanted to come. To help you find out what happened to the nibblers."

"Which we still do not know," said Howard. "Not what happened to them nor where they are now. They were not killed here, anyway. Nor thrown in the river, for their bodies would have washed past Regalia."

"They went deeper into the tunnels, then," said Luxa.

"Possibly," said Howard. "But how is it that a colony of nibblers escaped the notice of the Fount scouts? They patrol these regions."

"So, where could they have gone?" asked Gregor.

"I can think of only one alternative. The Swag," said Howard.

"What's that?" said Gregor.

"A tunnel that runs from these caves under the river," said Luxa. "Do you know where the entrance lies, Howard?"

"I do. I had friends among the nibblers who showed me. I have crossed the Swag once. And I cannot help feeling we may find some answers there," said Howard. "But I would not risk bringing further trouble to Gregor."

"Forget that. I've exceeded my trouble limit," said Gregor. "Do the Swag, don't do the Swag. I'm still getting sent home."

"What harm can it do, Howard? We are all past redeeming," said Luxa.

A few minutes later, they had located the mouth of the Swag and were practically sliding down the steep slope of the tunnel. It was particularly

difficult to get a footing because the floor was covered in some kind of gravel. The tunnel was large enough for the bats to fly through, but since they were hoping to find clues to the nibblers' whereabouts, they agreed that a slow journey on foot would be more helpful than a quick flight.

Crossing the Swag reminded Gregor of riding the subway that linked Manhattan to Brooklyn at 14th Street. You had to go under the East River. It was not a long trip, only a few minutes, but at about the halfway point Gregor always felt a little anxious. It was something, having a whole river running above your head. Wouldn't it have been better to build a bridge?

Eventually the slope tapered off and they were walking on even ground. For the first time, Gregor felt able to concentrate on something other than his feet. He moved his flashlight beam across the gravel floor, hoping for a sign that the nibblers had been this way, but the rocks yielded nothing. He tried examining the tunnel walls next. At first, they seemed as untouched as the gravel, but just as the floor began to turn upward, indicating they were nearing the far side of the river, Gregor spotted something.

"Wait a minute," he said. He crossed to the wall and shone his light on a spot about a foot above the floor. It was a paw print, slightly smeared but unmistakable. "Look here." He kneeled down and braced himself against the wall with one hand.

The others gathered around. "It is a nibbler print," said Luxa. "There is no doubting that. But what is it made of?"

Howard scraped the print with his fingernail, rubbed the residue between his fingers, and sniffed it. He held his hand out to Nike for confirmation. "Blood?" he said.

"Nibbler blood," she confirmed. "But a few days old."

"If you didn't have time to scratch out another scythe ..." began Gregor.

"Or if you could not be seen doing it..." said Luxa.

"Right. This would be a fast way to leave a message," said Gregor.

"Especially if one was already bleeding," said Aurora.

They stood staring silently at the paw print. There was a whole story behind it. As there was in Cevian's cold body and the basket of baby nibblers and the empty colonies. In and of itself, it was not proof of anything. But Gregor's instincts told him that Luxa was right. That it all added up to something ... evil. That was a funny word. A word for comic books and action-adventure cartoons. Not a word he ever even used in its real sense. But here in the tunnel it felt real.

Luxa, as if unable to help herself, pressed her hand on top of the paw print. Her head dropped forward slightly, and for a moment she squeezed her eyes shut tight. Gregor could almost feel the sorrow radiating from her.

He was trying to figure out what to do next when he noticed the tremor beneath his feet. "It's just another subway going by," he thought. The trains made the platforms vibrate, and you could even feel them above-ground. Then he remembered he had not arrived in this tunnel by subway.

"Mount up!" cried Howard, and the bats fluttered into positions for takeoff.

"What is it?" asked Hazard. "What is happening?" Gregor grabbed up Boots and hurdled onto Ares's

back. He did not need to wait for Howard's answer to know this was his first earthquake.

CHAPTER 11

Gregor and Boots had just landed on Ares's back when a shock wave knocked the bat off his feet. Ares managed to get into the air, as did Nike, who carried Howard, and Aurora, who had Luxa. But Thalia was not so lucky. The little bat, with Hazard on her back, was thrown sideways.

"Hazard!" cried Luxa. She swooped down on Aurora with her arms extended to pull him up beside her, but he brushed her away.

"No, Luxa, I must stay with Thalia!" said Hazard. "We mean to be bonds!"

"She cannot take flight with you on her back!" said Howard. "Oh, we have no time for this! Nike!" Nike dove for Thalia, and Howard plucked the boy off her back with one hand.

"Thalia!" shrieked Hazard as Howard hauled him onto Nike's back. "Thalia!" Despite desperate flutterings of her wings, Thalia could not get into the air.

The entire world seemed to be shaking now, and a deep rumbling sound threatened to drown out their voices.

"Hold tight!" ordered Ares, and Gregor locked his legs around the bat and his arms around Boots as they tipped downward. Then they were level again, but Gregor could feel the drag on Ares and knew he had Thalia in his claws. "Which way?" the bat cried. "Back to the colony?"

"No, we will never make it. Follow me!" said Howard, and headed up the tunnel that led to the far side of the Swag.

Rock chips began to rain down from the roof of the tunnel. First small ones, like the gravel that lined the floor, but soon larger pieces. One caught Gregor on the shoulder, and the sharp edge cut through his shirt to his flesh. He pressed Boots forward over Ares's neck, protecting her with his body as best he could. Suddenly an awful thought hit him. "Temp! We left Temp behind!" He had not seen the cockroach on anyone's bat. A reassuring bump came from behind Gregor, and he knew the bug must have scurried up on Ares when the earthquake started. A good thing, too, because there was no going back for a rescue.

With his head bent over Ares's neck, Gregor could see the floor, rolling as if the gravel were waves on the ocean.

Cracks began to appear in the walls of the tunnel. First thin lines, which shot up the stone faces, etching treelike patterns in the surfaces. And then deeper fissures. That's when Gregor felt the water on the back of his neck. It was only a gentle patter like rain, but he knew that wouldn't last.

"The roof! It's breaking! The river's coming in!" he cried. He didn't know if Ares could hear him over the noise. Anyway, he was already flying as well as he could. The falling rocks had increased in both size and quantity, and despite the bat's best efforts, he could not dodge them all.

Suddenly the waves of gravel were replaced by rushing water and Gregor knew that somewhere behind him the river had broken through. The mouth of the tunnel was in sight. Nike and Aurora had just shot out into freedom when the wave hit Ares.

Boots was ripped from Gregor's arms. Ares disappeared from under him. Gregor was alone in the water, dragged along, unable even to seek air, because he had no idea where the air might be. "Boots!" his brain screamed. "Boots!"

Gregor was dashed against some rocks and allowed one ragged breath before another swell of water engulfed him. He tumbled over and over in the black water. His head struck something and he gasped, filling his lungs with water. He felt consciousness slipping away.

Then he was vaguely aware of a sharp pain in his foot and there was air around him again. He was dangling in space, water running from his nose and mouth. A bat had him from above, but he was unable to see which one.

The claw released him on a stone outcropping where he choked out the rest of the river he'd inhaled. The earth trembled ever so slightly beneath him. Gregor forced himself onto his knees. His flashlight was still working. Howard, Luxa, and Aurora lay bloody and gasping beside him. The wave must have caught them as well. There was no sign of the others.

"Boots!" Gregor cried out. His flashlight beam cut into the darkness. They were up very high over an expanse of churning water. Several hundred yards away, he could just see the top of what must have been the opening to the Swag. Ares and Nike were speeding over the water, searching for the others.

"Hazard! Hazard!" Luxa's voice was as desperate as his own.

Boots, Hazard, Thalia, Temp. The smallest, the youngest, the most vulnerable, were all missing.

"Aurora, can you fly? Can you fly?" begged Luxa. But the golden bat was still gagging up water and unable to answer.

The flashlight beam caught something floundering in a shallow area nearby. Ares dove and when he came up he had a sodden Thalia in his claws. And in her claws was Hazard.

Ares gently laid the pair on the stone before he fluttered off again. Thalia was waterlogged, probably going into shock, but she was at least still fighting. Hazard appeared lifeless. His pale skin had a bluish tint. Blood ran from a deep gash in his forehead. There was no movement in his chest.

Howard was over the boy at once, trying to restore his breathing. It took both Gregor and Aurora, who had recovered slightly, to hold Luxa back from Hazard.

"Let Howard do it! He's an expert!" Gregor said as she struggled. If Mareth were here, he'd have just knocked Luxa out. He'd done that to Howard when he'd flipped out the time his bat, Pandora, had been devoured by mites. But Gregor couldn't imagine hitting Luxa that hard.

When she'd calmed down enough that Aurora could contain her, Gregor waved his arms and called to Ares to retrieve him. They flew low over the water, searching frantically for a sign of life.

"Boots!" yelled Gregor. "Boots!" Every second that passed drained another bit of hope from his heart.

He could feel despair overtaking him when a tiny wail caught his ear. "Ma-maa!" It increased in volume. "Ma-maa!"

"Oh, man, she's alive!" said Gregor as tears of relief blurred his vision. "Boots! I'm coming! Hang on!"

"Ma-maa!" came back at him, but they still couldn't find her.

"Where is she, Ares?" said Gregor.

"I do not know! I cannot locate her!" said his bat.

"Ma-maa!" The cry was fainter this time.

Gregor felt the darkness was about to swallow her up forever. "Boots! Where are you?" As if she could tell him. But it turned out she could. For suddenly a pinprick of light caught his eye. Her scepter! Her stupid, silly, wonderful, amazing, and apparently waterproof princess scepter!

They found her in a small pool. Weeping. Her tiara and princess skirt gone. Clutching her scepter. Sitting on Temp's back as he paddled around in a circle, unable to climb up the steep rocks that surrounded them.

"Oh, sweetie," said Gregor as he pulled her up into his arms. "Oh, Boots."

She clung to him but was mad at him, too. "You let go. In the water. You let go of me!" she sobbed, and hit him with her small fist.

"I'm sorry. I tried not to. I'm sorry, Boots," he said, but she was not ready to forgive him.

There was no easy way to retrieve Temp. Ares ended up tossing the cockroach into the air with his snout and catching him on his back. Temp landed with a hollow thud that couldn't have felt too good, but the bug wasn't one to complain.

Boots, on the other hand, was just warming up. "You let Temp go! You let Temp go, too!"

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry," was all Gregor could say as they coasted in to join the others. Howard was still trying to restore Hazard's breathing when the earth began to shake again.

"An aftershock," thought Gregor. "I think that's what they're called." As he locked his arms around Boots he wondered if they should be trying to escape. But where do you run to when the whole world is unstable?

The sharp collision of rock on rock drew Gregor's attention back to the exit of the Swag. The stone wall above the tunnel, already cracked and damaged from the initial earthquake, began to break away. A deafening explosion of sound assaulted his ears, and then he was lying on his side, Boots still in his arms.

He lifted the flashlight just in time to see the avalanche bury the opening to the Swag under a mountain of rock.

CHAPTER 12

The impact of the avalanche as it hit the water was enough to send waves splashing over the edge of their haven, but no one was washed away. Nor could anyone get any wetter. They were all soaked, inside and out.

Howard was almost oblivious to the latest disaster, because he was so focused on Hazard. The rest of them sat dripping and shivering as he pumped the boy's chest and gave him mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. The seconds dragged on. Luxa had stopped fighting and now just stared at Hazard, stiff and distant. Gregor knew she thought the boy was lost.

Only when Howard cried out, "His heart beats!" did everyone come to life. Luxa sprang forward and clutched Hazard's hand, saying, "He is alive? He is alive?"

At that moment, water gushed from Hazard's mouth. Howard rolled the boy on his side and let Luxa comfort him as he retched. The picnic hampers were still secured to the bats' backs. Howard dug into the smaller hamper on Nike and pulled out a large leather box. Leave it to Howard to think to pack a first-aid kit. It had never even crossed Gregor's mind. Just another reason he was probably not doctor material.

Gregor had brought flashlights, though, and several spare batteries, which was good because, besides Boots's scepter, that was all the light he had. The torches had been taken by the flood.

"I must stitch his wound," said Howard. While Luxa cradled Hazard in her arms, Howard cleaned and sewed up the gash in his forehead with quick, deft strokes. He shone Gregor's flashlight in Hazard's eyes and checked his pupils.

"Will he recover?" asked Luxa.

"Oh, yes. Just a knock on the head and a bit too much water," said Howard cheerfully. "Next time you are thirsty, Hazard, you might try a cup instead of a river." Hazard managed a weak smile. "I will."

Thalia laughed hysterically until she began to cry. The whole day had been too much for Thalia. Nike snuggled the little bat in her wings until she could calm down.

Howard stripped off Hazard's wet clothes and wrapped him in a blanket. "I will wager your head aches." Howard gave Hazard a swallow from a big

green bottle that Gregor recognized as painkiller. "Try and lie still. Can you do that?" Hazard gave a nod.

"All right, then. How fare the rest of you?" said Howard.

They all just stared at him. Their injuries so paled in comparison to Hazard's that no one felt they could complain. Except for Boots, of course.

"Gre-go let me go," she said, still sniffing. "Look." She held up her little pointer finger dramatically. It would have been an exaggeration to call it a cut. A nick maybe.

"Oh, dear. We must address that immediately," said Howard. "And line up, all of you. I do not want anyone being brave."

It took less than a minute to fix up Boots, and then Howard worked his way through the rest of the party, stitching up cuts and checking for broken bones. They were banged up and bruised, but no one had serious injuries. Luxa, who had been holding Hazard while the others were treated, came up last. She had sprained a finger on her left hand.

While Howard immobilized it with a thin strip of stone and fabric, she said, "I am so grateful you came."

"I would like that to be carved in stone. For when you are deciding who to invite on future picnics," said Howard.

"Thank you for saving Hazard," said Luxa tremulously.

"He is my cousin," said Howard as he tied off the fabric. "As are you, right?"

In answer, Luxa put her arms around Howard's neck. "Oh, no, are you actually giving me a hug?" He hugged her back, grinning at Gregor over her shoulder. "And it only took an earthquake, a flood, and an avalanche to get it."

They all laughed then, even the bats and Temp. Even Luxa.

Now that the immediate crisis was over, they had to deal with the larger crisis at hand.

"The avalanche blocked the Swag. So, how do we get back to Regalia?" asked Gregor. The pursuit of the mice was over. They had to get Hazard home now.

"It is easier said than done," said Howard. "For we are in Hades Hall."

"Okay, what's that?" asked Gregor.

"It is a long passageway that goes very deep into the earth. But there are only two ways to gain entrance to it. On this end, the Swag, which is no

longer an option. At the far end, many miles from here, the Firelands," said Howard.

"What, there's no other way to get out?" asked Gregor.

"I am afraid not. There are some caves. But no other tunnels," said Howard.

"The Firelands ... aren't they near the jungle?" asked Gregor. He was trying to call up the image of the Underland map he had once seen, but it was foggy.

"Yes. The journey should require about five days of travel. Three for Hades Hall, and two to get back to Regalia. But before we begin, we must eat; we must rest. We are all in need of recovery, and I would not move Hazard so soon," said Howard.

No one wanted to eat. The river water had made their stomachs feel weird. Gregor put his flashlight on low and set it in the middle of the group. It was all they could allow themselves, with a long trip ahead and no torches.

"Your light, Gregor. How long will it last?" asked Luxa.

"Not for five days," said Gregor.

"I don't like the dark," said Hazard plaintively. "I miss the jungle. There was always some light there."

"When we sleep, Hazard, it will not matter if it is light or dark," said Luxa, smoothing back his curls. "May he go to sleep now, Howard?"

"Yes, Hazard may rest, but we must wake him every time the watch changes," said Howard. "It is standard with head injuries."

Luxa wanted the first watch. She was still too worried about Hazard to do anything else. Gregor realized that her loving Hazard had brought a new dimension of anxiety into her life. Made her vulnerable in a way she had not been before. It was unbearable to think about losing anyone you loved, but that time Gregor had thought he'd lost Boots it was as if the world had ended. Little kids ... you just loved them in a special way.

Between the incident with Hazard and her ongoing fear for the mice, Luxa was being pushed to the limit. Gregor volunteered to take the watch with her before anyone else had a chance. Just to keep an eye on her.

Despite the dampness of their clothes and fur and even Temp's shell — periodically trickles of water would run out of some part of him — the others fell asleep quickly.

Gregor sat next to Luxa on the smaller picnic hamper that she had positioned over Hazard's bedside. He reviewed his situation in his head.

Boy, was he ever in trouble now. The list of his transgressions was quite impressive. He had secretly gone to the mouse colony with Luxa. He had taken Boots along. He had crossed the Swag, which he knew nothing about, and then been cut off by an avalanche. He was five days from reaching Regalia, which meant during that time his family would be in hell. All they would know was that he had taken Boots on a picnic and never returned. A thought hit him.

"Hey, Luxa, if all that water ran into the Swag from the river, they would know in Regalia, right? I mean, the whole river would be lower," said Gregor.

"Yes, I suppose so. The water here stopped rising after the avalanche. It seemed to have blocked it off. But we have no idea what happened on the other side of the Swag," said Luxa. "Why?"

"I was thinking, at least people might guess we had come here and know it might take us some time to get home," said Gregor. "I mean, say they came to investigate why the river was low. And they found where we'd had a fire at the nibblers' colony. Maybe they could put two and two together and know we'd gone through the Swag."

"But, Gregor, that could have been anyone's fire. And once the river fills the Swag it may flood the nibblers' colony as well, erasing all signs of us," said Luxa.

She was right. If a big wave had come out of this side of the Swag, a big wave had probably come out of the other side, too. Gregor didn't know enough about science to even guess what would happen to the river or to the surrounding areas when everything had settled.

"Besides, they have no reason to think we would come so far. Had it been only you and I, possibly. We are not much trusted. But we took Hazard and Boots, whom we cherish. And Howard ... no one ever would expect Howard to make such an unauthorized trip. He is so dependably good," said Luxa.

"That didn't keep them from putting him on trial for treason," said Gregor.

"True enough, but he was easily cleared of the charge. And this morning Vikus saw us off with two hampers of food. I expect they are searching well-frequented picnic sites for us," said Luxa.

"Oh. It was just a thought," said Gregor. "So ... how are you doing?"

"Better, now that Hazard breathes," said Luxa.

"Don't worry. Howard will make sure he's okay," said Gregor.

"Yes, Howard watches over him," said Luxa.

"He watches over you, too," said Gregor, remembering his uncomfortable date conversation. His face turned hot again. "Look, you know when we were leaving Regalia and I said that whole thing about the picnic being a date? I'm sorry. That was just to get us out of there. I didn't mean ... you see, I didn't know... in the Overland a date's not that big a deal... well, it would be for me, but for other people ... okay, you can stop staring at me now. I'm done."

Those violet eyes had been locked on his face as he floundered through the explanation. "Did Howard say something to you about it?" asked Luxa, not looking away.

"Yeah. He made it pretty clear you and I weren't going on any dates," said Gregor. They both laughed.

"I knew you did not mean anything by it," said Luxa. "I am sure I am not at all the person you would choose to invite on a date."

"That's not true," Gregor blurted out. Oh, man! Why did he say that? She had been perfectly willing to go with the "that was just to get us out of Regalia" excuse! And here he was, stepping right back into it. "I mean, there's nothing wrong with you." That sounded bad, too. "It's just the whole queen thing."

"And the Overlander thing," she said, finally looking away.

"Yeah," he said. What did that mean? That if he weren't an Overlander she might... she might what? He had to stop this now. He needed to change the subject. New subject... new subject... "Do you want a sandwich?" he said.

"A sandwich?" said Luxa. "Yes."

"I'll make some," said Gregor. They ate cheese sandwiches and talked very little. When Ares and Nike awoke to take the next shift, Gregor lay down next to Boots and pulled the edge of the blanket up over his face, grateful to be away from Luxa's eyes.

The next morning, while they had breakfast, Howard explained the geography of Hades Hall. "I have never traveled it myself. Humans rarely take this route, for others are shorter and less perilous."

"Where does it come out exactly?" asked Gregor.

"In the Firelands. Here, Gregor, it is like this," said Howard. He dipped his finger in some kind of spicy sauce and drew an *A*. "We are here." To the left of the *A* he made a long line. "Here is the river that leads into the Waterway." A large oval indicated the Waterway. To the left of the Waterway, way off to the side, he made a *B*. "Here lie the Firelands. And Hades Hall runs something like this." Howard drew an S-shaped line between points *A* and *B*.

Gregor stared at the map. Something was confusing him. "Where's Regalia?"

"Here," said Howard, indicating a point directly on top of the S-shaped line.

"So, why don't we run into Regalia on the way?" said Gregor.

"Because Hades Hall is far below Regalia and there is no access to it. You must not think of the Underland as a flat plain. Think of it as a sphere, where one can go up and down as well as side to side," said Howard.

"At one point, Regalia will be directly over our heads," said Luxa. "I do not much like going so deep in the earth." Which Gregor found ironic, since she already lived miles below the planet's surface.

They packed up their gear and got ready to travel. Hazard was the greatest concern. Howard settled him on Aurora's back, giving Luxa specific instructions for his care. Gregor took Boots and Temp on Ares, Howard rode Nike, and they all just hoped that Thalia, without a rider, might be able to keep up.

At first Gregor was optimistic. Hades Hall was a massive tunnel. At times he could not see both sides of it at once. It had clean streams filled with fish, so they weren't likely to dehydrate or starve. The floor was rocky and uneven, but they would be up on the bats. On the whole, it seemed like it would be a decent enough trip.

As the hours passed, though, he felt they were making little headway. The tunnel began to slope so dramatically that at times the bats were practically free-falling in space. They couldn't really fly ... they just sort of dropped and occasionally opened their wings to guide themselves. It was not a speedy way to travel. Besides that, it seemed like they were stopping every ten minutes for something. Boots had to pee; Thalia needed a break; Hazard's bandage had to be changed; Nike spotted a good stream and thought they should fill their water skins as a precaution.

They carried on this way for about six hours, until Howard said they would have to make camp for the night. Hazard couldn't travel anymore. Hades Hall was still angled sharply down, but they found a big ledge on the tunnel wall to stay on.

Hazard and the bats went to sleep. The rest of them gathered around the beam of Gregor's flashlight and tried to act like they weren't worried. Well, Boots really wasn't worried. She played I Spy with Temp. It wasn't much of a game, since it was too dark to see stuff. But that didn't stop her.

"I spy, with my little eye, something that is black!" she said about a thousand times. Temp would try to guess. Often the big reveal was just Boots pointing into the darkness at different angles and saying, "That!"

They were all a little relieved when she finally fell asleep. Gregor felt free to bring up something that had been weighing on him since that morning. Something he had not wanted to discuss in front of the little kids. "Howard, you said this trip was more perilous than other routes. What did you mean by that exactly?"

"The depth of the tunnels is difficult to navigate. The air becomes foul as we near the Firelands. And then there are creatures who live here who would rather not be disturbed," said Howard.

"Dangerous creatures?" asked Gregor.

"Some. Most will simply avoid us. Of those who would seek to do us harm, many do not fly, so we shall elude them. And then there are others who are not hostile but must be acknowledged," said Howard.

"Like who?" said Gregor.

It was as if the creature in the darkness had only been waiting for the right opportunity to break in. And when he spoke, Gregor recognized the high whiny voice immediately. How could he forget it?

"Greetings, all! I am he called Photos Glow-Glow ... and she is Zap."

CHAPTER 13

"No way!" was the first thing that burst out of

Gregor's mouth. He had never expected to see the fireflies again. The bugs had deserted the ship on the quest to find the Bane and betrayed everyone aboard to the rats. Gregor, Boots, Ares, Howard, Luxa, Aurora, and Temp had all nearly been killed because of their deception. Gregor didn't know what the fireflies were doing here in Hades Hall, but he couldn't believe that they had the guts to come up with a big friendly hello.

Howard, who had been the most outraged at the bugs' disloyalty, sprang to his feet and drew his sword. "Show yourselves, shiners!" he shouted into the darkness, waking the bats. "Show yourselves, you bloated bags of treachery!" There was a long pause. Then Gregor heard Zap say, "Well, that was rude."

"Very rude," agreed Photos Glow-Glow.

"And after all we did for them. One would think a little gratitude might be in order," said Zap in a wounded tone.

"Gratitude!" spat out Howard. "You sold us to the rats and now you expect gratitude? Show yourselves!"

"Someone has a very selective memory," said Photos Glow-Glow. "You do not seem to recall how we starved for you, guided you across the Waterway, and masterfully defended you from the squid!"

"I remember you ate some squid," said Gregor. "That's about it." He hadn't even bothered to rise. The shiners were such lazy, inept creatures, he knew they would never attack. He supposed he could chase them down in the dark ... and then what? He despised them, but he wasn't going to go kill them.

But Howard was of another mind. "Nike!" he called. "Let us rid ourselves of these traitors once and for all!" Nike fluttered to his side.

It was Luxa who grabbed Howard by the arm. "Wait," she said. Howard looked at her in surprise. "Do you not join me, Cousin? After all you have suffered at their hands?"

Gregor could barely hear the next thing she whispered to Howard. "They have light."

Howard's shoulders hunched forward as he wrestled with what she was suggesting. Finally, he shoved his sword back in his belt.

"Shiners, will you not show yourselves?" said Luxa pleasantly. "We mean you no harm."

"It seems more prudent to remain aloof," said Photos Glow-Glow.

"He means aloft," said Zap. "He can never keep words straight."

"I meant aloof! As in distant, remote, and detached!" said Photos Glow-Glow.

And the two launched into a big argument about "aloof" and "aloft." When they were winded, Luxa tried again.

"That is too bad. For we find ourselves with an overabundance of food that will soon be unfit to eat. Particularly cake," she said.

"Cake?" said Zap. There was another long pause.

"Has this cake ... been frosted?" asked Photos Glow-Glow.

"Oh, yes. I do not care for it any other way," said Luxa. "But it is such a pity to waste it." She removed a round cake from the hamper and looked at it regretfully. It was rather battered from being tossed over and over in the flood, but it gave off a delicious smell.

"Well, Your Highness has not been rude to us, as some have. So if my eating that cake would please you ... I do not have any objection to it," said Photos Glow-Glow.

"Nor I!" said Zap, and suddenly the pair of fireflies were right in front of Luxa, their rear ends ablaze with yellow light.

For the first time in days, Gregor could see properly. He was immediately aware of things he had missed. That there were large patches of mushrooms growing on the ceiling. That puffs of vapor periodically emerged from cracks in the walls. That Boots had a big bruise on her arm. If he had not seen these things, what else had he been blinded to? What dangers lay out in the dark beyond his vision's reach?

Gregor knew Luxa absolutely loathed the shiners. She also knew they could be of use. He had to admire how quickly she'd assessed the situation and made the decision to make peace with them. He thought Ripred would have applauded her shrewdness. It was something the big rat would have done himself. If he were here. Instead of hunting down the Bane. Or whatever. Hopefully by the time they returned to Regalia, Ripred would have checked in.

Luxa divided the cake in two and the bugs gobbled it down to the last crumb.

"How come you to be in Hades Hall, Most Gracious Queen?" said Photos Glow-Glow.

"We crossed the Swag for a lark and were cut off by an avalanche. Now we must proceed home this way," said Luxa. "And yourselves?"

"We live here," said Zap unhappily.

"You live here?" asked Gregor. He had never thought of the fireflies as living anywhere.

"We were driven out of finer lands by villains who greatly outnumbered us," said Photos Glow-Glow. "The slimers."

Howard gave a snort of derision. "Snails, Gregor. They were chased out of their lands by snails."

"Are snails fast down here?" asked Gregor.

"Fast enough!" snapped Photos Glow-Glow.

"At full speed, they travel one yard an hour," said Nike.

"But they are persistent!" said Zap indignantly.

"It is widely believed that the snails did not even know they overthrew the shiners, so nonexistent was the resistance," said Howard.

Gregor could tell Howard had hit a nerve. Zap's light came in short, angry bursts, and Photos Glow-Glow's butt had turned bright red.

"Howard, Nike, why do you provoke my guests?" said Luxa.

"We are hoping they will be offended enough to leave," said Nike.

"And I am hoping they may join us for a few days," said Luxa. "After all, this is their territory. They know it well. Do you two?"

"No," said Howard sullenly.

"Then counter not my desires," said Luxa.

"I hope you know what you are doing, Your Highness," said Howard.

"You seem tired. Why do you not get some rest?" said Luxa.

Grumbling to himself, Howard wrapped up in a blanket and lay down. Nike fluttered over to his side. They would make good bonds, Howard and Nike. They both were honorable, brave, and good-natured. Already they trusted each other with their secrets. And they clearly agreed about the shiners.

"It seems that some believe us to be the villains in our last encounter. When in truth it was you humans who broke your contract with us," said Photos Glow-Glow. "We were guaranteed a certain measure of food ... which was not supplied."

"We stayed extra days, just as a favor," said Zap.

"Yes, unquestionably we were the injured party," said Photos Glow-Glow.

It was sort of interesting to hear things from the fireflies' perspective. They had some valid points, in a way. The trip to find the Bane hadn't been their quest. They were hired lightbulbs. Gregor still couldn't stand them, though.

"It wasn't so much that you left. It's that you told the rats we were coming," said Gregor.

The fireflies shifted around uncomfortably.

"That was Zap's idea," mumbled Photos Glow-Glow.

"Liar!" shrieked Zap. She flew furiously at Photos Glow-Glow. Their heads smacked into each other with an unpleasant cracking sound, and they both plopped back on the ground, groaning and spitting insults at each other. Then they just glowered at each other.

"Well, let us let bygones be bygones," said Luxa. "Perhaps you will journey with us through Hades Hall. I cannot promise large quantities of food, but we will share what we have and the fliers are excellent fishers."

Photos Glow-Glow and Zap agreed, probably because they were hoping for more cake. Besides, what else did they have to do? Gregor couldn't imagine them having enough willpower to work up any constructive plan for themselves. If their species had been driven out of their lands by snails, they weren't highly motivated. They made it seem like their schedule was packed, though.

"Well, I suppose we can fit it in," said Zap. "If we break a few other commitments."

"Yes, others will be disappointed, but we will fit it in," said Photos Glow-Glow. "We can hardly leave you down here with the rats to fend for yourselves."

"Rats?" said Howard, sitting right up. He hadn't been sleeping at all. "Have you seen gnawers down here of late?"

"Oh, look who deigns to speak to us now," said Photos Glow-Glow.

"Yes, la-de-da-da," agreed Zap.

"Shiners, if you have knowledge of the gnawers, I would greatly appreciate your sharing it," said Luxa.

"They came past our lands," said Zap, indicating the tunnel ahead of them with a nod.

"After the nibblers," said Photos Glow-Glow.

All that had happened, the earthquake, the flood, the avalanche, Hazard's injury, and the journey through Hades Hall, had overshadowed the nibblers' plight for Gregor. But he could tell by Luxa's response that she had never stopped thinking of them.

"Where?" she said, springing to her feet. "How many nibblers? Were the rats with them or did they flee? Tell me!"

"Oh, there must have been hundreds," said Zap. "Maybe thousands."

"The rats were driving them somewhere. They are always driving the nibblers somewhere. Out of the caves, into the jungle, out of the jungle, into the tunnels. The whole thing is very tedious to watch," said Photos Glow-Glow.

"We fell asleep," said Zap.

"Were these nibblers from the jungle?" asked Gregor.

"No, they took the ones from the jungle straight to the Firelands," said Zap. "At least, I think someone said that. It was days ago. But the rats have been moving the nibblers around for years."

"Maybe they'll just leave them all in the Firelands and stop annoying the rest of us," said Photos Glow-Glow.

"The nibblers could not make a decent home in the Firelands," said Nike.

"Everyone has troubles, and no one helps," said Zap. "Look at us. Those slimers drove us from our home, and who came to our aid?"

"No one knew you were under attack," said Luxa.

"Because ... we were too proud to ask for help!" said Photos Glow-Glow dramatically.

"And it was such a long trip to Regalia," admitted Zap. "Nobody wanted to fly that far."

"But mostly... because we were too proud to ask for help!" repeated Photos Glow-Glow with a flourish.

The fireflies claimed they'd flown for hours and had to be exempted from watch duty that night. Soon they were snoring. Luxa asked Howard to take the first shift with her, and as he drifted off to sleep Gregor could hear her trying to reason with her cousin about the shiners, saying they would give Hazard comfort and that they might reveal more information about the nibblers.

The next morning, Gregor was awakened by Boots's surprised voice. "Fo-Fo? Are you Fo-Fo?"

"I am he called Photos Glow-Glow and will answer to no other name!" said the firefly.

"Oh, shiners!" said Hazard, rubbing his eyes and smiling. "How bright they are!"

"Temp! Temp! Look! Fo-Fo is here!" said Boots cheerfully.

"I said, I am he called ... oh, never mind," said Photos Glow-Glow crankily.

His mood improved with breakfast. The bats fished to provide a base for the fireflies' meal, and Luxa gave them each some shrimp salad. It was starting to spoil, but they didn't seem to notice.

The little band hadn't flown for five minutes when they passed the fireflies' current home. It was an enormous cave off Hades Hall that emitted a continuous whiny buzz. Multicolored lights flashed from the inhabitants' butts and a few voices demanded to know what Photos Glow-Glow and Zap were doing, but none of the other bugs could be bothered to fly out and find out.

Apparently Photos Glow-Glow and Zap were real go-getters for their species.

Hades Hall continued to veer downward at an alarming rate. They were moving deeper into the earth every moment. Often when Gregor swallowed his ears would pop.

They had to stop many times and fish for the fireflies just to keep the bugs going. Gregor wondered if they were really worth the effort. Then he remembered being knocked around the cave by Twirltongue and her friends and knew that they were.

"We near the bottom," said Photos Glow-Glow finally.

"Good, we will make camp there," said Howard.

"Not us," said Zap.

"Why not?" asked Gregor.

"Are your noses of no use at all?" asked Photos Glow-Glow.

There was a smell. A horrendous smell, wafting up from below them. Gregor flashed back to a summer several years ago, the farm in Virginia, his grandpa dragging a possum carcass from under the shed. "Something died down there," Gregor thought. A moment later, he saw them.

At least a hundred mice lay twisted and motionless at the bottom of the tunnel.

CHAPTER 14

"The mouses take a nap?" said Boots. "Kill the lights!" Gregor shouted at the fireflies. In another few seconds even Boots would realize that the mice were not sleeping but dead. Some lay in pools of dried blood. The eyes of others were wide open as they stared frozen into space. "Turn them off!"

The bulbs on Photos Glow-Glow's and Zap's rear ends went dark. Gregor flicked on the flashlight at his belt but did not direct it to the ground.

"What did Boots say? What mice? Did we find the nibblers?" asked Hazard, struggling to sit up.

"Lie back, Hazard; there is nothing to see," said Howard.

"What is that smell?" Hazard insisted.

"It comes from a foul stream. We will fly on," said Luxa.

None of them wanted Hazard or Boots to see the corpses. But there was no concealing them from Thalia. When they found a place to land about a thousand yards beyond the graveyard, Gregor noticed the little bat was trembling. He felt pretty shaky himself.

Howard made a bed for Hazard and then pulled Luxa and Gregor aside. "One of us must stay with the young ones while the other two go back."

"I must go," said Luxa.

"You stay, Howard. In case Hazard feels bad or something," said Gregor.

They left Howard, Nike, and Temp to watch over Hazard, Boots, and Thalia. Photos Glow-Glow stayed at the campsite while Zap escorted Gregor and Luxa and their bonds back to the mice.

Before they left, Howard provided them with cloths wetted with an antiseptic solution to hold over their noses as a barrier to the smell of decomposing flesh. "Do not touch any of them," he instructed. "You do not know what contagion they might carry."

The cloths helped, but when they reached the mice Gregor still could not help gagging at the stench. Zap's light was enough to illuminate the whole area. The bottom of the tunnel had ended with a sheer drop of about forty feet. The mice must have been driven straight off the side of the cliff and fallen to their deaths. Some, by their squashed and battered appearance,

had clearly broken the fall of others. Several pups were crushed completely. There were no rats among the dead.

Even Zap, who showed remarkably little compassion in general, seemed affected by the scene. "What a waste. What a waste. I do not pretend to like the nibblers, but what a waste."

"I guess they ran right off the edge of the cliff," said Gregor.

"They would have found a way to scale the wall, had they been given time," replied Luxa bitterly. "This was the gnawers' work."

"Should we do something with the bodies?" asked Gregor.

"There is nothing to be done. If we place them in the water, we pollute our own drinking supply. We do not have enough hands to bury them in stone, nor the fuel to burn them properly," said Luxa. All this was true. Yet somehow they couldn't just fly away and do nothing.

"We should leave something, a headstone or some message," said Gregor. But writing in stone was no small matter. He had intended to write a few sentences about what happened, but it was an effort even to scratch one straight line into the side of the cliff with his sword. As he stood considering the wall, waiting for inspiration, Luxa came up and added the thin, beaklike appendage that turned the line into the scythe. Into a mark of secret.

"It will be a warning to any that follow us," she said. "And it will be a fitting marker for the nibblers' graves."

And then Luxa did something that made Gregor feel both remarkably close to and a million miles away from her. Flinging away the cloth from her nose, she kneeled on the ground and placed her crown in front of her. Crossing her wrists, she held her hands, palms down, over the gold circle, and said in a loud voice:

"Upon this crown my pledge I give.

TO MY LAST BREATH, I HOLD THIS CHOICE.

i will your unjust deaths avenge, All here who died without a voice."

The words reverberated around the tunnel. It was not an impromptu rhyme, something she had made up off the top of her head. There was a specific ritual and a grim, formal tone to the lines. Gregor was certain it was an oath. Something you swore to fulfill or died trying to. It came from such an agonized place within Luxa that Gregor wanted to wrap his arms around her. But the oath had pushed him away from her, too. Had reminded him

that he was just a visitor in a strange land where people vowed vengeance and crowns mattered and queens were off-limits to him.

Watching her rise, Gregor could no longer see Luxa the twelve-year-old girl who'd been searching for clues about her mouse friends. What he saw was the future head of Regalia, and its considerable armies, and that the rats were somehow going to pay with their blood.

Something was happening in the tunnel. Faint whispering sounds, buzzes, a rustle of wings. Gregor remembered what Howard had said, about how a lot of creatures lived in Hades Hall. They had been keeping a low profile so far, but they were around, watching, listening, and now reacting to Luxa's little speech. She heard the reaction and for some reason that Gregor didn't understand, she smiled.

The moan startled them. Zap brightened her beam and they saw a slight movement in the field of stillness. The tip of a tail shuddered. Disregarding Howard's warning about touching the creatures, Luxa raced to the mouse's side and crouched beside him, stroking his fur. He could not speak.

"Let's get him to Howard," said Gregor. Together, he and Luxa loaded the mouse onto Ares's back. Gregor tossed his leg over his bat's neck, but Luxa remained on the ground. "Aren't you coming?" he asked.

"No, Gregor. We will stay and make sure no others still have light," said Luxa. In the Underland, the word "light" could be interchangeable with the word "life."

Gregor looked at the victims. "We'll come back and help," he said.

"You do not have to," said Luxa. "Aurora and I can manage."

"We will come back," Ares said.

Gregor and Ares delivered the barely conscious mouse to Howard and returned to the base of the cliff. One by one, they checked each body. Some were obviously dead. Some it was impossible to tell, so they felt for a pulse or listened for a whiff of breath coming from their nostrils. There were no other survivors.

Back at the campsite, Gregor scrubbed himself at a nearby stream, but he could not seem to get the smell of the dead mice from his pores. And the images of those bodies ... well, he knew those would revisit him for a long time in his dreams.

Howard worked long and hard over the injured mouse. One of his front legs was broken, so Howard set the fracture. He put a salve on the mouse's raw and bloody paws. After about an hour of periodically getting him to

take spoonfuls of water, Howard made a thin gruel of fish, bread crumbs, and broth and got the mouse to eat a little. The water and food revived him enough for him to speak a few words, starting with his name, Cartesian. Howard was able to ascertain the extent of Cartesian's injuries better now. The mouse had badly bruised ribs, although they did not seem broken. He'd received a blow to the head. Dehydration and hunger had also taken their toll. It was not enough information to find out exactly what had happened to Cartesian, but it was enough to treat him. Howard made a poultice for Cartesian's head, gave him some painkiller and a second medicine to reduce swelling, and continued to feed him.

Boots wanted very badly to help, so Howard gave her the job of singing the mouse to sleep. She squatted down a few feet away and softly sang little tunes she knew from home. These were mostly theme songs from preschool shows she watched on TV. Then she launched into her Underland repertoire, which included the songs about the spinners, and the fish, and the bats.

*"Bat, bat,
Come under my hat, i will give you a slice of bacon
And when I bake, I will give you a cake,
If I am not mistaken. "*

Then she sang the stanza from the one about the queen and the nibblers and pouring tea, because she thought, as a mouse, Cartesian would like it best.

*"Catch the nibblers in a trap. Watch the nibblers spin and snap.
Quiet while they take a nap.
Father, mother, sister, brother,
Off they go. I do not know
If we will see another. "*

Cartesian slowly drifted off to sleep, and Howard praised Boots for her excellent singing job. Enamored with her newfound talent, Boots went around to everybody trying to sing them to sleep. Half the party were so tired they genuinely fell asleep; the other half pretended until Boots dozed off herself. Then Gregor, Luxa, Howard, Aurora, Nike, and Ares gathered for a consultation in the glow of Photos Glow-Glow's bulb.

"Well, as tragic as our findings today have been, at least we know we have kept to the nibblers' trail," said Howard.

"It is not much to our credit," said Luxa. "We chose this path because it was the only way out. We can be sure that we follow them to the far side of Hades Hall."

"And then?" asked Gregor.

"And then what?" asked Luxa.

"And then you're going to keep following them, aren't you? Instead of going back to Regalia," said Gregor. She didn't answer, but he knew he was right. She wasn't going home. Not after she'd kneeled on the ground and said that stuff over the crown.

"We cannot do that. We have injured who must be returned home," said Howard. "And I believe there is enough evidence to make a case before the council, now that we have Cartesian for a witness."

"The rest of you will go back. Aurora and I will continue after the nibblers," said Luxa. "Someone must stay on their trail."

"But it will not be you, Cousin. I will drag you back to Regalia before I would leave you here alone," said Howard.

"She made some kind of oath," said Gregor. "Back at the cliff."

"Oath?" Howard looked at Luxa and his face fell. "Not 'The Vow to the Dead'?" he said in a hushed voice. Luxa nodded. "Oh, Luxa, what have you done? You are not even of age. You do not reign. The army does not move at your command. How mean you to fulfill it?"

"The only way I can," said Luxa. "I will go after the nibblers, and the council will send the army after me."

"They didn't send an army when you got caught in that rat maze," said Gregor.

"Because they thought she was dead," said Howard. "They will now. They must. Especially if she has said the vow."

"How will they even know?" said Gregor. "It's not like the humans have scouts in Hades Hall."

"Do you think only human ears matter?" scoffed Photos Glow-Glow. "The fliers heard her; that nibbler heard her; Zap heard her and has already told me. You are in Hades Hall, not the Dead Land. Who knows how many other creatures sat in the dark listening?"

"A lot," thought Gregor, remembering the strange noises that had followed Luxa's vow. That's why she had smiled. She had wanted them to hear.

"Half the Underland will know she said it in a matter of hours; she cannot take it back," said Howard.

"Nor would I if I could," said Luxa.

"But you're only, like, twelve," said Gregor. "Does it even count?"

"In this case, it counts," said Howard. "By the time word of the vow reaches the council it will already have reached our enemies. There will be no way to call it back or deny it. And given the circumstances, we will have only one option."

"What's that?" said Gregor.

Luxa gazed at him evenly. "I have just declared war on the rats."

CHAPTER 15

"So this is how a war starts," thought Gregor.

Not with two armies facing off, waiting for the signal to charge. Not with a wave of rats invading the avenues of Regalia. Not with a formation of bats swooping down on an unsuspecting colony of rats. It begins much more quietly. In a room, on a field, in a remote tunnel when someone who has power decides the time has come.

"No," he said. "We have to find some way to stop it."

"It is too late," said Luxa. "It is ironic. I could never start a war in Regalia. I can barely get leave to go on a picnic. But here, away from my city, I am free to make momentous decisions."

"Then maybe they should keep you locked up in your city, if you're going to go around declaring war!" said Gregor.

"Did you not see the bodies?" exclaimed Luxa. "What would you have me do, Gregor? Sit by while my friends are driven to their death?"

"We do not know exactly what plans the gnawers have for the nibblers, Cousin," said Howard. "But we do know they have a history of moving them from place to place. Perhaps the majority of the nibblers have already reached their new home in safety."

"That they were forced from their old home is not acceptable!" said Luxa. "That hundreds lie dead from the journey is not acceptable!"

"Okay! But maybe you might want to consider some other options besides waging war!" said Gregor.

"As in?" said Luxa.

"I don't have any off the top of my head," said Gregor. "But I bet I can come up with something a little less extreme."

"Well, when you do, I would love to hear it," said Luxa. "I am sure it will dazzle us all." She was mocking him. He might as well have been talking to Ripred. Gregor stared at her a moment. "It was pretty easy, starting a war," he said.

"It was not difficult," said Luxa.

"I wonder what it will take to get out of it?" said Gregor.

"I doubt you will ever find out. Since you are going home," said Luxa. "We, on the other hand, must stay and live here."

They did not take a watch together that night. Gregor didn't want to argue with Luxa. What he wanted was to think up an answer to her question that *would* dazzle everyone. The problem was... he didn't know what else could be done about the rats abusing the nibblers. If they didn't use force, how could the humans stop them? He knew the rats would not listen to talk. Since the plague, the humans had given the rats a lot of food and medicine to make up for unleashing the disease, but it had not erased the bitterness.

It was even more complicated because the rats did not have a leader to negotiate with. After King Gorger had died, the rats had splintered into groups. The plague had thrown them into even greater chaos. Now there was the Bane. He might be the next king. But then, what about rats that didn't follow him? Like Ripred and his gang. What about rats like Lapblood, who had been with Gregor on the quest to find the cure to the plague? She'd been trying to keep her pups alive. That's the main thing he knew about her. Would she support the Bane? If he was alive? If Ripred hadn't killed him?

Who exactly was Luxa declaring war on? The rats who had driven the nibblers off the cliff? Anyone who supported the Bane? Or just every rat, regardless of what they thought or stood for? Whatever Luxa had in mind, Gregor guessed that if a war really did begin, no one was going to take the time to interview a rat on its political position before they killed it.

Gregor found himself wishing very badly that he could talk to Hazard's father, Hamnet. Of course, Hamnet was gone. Killed months ago by the ants in a battle back in the jungle. Ten years earlier Hamnet had been one of Regalia's top soldiers. During a battle, he had inadvertently caused a dam to break, which resulted in the drowning deaths of not only an army of rats but also humans, bats, and the innocent rat pups sheltering in nearby caves. Hamnet had gone temporarily mad and then disappeared. Many years later, he had resurfaced in the jungle with his little son, Hazard, to act as Gregor's guide. Gregor remembered Vikus, who was Hamnet's father, begging him to return to Regalia. "What do you do here that you could not do there?" To which Hamnet had replied, "I do no harm. I do no more harm." Hamnet knew if he returned to Regalia, they would make him fight again.

Hamnet had tried to explain his position on war to Luxa. How it did no good. How innocent creatures died and, in the end, how it only increased the already intense hatred between the rats and the humans. Hamnet believed that the least amount of violence used, the better.

The things he'd talked about had made real sense to Gregor. Then an army of ants had appeared to destroy their precious plague cure and they had all ended up fighting, anyway. And that's when Hamnet had died. But what he had said ... everything he had said ... had been right. Deep inside, Gregor was sure of this. Only he did not know how to work his ideas into some kind of argument with Luxa. Not here. Not with the dead mice and the Bane running loose and everything. And why would she listen to him, anyway? Why would she listen to him say violence was a bad choice when he had hacked up a couple hundred snakes with a smile on his face? He drifted off to sleep feeling heartsick and confused. And without one dazzling idea.

When he awoke the next morning, the bats had already been fishing. Photos Glow-Glow and Zap were making loud smacking noises as they wolfed down their breakfast. Along with the fish, Howard had given them some other picnic treats that had spoiled ... mushrooms in cream sauce, rotted greens.

The bats and Temp were only eating from the river now, but the remaining picnic food was running low. There were a few loaves of stale bread, some cheese, some dried vegetables, and a couple of cakes. Gregor looked over the supplies and thought about Boots wailing for food and water in the jungle. It had been unbearable. He sighed and picked up a raw fish, hacking off a piece with his sword. Better to save the picnic food for the kids.

Howard must have made a similar decision, because he was cracking open shellfish with a rock. "Try this," he said to Gregor, handing him a slimy thing on a half shell. "It is considered a delicacy at the Fount."

Gregor dumped the contents of the shell into his mouth. His teeth chased the slippery glob around his mouth for a few chews then he swallowed. Ugh. "I can see why," he said, trying to be polite.

"There are plenty," said Howard, shoving a stack toward Gregor.

"He does not want them, Howard; they are disgusting," said Luxa. She was expertly flaying the skin off a fish.

Gregor agreed with Luxa, but because he was angry with her and liked Howard he ate a few more of the shellfish just to prove her wrong. He drank some water to wash the taste out of his mouth, but then he could feel the things sloshing around in his stomach.

Cartesian awoke and seemed to have gained a little of his strength back. He was woozy from the medicine. "Where are the others?" he kept asking.

"We are going to get them now," said Luxa gently.

But he kept repeating, "Where? Where are the others?"

Howard got Cartesian to eat some ground-up fish and gave him another dose of painkiller. Soon the mouse was sleeping again. "I'm afraid I shall have to sedate him on the entire journey back to Regalia," said Howard.

Space on the bats was becoming an issue. Hazard was still supposed to be lying down, so he and Luxa filled up Aurora's back. Gregor had Boots and Temp with him on Ares. And Howard settled Cartesian on Nike's back. "We are becoming a flying hospital ward," said Howard, "what with Hazard and Cartesian. We are lucky no one else is hurt."

Boots indignantly held up her finger. The nick was all but invisible now. "Me!" she said, shocked that she'd been overlooked.

"Oh, my goodness. Did I forget you, Boots? We had better put some medicine on that," said Howard.

It did not take more than an hour to cover the stretch of Hades Hall that was flat. Then the tunnel began to tilt upward as rapidly as it had dipped. If the trip down had required patient navigation from the bats, they had been allowed to coast for much of it. Now that they were flying upward, it required real physical exertion, but they seemed to be moving faster. Thalia began to fall behind as the morning wore on. By lunch it was clear the little bat was done in.

"I know it is tight, but we are going to have to double up," said Howard, handing Gregor a nice, freshly cracked shellfish.

Gregor tossed it back without chewing. That was better somehow. "How do you want to do it?"

"We must put Thalia on Ares. Temp, could you ride on top of Thalia?" asked Howard.

Gregor remembered the first time Temp had flown. How much he had hated it. "Do it, I can, do it," said the cockroach, but Gregor knew it would be a challenge for the bug to be the top of a flying-bat pyramid.

"Cartesian is heavy, and I as well, so I do not think Nike can manage more than Boots," said Howard.

Gregor knew where that left him. With Luxa.

"If that is all right," said Howard.

"Fine," said Gregor.

Luxa was probably no more thrilled about the travel arrangements than Gregor, but there was nothing either of them could say. When it was time to move on, Gregor took a seat on Aurora's neck, facing forward. Luxa sat with her back to Gregor's, so she could amuse Hazard as they flew. The boy lay facing Luxa, with his feet on her lap.

For the first few hours, Luxa basically ignored Gregor. She passed the time by playing word games with Hazard. When that grew old, she told him the Underland equivalent of the famous fairy tale "Little Red Riding Hood." In Luxa's version, Little Red Riding Hood was a girl who left Regalia on her bat to visit her grandmother at the Fount. Against instructions, she strayed from the path. Instead of going into a forest, she was lured into tunnels by some lovely mushrooms. There she ran into the Big, Bad Rat. The rat didn't kill her because she was flying too high. Instead, he was so friendly that Little Red Riding Hood told him all about her plans. When Little Red Riding Hood arrived at her grandmother's house, the Big, Bad Rat was waiting for her, disguised as her grandmother. They did the whole "But, Grandmother, what big eyes you have!" routine. Then the grandmother appeared and killed the Big, Bad Rat and she and Little Red Riding Hood threw the rat's body in the river. The moral of the story — never trust a rat.

"But what about the good rats, Luxa?" asked Hazard. "Like Lapblood. She saved Boots's life in the jungle. Or Ripred. My father said he was a good rat and he is Vikus's friend," said Hazard.

"Yeah, what about them, Your Highness?" said Gregor. This was exactly one of the things that had been worrying him the night before.

"You must be very careful with rats, Hazard," said Luxa. "It would take many years and many acts of loyalty for me to consider a rat my friend. They teach their pups to despise us."

"You do the same thing," said Gregor. "Or are we supposed to feel sorry for the Big, Bad Rat?"

"You really have no idea how much they hate you, do you, Overlander?" said Luxa.

That gave him pause. "I know most of them do," Gregor admitted. "But there are a few I would call my friends."

"I wonder, would they call you their friend?" said Luxa.

Gregor let the question hang there. If you came down to it, it was hard to imagine Ripred or Lapblood actually calling him their friend. The only

rat who might do that was Twitchtip, but she had been driven into the Dead Land by her own kind because of her extraordinary ability to smell and then she'd hooked up with humans on a mission to kill the Bane. She was not really a representative rat.

Hazard began to yawn and they stayed quiet while he went to sleep. It was not until the boy began to snore gently that Luxa spoke.

"You are very angry at me about declaring war," she said.

"I think it was the wrong thing to do," said Gregor.

"It has to happen, Gregor. Everyone knows it. The humans and gnawers cannot live in peace. One of us has to leave," said Luxa.

"Ripred said there was peace sometimes, in the past," said Gregor.

"But only for short periods. It never lasts," said Luxa. "We may as well get it over with. Have the war that will answer the question of who stays and who goes."

"Goes where, Luxa? If the humans lose, are you coming back up to the surface of the earth?" asked Gregor.

"I do not know. More likely, we would be forced into the Uncharted Lands, those beyond the edges of our maps. Perhaps, after some trial, another home could be found," said Luxa sadly.

"And if the rats lose, the ones who survive have to go into the Uncharted Lands?" said Gregor.

"I might keep Ripred around. As a pet," said Luxa.

Gregor had to smile. "A pet, huh?"

"Of course. I'd put bows on his tail and feed him shrimp in cream sauce and let him sleep by my pillow," said Luxa.

"He'd love that," said Gregor. He was laughing now. Something about the image of Ripred with bows on his tail.

"I had a pet lamb once and it was quite agreeable," said Luxa.

"Maybe you can teach him tricks," said Gregor.

"Maybe," giggled Luxa. "How to fetch and come when I whistle. My lamb could even jump through a hoop."

"It may take some time, but I'll bet he could learn that," said Gregor.

"Oh, yes, Ripred is very keen," said Luxa. She leaned against Gregor's backpack. He could feel her shaking as she laughed. After a while, she relaxed, but she didn't move away. She rested her head on the top of his shoulder, and he could feel her hair against his ear. It was nice. He sat very

still, not wanting her to move away. Not wanting to think about wars. Or going home. Just wanting to sit close to her, in peace and quiet.

They flew a long while like that. The air grew warmer and a bad smell reached his nose. Like rotten eggs ... that must be sulfur ... and smoke. "We must be near the top of Hades Hall," Gregor thought. "Howard said the air would get foul as we came to the Firelands."

Aurora banked for a curve in the tunnel and at that moment the fireflies blacked out. Gregor could still see some, though. For a moment he was confused and thought they might be in the jungle. As his eyes adjusted to the dim reddish light, he realized they had left Hades Hall and entered a whole new world. It was like flying over some far-off planet. It was impossible to tell how long the cavern was, but it was only about twenty feet high. The ground was desolate, pitted with craters, covered with an ashy dust that swirled up in small clouds and then settled down again. It did not seem that anything could survive here.

But something was very much alive. Gregor could just make out the creatures' backs a few hundred yards away. They were rodents of some kind. A number of small ones were gathering around a gray figure, which towered over them. At first Gregor thought they had caught up to the mice and one of their rat guards. Then the gray figure gave a shake, freeing itself of a layer of ashes and revealing a pearl-white coat.

CHAPTER 16

Aurora made a sharp turn and they landed in a hollow space in the wall to their right. It was barely deep enough to be called a cave, but it did shelter them from the rats' direct line of vision. Ares and Nike were quick to join them.

"The dust should prevent them from smelling us," said Howard.

Gregor could hear the crowd of rats he had seen talking. But there were no angry cries to attack.

"And they must not have seen us," Gregor whispered.

"No," replied Aurora. "Their eyes are fixed upon ... upon ... is it him?"

"Yeah, that's the Bane," said Gregor, sliding off her back. Howard and Luxa joined him as he peered around the stone opening to get a better look.

"Let me see!" said Boots, lighting up her scepter.

"No, Boots! We need it to stay dark." Gregor quickly confiscated the scepter and slipped it into his backpack. "I'll give it back soon," he promised.

"He is enormous," said Howard.

"He's even bigger than the last time I saw him," said Gregor.

"What? When he was a pup?" asked Luxa.

Of course, they didn't know about his meeting the Bane beneath Regalia. He hadn't told anyone. "I'll tell you later," he muttered.

Luxa scowled. "Maybe you should tell us now. Have you seen him —?"

But Howard cut her off. "Hush, he means to speak."

The Bane had leaped up onto a shelf of rock before the other rats. "Gnawers! Gnawers!" called the Bane. "I beg a moment of your time!" His voice had matured since that day Gregor had watched him fight with Ripred. It was low and deep and commanded attention. At its sound, more rats appeared out of the wasteland and joined those already assembled, swelling their ranks to several hundred.

"A moment of your time, to give you my thanks," said the Bane. "For being here. For standing beside me. Because what am I, what are any of us, if we stand alone?"

The rats had settled down now and were giving the Bane their full attention. The white rat lowered himself onto all fours and began to pace

back and forth before the crowd. His manner was almost casual, his tone philosophical. "I know what we once were. The unquestioned rulers of the Underland. And I know what we have been of late. Weak. Hungry. Diseased. At the mercy of our enemies. Tortured by humans, and mocked by creatures who in the past would not have dared to look us in the eye."

A murmur ran through the crowd.

"We've never been liked," continued the Bane. "But we were always feared. Until Gorger died. When the others stopped fearing us, they stopped respecting us as well. Does it bother you when the crawlers laugh as they strip our rivers clean of fish?"

A few of the rats called out, "Yes!"

"When the cutters claim land we have held for centuries?" asked the Bane.

"Yes!" More rats were joining in.

"When the humans infect us with a germ that ravages our species and then try to smooth things over with a few baskets of grain?" said the Bane, his voice rising in anger.

"Yes!" Most of the crowd had answered. Gregor could see the rats' agitation, their restless bodies, their swinging tails.

"How many of you lost pups?" asked the Bane. "And how many of you still call yourself parents? Which is worse? To watch them suffer and die quickly or to see them die slowly, stripped of pride, groveling at the feet of inferior creatures? Is that the life we want for our children?"

Several rats shouted, "No!" while others called for the death of the humans.

"The humans. The humans," said the Bane in disgust. "We knew from the moment they arrived that the Underland was not big enough to hold us both. And we will deal with the humans in the proper time. But there are others who must be taken care of first...." He stopped pacing and planted himself directly before the crowd. "If we ask ourselves who caused our troubles, we must ask ourselves who benefited by our suffering. Who found fertile lands to feed in? Whose numbers increased while ours diminished? Whose pups thrived while our own died of starvation and disease? You know who I'm talking about!"

Cries of "The nibblers!" came from the crowd.

"Yes, the nibblers! My father used to joke that the only good nibbler he ever saw was a dead nibbler," said the Bane wryly.

Ugly laughter rippled across the crowd.

"But maybe if he had used his time acting instead of joking, we would not be here today!" continued the Bane. "Tell me, if you can, why not one nibbler pup died of the plague? Why, when gnawers and fliers and even humans writhed in agony, they alone remained well? I'll tell you why. Because it was their plague. Everyone blames the humans; the fools even blame themselves. But where did that germ come from? It had to come from somewhere. The humans did not create it in their laboratories. We all know where the plague is born. In the jungle. And who, until quite recently, made the jungle their home? The nibblers. They found that germ. They gave it to the humans to turn into a weapon to be used against us. But not before they had the cure — all along they had the cure — all along they were safe and smug while they watched us die!"

There was a confused rumbling in the crowd. Gregor had the feeling that this was the first time this theory had been presented to the rats.

"Why should that surprise us?" said the Bane disdainfully. "Haven't they always plotted against us? Didn't they ally themselves with the humans the moment Sandwich arrived and offer to become his spies? Aren't they, even to this day, the eyes and ears of Regalia? Of all the creatures who take pleasure in our humiliation, I can stand the nibblers the least!"

This was greeted with a roar of agreement. The Bane lifted his voice above the din. "We have tried to drive them from our lands again and again, but it is never far enough. I say, this time we drive them to a place that allows no return!"

The rats were being whipped into a frenzy.

"Do some of you hesitate? Do some of you think another solution can be found? Remember that we have looked for gentler alternatives in the past, and think where that got us!" said the Bane.

The Bane reared up on his hind legs to his full height. "It is the law of nature. The strong determine the fate of the weak. Are we the weak? Are we the weak?"

The rats were leaping into the air and screaming back, "No! No!"

"Then gather the strength within you and fight with me! We have many enemies. The battle ahead of us is long and bloody. It will be difficult. But when you start to falter, find the hatred inside of you and draw power from it. Think of how the crawlers laugh, the humans smirk, the nibblers grow fat

while we starve, and see then if you do not have the stomach for what lies ahead!"

The crowd began to scream for the Bane.

"You say you want me to lead you? I will lead you! But a leader is only as strong as the force that stands behind him. Are you strong?" bellowed the Bane.

"Yes!"

"Do you stand behind me?" he shouted.

"Yes!"

"Then let our enemies do what they will. No creature in the Underland can stop us!" The Bane tilted back his head and gave a bloodcurdling battle cry as the rats went wild below him.

Gregor slumped back against the wall inside the cave, breathless and dazed. "Oh, no." It was not just the viciousness of the Bane's speech that stunned Gregor; it was its persuasiveness. "Twirltongue has been coaching him," Gregor thought. "Putting ideas in his head. Teaching him how to say them. And now he believes it all."

Luxa's and Howard's faces were shocked and pale. "He is a monster," said Howard. "Did you hear his words? Is he insane? How can he blame the plague on the nibblers?"

"The others believed him," said Luxa.

"I half-believed him myself," said Ares. "He made it seem so logical."

"What will he do to the nibblers?" said Aurora. "What does he mean, to drive them to a place that allows no return?"

"I do not know. Out of the Underland for certain," said Howard.

"And into the Uncharted Lands," said Luxa.

The rat noise began to die down a little.

Boots tugged on Howard's sleeve. "I'm hungry." He quickly pressed his finger against her lips. "Shh. We must not be discovered, Boots. Like Hide and Go Seek, you understand?"

Boots grinned excitedly and gave a little bounce. "Shh!" she said.

"Shh!" repeated Howard.

But there was someone it was not so easy to quiet. Cartesian had been stirring in his drug-induced sleep. The Bane's words must have filtered into his dreams. "No!" he cried out. "No!"

"Wake him, Howard! They will hear!" said Luxa.

Howard shook Cartesian and the mouse bolted up in terror. "Where are the others?" he screamed, his head turning from side to side. "Where are the others!"

"No, Cartesian, hush. They are safe. You are safe," whispered Howard urgently.

But the mouse was not reachable. "Where are the others!" he insisted.

Gregor allowed just one eye to slip around the cave wall. It was enough to see that the army of rats was galloping for them. "They heard! Mount up! Get out of here!"

They reloaded the bats in a moment. Gregor grabbed Boots because it was all Howard could do to keep the frantic Cartesian on Nike's back.

"Where are the others! Where are the others!"

The bats shot out over the cavern but had no idea where to go. As soon as they were airborne, they were recognized. The rats began to shout, "The Warrior! Queen Luxa!" Some were laughing, almost crazed by their good fortune of trapping such excellent quarry so easily.

"Where to?" called Ares, circling the air with Thalia and Temp clinging to his back.

Gregor saw what looked like some tunnel openings along the walls, but the rats had stirred up the ashes from the ground into a cloud, making it even harder to see. "We need more light!" he said, expecting the bright shiner beams to turn on. But there was no response. "Shiners!" He turned his head from side to side, trying to locate the bugs. "Where are they?"

"Gone!" said Howard in disgust. "They headed back into Hades Hall the moment we left the cave!"

"Stupid bugs!" said Gregor. But what had he expected? This was not the kind of situation Photos Glow-Glow or Zap would hang around for. He snapped on the flashlight at his belt and shone it around the cavern. Below them, hundreds of seething rats called out curses and leaped as high as they were able. Others had split off from the main group and were running to block the mouths of the tunnels along the walls. A few were already impassable.

"Should we go back to Hades Hall?" shouted Gregor.

"No, we will be trapped there for sure!" said Luxa.

"Then pick a tunnel, Luxa!" said Howard. He was literally pinning Cartesian to Nike's back now. "Make haste!"

"The one on your left, Aurora! Take it!" Luxa ordered.

The rats had not quite reached the tunnel entrance as the bats swept into it. But they were only seconds away and there would be no turning back. Gregor could hear them calling from the entrance, laughing and taunting. It gave him a bad feeling.

"They don't seem too unhappy about our escape," he said.

"That can only mean one thing," said Luxa. "Whatever lies in this tunnel wants us as dead as the rats do."

The words had just left her mouth when Ares gave a warning. "Arm yourselves! Stingers! Arm yourselves!"

The bats swooped into a huge chamber. Waiting on the floor with their tails poised in the air were a pair of giant scorpions.

CHAPTER 17

The two scorpions were about ten and twelve feet long. In addition to eight legs, each had a pair of pinchers snapping before it. But Gregor knew their most deadly weapons were their tails, which began to swing the moment the bats entered the chamber. He caught a glimpse of a foot-long stinger projecting from the end of a tail as it whizzed by him. Most of the scorpions in the Overland just gave you a terrible sting, but some had poison toxic enough to kill a human. And they were tiny beside these creatures. Whatever kind of venom these scorpions were packing, Gregor was sure one shot would be enough to finish off any of his party.

He could tell the bats thought so, too, because they were expending all their energy dodging those tails, even if it meant taking a dive down into pincher range.

Gregor had his right arm wrapped around Boots and was holding the flashlight in his left hand. He struggled to pull his sword off his left hip without letting go of her, but she was leaning curiously over the side of Nike's neck.

"Who's that?" she said. "Spiders?"

"Sit up, Boots!" he said.

"We need more light!" said Luxa.

"In my backpack!" said Gregor as he finally worked his sword free. Only now he had to hold his wiggly little sister with his flashlight arm. "Can you sit still!"

"Are they spiders, Gre-go?" Boots asked. "Like 'Itsy-Bitsy Spider'?"

"No!" said Gregor. "Boots, turn around! Hang on to me like a monkey!" She obeyed, but she still kept craning her neck around to see the "spiders."

He could feel Luxa digging in his pack and a few seconds later another beam of light brightened the cave. "Geez," he said as he got a clear look at the larger of the two scorpions. He was even more formidable when you could see him better. His body was covered in an armor shell, and he had about five pairs of eyes. That multiple-eye thing always freaked Gregor out.

"Hold on, Boots! I'm going to let go!" he said. This caught her attention. Maybe she remembered the flood and what had happened the last time he'd let go of her, because she locked her arms and legs around him so tightly he could hardly breathe. "Good," he squeaked out.

"Sever their tails!" he heard Howard shout.

"Right!" Gregor said, but he could not get himself into attack mode. What with Aurora flipping right and left to avoid the stingers and Boots squeezing the air out of him ... plus he had very limited motion with his sword arm since he had to fight around her. "I hope Luxa and Howard can take them," he thought. But he soon realized that was not going to happen. Howard had not even managed to draw his sword, because he was still trying to restrain Cartesian. Luxa was facing backward on Aurora, not the ideal fighting position, trying to keep herself and Hazard on board.

"Gregor, can you attack?" said Howard.

"I'm trying," said Gregor, chopping in the general direction of a tail. He missed by a mile. As to becoming a rager — the idea was laughable. He felt none of the intense focus and fear that sometimes brought on the condition. Instead, he felt trapped in a really silly horror movie.

"Baby spiders!" said Boots, as if making a pleasant discovery. "See the babies?"

"They're not babies," he said, and then had the awful thought that these were babies and she had spotted even larger scorpions, like the thirty-foot kind, headed their way.

"Hi, babies!" said Boots.

"Where? Where are the babies?" said Gregor.

"On the mama," said Boots, pointing. "See? Babies."

Gregor shone his light on the smaller scorpion's back and for the first time knew what Boots was talking about. About a dozen little scorpions were squirming around on the scorpion's shell. "Oh, great," he thought. The only thing worse than fighting a giant scorpion was fighting a giant scorpion who was trying to protect her young.

"I sing the babies to sleep," announced Boots.

"Fine, sing," said Gregor, thinking it would be better if she was occupied if he ever did make contact with one of those tails. Any sort of violence upset her. She wouldn't want him to hurt her "spiders." It wasn't until Boots launched into her rendition of the "Itsy-Bitsy Spider" that Gregor realized what a bad idea it was. The song required hand motions as the spider climbed the waterspout, as the rain fell down. And to do them, Boots let go of his neck.

"Hang on, Boots! Hang on!" he cried. But it was too late. Just as the sun was coming up in the song, Aurora did a full body roll to the side to avoid a

tail, and Boots fell off.

"Me!" said Boots as she flapped her arms, just as she had back in the arena.

"Boots!" cried Gregor.

Ares dove to catch Boots and managed to scoop the little girl up on his head, but the motion so startled Thalia that she fell off his back, taking Temp with her. Neither Aurora nor Nike had any means of catching the pair, so the little bat and the cockroach landed with a thud on the stone floor.

"Thalia!" screamed Hazard. "Fly!"

"Hold on, Temp!" said Gregor.

Thalia scurried to her feet, and Temp scuttled sideways a couple of yards, unsure of where to go. Ares veered back, claws extended to rescue them, but it was too late. Lightning fast, the mother scorpion attacked and pinned Thalia's wings to the ground with her pinchers. Her tail flipped over her head, poised for the kill. Thalia let out a piteous cry, knowing she was moments from death.

"No!" shrieked Hazard. "No!" He wrenched himself free of Luxa and leaped off Aurora's back. Fortunately, Aurora was only about twelve feet above the ground and he managed to land on his hands and feet. He scrambled straight over to Thalia, kneeled above her head, and extended his hands up to block the stinger. "No!"

Luxa had flipped after Hazard seconds after she'd lost her hold on him. She landed solidly on her feet and made for the scorpion, her sword ready to attack. The scorpion let out an angry hiss and Hazard suddenly turned and grabbed Luxa's sword arm. "Don't! Don't attack her!" he said frantically. "No one attack!" Still clinging to Luxa's arm, he turned his head back to the scorpion and began to make a bizarre series of hissing sounds.

The scorpion's tail quivered in place for a moment, as if in indecision. "Put your swords away! All of you!" said Hazard. Luxa hesitated. "Please, Luxa!" She reluctantly returned the sword to her belt, her hand still clenched on the hilt.

Hazard let out another round of hisses. The scorpion slowly let her tail relax behind her, although she did not release Thalia.

By this time Gregor and Aurora had landed. The first thing Gregor did as he slid off Aurora's back was sheathe his sword.

"Can you talk to her, Hazard?" Gregor asked.

"I don't know. I'm speaking Hisser, like I did with Frill. But I don't think the words are exactly the same for stingers," said Hazard.

A thought struck Gregor. Boots was right about one thing: Scorpions had eight legs like spiders... . They were different species, but maybe ...

"Try talking in Spider."

Hazard began to drum on his chest and issued a series of vibrating sounds. The scorpion shifted slightly from side to side, seeming genuinely confused.

"Temp! Temp! Try Crawler speech on it," said Howard.

Temp pattered up to join Hazard, clicking tentatively. Hazard joined in; he was almost fluent in Cockroach now. And of course, someone else would not be left out.

"Me, too! Me, too!" said Boots. She jumped off of Ares's head, and Gregor just barely caught her.

"Hey!" he said. "You can't just jump off—"

But she was already out of his arms, running over to the mother scorpion. "Let me talk! Let me talk!" Boots squealed, hopping eagerly from foot to foot. A stream of clicking intermingled with English poured out of her mouth. It was so frenetic, Hazard and Temp left off and let her go. Boots rattled on for about a minute, gesturing to the babies and singing little bits of "Itsy-Bitsy Spider" and click, click, clicking away, and then suddenly she stopped, her hands clasped together, her chin forward, as if she was eagerly expecting an answer.

There was a long pause, and then one of the scorpions behind Gregor made a few clicks. Then everybody started babbling or clicking or hissing until Howard called for silence.

Nike came in for a landing. Cartesian had worked himself into a state of exhaustion and lay limp on her back, glazed eyes staring into space. Howard slid off the bat and took Hazard's hand.

"What is it, Hazard? What do they understand?" said Howard.

"I think that they both understand some Hisser, I can't tell about the Spinner talk, and the big one there knows Crawler," said Hazard.

"All right, then," said Howard. "Ask them to free Thalia. Tell them we mean no harm and only wish to pass."

Hazard communicated this to the scorpion who had clicked. They did not hear him respond. But he must have said something to the mother

scorpion, because she released her grip on Thalia. The little bat fluttered right into Aurora's wings and buried her head.

The scorpion began to click again.

"He wants to know how we came here," said Hazard.

"Tell him," said Luxa. "Tell him the rats chased us here, sure that the stingers would kill us."

Hazard transmitted the message and the scorpion replied after a minute. "The gnawers are their enemies, too. They have recently forced the stingers out of some of their lands."

"Have they seen the nibblers?" asked Luxa.

Hazard talked a moment with the scorpion and said, "They have. The rats drove them by here only yesterday. And it does not go well with the nibblers. Many are sick or injured."

Boots, who had been very patient for a three-year-old, could no longer contain herself. She went off again, clicking and singing and pointing at the mother scorpion.

"What is your problem?" said Gregor, scooping her up.

"She wants to pet the babies," said Hazard.

"What? They're scorpions, Boots. You don't pet them!" said Gregor. But he was wrong again. A few minutes later, after some negotiation and assurances that they were too little to sting, Boots was sitting on the mother scorpion's back cooing to the babies as she patted their shells. Gregor guessed he shouldn't be surprised when he remembered how readily she'd taken to the cockroaches. And they were full-grown.

Hazard came over to join her and seemed to be able to talk to the mother some by hissing. Howard and Temp continued to exchange information with the bilingual scorpion. Luxa got out the last, very stale cake and laid it out as a peace offering for the scorpions. All thoughts of fighting were gone. Luxa licked a bit of frosting from her finger and shook her head. "It reminds me of what Hamnet told us in the jungle," she said to Gregor.

"What's that?" he said.

"About how many creatures do not wish to fight," said Luxa.

"But you'll never know if you show up waving your sword around," said Gregor, remembering. "I guess it's a good thing we were all so useless."

"Yes, if we could have actually fought, no doubt someone would now be dead," said Luxa.

"The stingers have agreed to let us stay here and rest before we move on," said Howard.

Ares and Nike got directions to a stream that ran through a nearby tunnel and soon returned with fish. They had a sort of picnic with the scorpions: raw fish and cake, and cold water to drink.

Boots would not eat the fish herself but loved feeding it to the baby scorpions. They took the fish but couldn't really swallow it. The scorpions seemed to need to drink their food like the spiders had. Injecting it with some liquid until it turned to goo. So the babies stole bites from the pile of gunk in front of their mother. Gregor just tried not to look at it. Hazard and Temp continued to act as interpreters.

"We know so little of stingers," said Howard. "Ask them, do they always live here or are they wanderers?"

"They say they have always lived here. Usually it is very peaceful. No one bothers them. But of late, the whole Underland comes to their doorstep. Shiners, nibblers, gnawers, crawlers, fliers, and even killers," said Hazard. He bit into a raw fish as if he'd said nothing out of the ordinary. But Gregor could see the look of shock on Howard's and Luxa's faces.

"Killers," said Gregor. "Who are they? Is there some other monster running around out here?"

"Oh, no, Gregor," said Hazard simply. "It's us. We humans are the killers."

CHAPTER 18

"What do you mean, we're the killers?" asked Gregor.

"You know how things have two names. Rats are gnawers. Bats are fliers. Most people call Temp a crawler, but my mother called him a cockroach like you do," said Hazard. "And she said 'spider' like Boots."

"When Sandwich came down, he used 'spider' as well," said Howard. "But in time, 'spinner' became the more popular term."

"In the Underland, creatures are named for what they do," said Hazard. "That's why they're the stingers," said Hazard, nodding to a scorpion. "And Ares is a flier. And we're killers."

"I've never heard that before," said Gregor.

"We do not like the name, so our friends do not call us by it. And our enemies do not use it to our faces, either, because it makes the humans seem too strong," said Howard.

"Killers, huh?" Gregor said to Luxa. He had seen too much in the Underland to give the humans some sort of "good guy" status. They were capable of doing plenty of damage. But what had they done to have earned the name "killers"? Had they really killed more than any of the other creatures?

"It is a very old name. As Howard says, we do not like it," she said. "I am surprised to hear you use it, Hazard."

"My father used it sometimes," said Hazard.

"Well, your father was not... he was not really one of us anymore," said Luxa. "I mean, he did not want to live with us."

"No. He did not like being a killer," said Hazard.

"Stop it! Stop saying that!" said Luxa.

Hazard looked at her in surprise. She almost never rebuked him. "Why? It is true. Humans are known for their killing."

"It is a very old name, Hazard," said Howard. "One we would like to see fade away entirely."

"I don't know how that will happen," said Hazard earnestly. "It's what most creatures call you in their own tongues, even if they do not use it in English. The hissers, the spinners, the crawlers, almost everyone."

"Well, that is an interesting piece of news," said Luxa, shooting a look at Temp.

"An old word, it be, old," said Temp uncomfortably.

"How could you not know that?" asked Hazard.

"Because you and your dad were the first humans who ever learned to speak another creature's language," said Gregor. "Better let it drop now, Hazard."

"I'm sorry," Hazard said, squeezing Luxa's hand.

"It is of no account," she said, giving him a hug. But Gregor could tell she was still unhappy about the whole conversation.

It was not exactly lifting Gregor's spirits, either. If the humans were known as killers, then what did that make him? Their warrior? Their rager? A killer among killers? For the first time he began to wonder what this war Luxa had declared would personally mean for him. Was it assumed that, as the warrior, he would participate? He had never fought in a major war. He'd only been in a couple battles and never faced off with an army of rats. He was, in reality, very inexperienced, but he doubted that would matter. What did the Underlanders expect of him? Did he have a special role? Like possibly ... killing the Bane? Gregor pushed the idea from his brain. No point thinking about that until he was back in Regalia with Vikus to talk him through "The Prophecy of Time." And then what? Then he would have to decide whether he was in or out.

It had been a long day. Starting with that breakfast of slimy shellfish, then the flight up Hades Hall, the Bane's speech, the rat attack, and the scorpions. Somewhere in that mess was the lovely peaceful time he had shared with Luxa, when they'd leaned back-to-back in silence. He wanted to pull the experience out and examine it and relive it. But the minute he'd curled up beside Boots, he fell fast asleep.

In the morning, the scorpions helped them work out their next move. The rats would have the mouth of the tunnel blocked, just in case any of them survived. But the scorpions knew the area far better than the rats. The best idea seemed to be to follow a series of tunnels deeper into the Firelands. Although it would mean a longer flight back to Regalia, they should have larger open spaces to fly in and less of a chance of being trapped by the rats. Luxa did not bring up her plan to pursue the mice, but Gregor knew she still meant to find them.

"And they say be watchful of the currents," said Hazard.

No one was too worried about the currents, though. Gregor had ridden the airstreams up and down to the Underland dozens of times now. He

actually kind of liked the currents.

As they were saying their good-byes, Luxa had Hazard translate a message for them. "Tell them from this day on, the humans consider the stingers their allies. Tell them we wish for nothing but peaceful relations between us. Tell them when they let Thalia live, they entered our hearts."

Hazard relayed the message. The scorpions came back with a similar, if less emotional, pledge. But then, since they'd had very little experience with the scorpions and there were several different languages to take into account, no one could really judge its tone. You had a scorpion speaking in Crawler to a seven-year-old boy who had only recently learned Crawler and spoke a mixture of Overland and Underland English. Things could have been lost in translation.

Gregor just considered it a huge victory that everyone got out of the situation alive. And there did seem to be the beginning of trust. Boots's affection for the babies had made a good impression. The scorpions were trying to help them evade the rats.

"You know who'd have loved that? Your grandpa," Gregor told Luxa as they started down a tunnel on Aurora's back.

"Yes, Vikus is very fond of peaceful resolutions. So am I. I just believe that in his eagerness to achieve them, my grandfather can trust too soon. Remember when we visited the spinners? We ended up as their prisoners," said Luxa.

"But they didn't kill us," said Gregor.

"They almost killed me!" said Luxa.

"Well, you were trying to escape," said Gregor.

"And then it took Gorger and his army slaughtering the spinners for them to ally themselves with us," said Luxa.

"They might not have ever done that, though, if they didn't trust Vikus," said Gregor.

"Perhaps not," said Luxa.

"I'm just saying, it's nice when nobody gets killed," said Gregor.

"That is pretty talk for a warrior," said Luxa. "Not the sort of thing you will want to be shouting out before a battle." She mimicked his accent. "'Remember, it's nice when nobody gets killed!'"

Gregor laughed. "Who knows? Maybe that's exactly what I should be shouting before a battle."

He was in a strangely good mood given the circumstances. He was far from home, surrounded by enemies, many of his companions were wounded, his family was worried sick, the mice were being driven who knew where, the Bane had turned into some sort of evil genius leader, and there was some ominous prophecy lying in wait for him. And here he was joking around with Luxa. Maybe it was just the relief of still being alive. Or maybe it was something else....

Luxa was leaning against his backpack again, her head on his shoulder. Howard flew by and gave Gregor a disapproving look. What? He hadn't made the seating arrangements. Howard had. It was more comfortable riding with someone to lean on. Probably Gregor was in for another speech about dates and queens and things. About how nothing was right about him liking Luxa.

"Oh, who cares? My mom will probably send me home the second we reach Regalia, anyway," thought Gregor. But the idea didn't make him feel happy. The walls and floor of the tunnel began to transform from a dull gray to a shiny black. Light from Gregor's flashlight and Boots's scepter danced off the surfaces and reflected to other spots. When they landed at a spring-fed pool for a break, Gregor stooped down and ran his fingers over the surface beneath his feet. It was smooth. Almost slick.

Luxa examined the ground beside him. "It is like black glass."

"I think it might be obsidian," said Gregor.

Boots quickly discovered the slipperiness of the floor. "Look, Gre-go, I ice-skate!" she said, sliding wildly over the black surface, waving her scepter.

"I want to try, too!" said Hazard.

Howard grabbed Hazard before he could work up much speed. "Oh, no, you do not, Hazard. The last thing you need is another head injury."

Luxa was still focused on the floor. "What is obsidian?" she asked Gregor.

"It's a kind of rock you only find around volcanoes. It's made from cooled lava," said Gregor.

"You must be right. The Firelands are known for their volcanoes," said Luxa.

"Active volcanoes?" asked Gregor. "Do they still work?"

"Why would they not?" asked Luxa. "They cannot break."

"They can become dormant. Asleep," said Gregor.

"I do not know, then. No human has ever stayed long enough to study them. The air is too bad for extended visits," said Luxa.

Suddenly all four of the bats lifted their chins, usually a sign they had sensed something alarming.

"What is it, Aurora?" asked Luxa.

"I do not know. Some creature moves within," said the bat, nodding in the direction Boots was heading.

"I cannot detect its shape," said Ares, in a puzzled tone.

"Come back, Boots!" called Gregor. But either she wasn't listening or she was ignoring him. "Hey, I'm not kidding!" he said, taking off after her. After about ten steps, he lost his footing and landed on his rear end.

"Boots!"

"Wheee!" said Boots as she spun across the floor, and then suddenly she gave an "Uh-oh!" and dropped out of sight.

"Where is she?" exclaimed Hazard.

"Ow!" said the little voice from the dark. "We bumped." Her sandals pattered around. "I know you!" she said. "Oh, ow...." But this second "ow" was a sound not of pain but of sympathy.

Gregor ran toward her voice and would have fallen as well had Howard not caught him by the arm and lifted him back. They were at the edge of a large pit that was about twenty feet deep. The obsidian walls were very steep and smooth.

"Gre-go! Gre-go!" Boots was trying to climb out of the pit, but she slid back down its side almost immediately. "Gre-go, see who is here! Ow!" She pressed her hand against her teeth and then pointed her scepter at the creature beside-her.

A scrawny rat lay a few feet to her right, panting for air. His front teeth were way overgrown, at least by a foot, and had locked together, spreading his mouth in a horrible grimace and distorting his face painfully.

But Gregor could still make out the scar on the agonized face. "Ripred," he said.

The rat locked eyes with him but was unable to speak.

"Don't move," said Gregor. "We're coming."

PART 3

The Queen

CHAPTER 19

Gregor turned to Howard, figuring he was the best person to handle a medical crisis. "What do we do?"

But even Howard was at a loss. "I do not know. Perhaps we can file his teeth down some way. I doubt pulling them is an option, but if we must —"

"Oh, move aside!" said Luxa impatiently, pushing by them. She stepped sideways onto the slope and slid, one leg extended, one leg bent at the knee, straight down into the pit. She landed on her feet and drew her sword, sweeping it back as if to attack. "Stand back, Boots!" she ordered, and the little girl cleared out of the way. For a moment, Gregor thought Luxa was going to kill Ripred. She had certainly done nothing to stop the rat from suffocating in quicksand when they'd met up with her in the jungle that time. But instead of cutting Ripred's throat, her blade smashed into his locked teeth. The ones on the left half of his mouth cracked off in jagged points. Ripred emitted a guttural sound of pain at the impact but lifted his head up for her to swing again. Luxa's second hit shattered through the other half of Ripred's teeth, and he slumped forward on the ground, gasping. The uneven edges left by the blow cut into his gums, causing them to bleed, but his jaws were freed.

Ripred stared at Luxa for a minute, then spoke in a hoarse whisper. "You remember ... in the jungle ... you said you would be in my debt..."

"If you told me Hamnet's story. About the Garden of the Hesperides," said Luxa.

"Consider the debt... paid in full," said Ripred.

"A story for your life? That is not a fair exchange. I believe you owe me now," said Luxa.

"I hate that," sighed Ripred.

"I bet you do," said Luxa with a grin. "Ares, can you bring him up?"

Ares flew down, clamped his claws into Ripred's shoulders, and hauled him out of the pit while Aurora brought up Luxa and Boots.

"Water," was Ripred's first request.

Howard opened up a skin and held it while the rat drank his fill. "I have a rough stone, a small one, for sharpening blades. Shall I try to even up your teeth?"

Gregor knew it must be killing Ripred, who was so relentlessly powerful, so universally feared, to be sitting there while a human filed his teeth. Guessing an audience would only make things worse, Gregor mobilized the others. He asked the bats and Temp to fish in a nearby stream. Hazard and Boots helped Luxa fill the water bags. Cartesian was too medicated to really matter.

When the fish started to arrive, Gregor busied himself by chopping some up into tiny pieces. He stirred in some water and a handful of dry bread crumbs. By the time Howard had the edges of Ripred's teeth smoothed out, Gregor had a nice big bowl of fish mash waiting for him. Boots wanted to feed him, but Gregor thought that would be too much for the rat, so he scooped the food into Ripred's mouth himself. Although Gregor had made several pounds of fish mash, several more bowls were needed before Ripred was satisfied.

"All right. I'm all right now," he said, finally pushing away the bowl, with a few remaining bites of mash stuck to the bottom. The rat gingerly opened and closed his jaws. "Can I see that rock?" Howard gave him the rock, and Ripred worked a little on his teeth, shaping them into his usual style. After a while, he stopped gnawing and sized up the group for the first time. "So, what brings the Children's Crusade into the Firelands? I don't flatter myself you were looking for me."

"We got lost on a picnic," said Luxa.

"I know I'm down, but don't humiliate me further with transparent lies, Your Highness," said Ripred. "Don't I always tell you the truth?"

"You lied to me about 'The Prophecy of Blood.' You said I just had to come to a meeting when you knew I had to go to the jungle," said Gregor.

"Not exactly. If you think back, my comments were very open to interpretation. And you happen to be easily misled," said Ripred. "As for the queen, who is difficult to lead anywhere ... I have always been and intend to be entirely straightforward."

Luxa considered this for a moment. "We went looking for the nibblers," she said. "One sent my crown, as a plea for help. The jungle nibblers have disappeared. Those by the Fount are being driven here to the Firelands."

"My little charge, the Bane, doesn't fancy them much, does he?" said Ripred. "And what do you mean to do by following them?"

"Draw the Regalian armies after me," said Luxa. "I said 'The Vow to the Dead' in Hades Hall."

"Did you indeed?" said Ripred. "It seems like only yesterday you were a baby bouncing on your grandpa's knee. And now you're starting wars. They grow up so fast."

"And what would you have done?" Luxa asked.

"Now I'm in an awkward position, Your Highness. Ordinarily, I'd have said I'd have hunted down the Bane myself and killed him, hopefully disabling the serpent by beheading it. Of course, as you've just rescued me from a pit where I was being slowly tortured to death on the Bane's command ... my advice seems to have less impact," said Ripred.

"You could not leap out?" asked Howard.

"No, the walls are too high to clear, too slick to climb. And there wasn't so much as a pebble for me to gnaw on. So my teeth kept growing. Mine locked, as opposed to growing up through my brain. Lucky for me, if not the Bane," said Ripred.

"He put you in there? He outfought you?" asked Gregor.

"Who, the Bane? Please. His soldiers did," said Ripred.

"But... no one can touch you!" said Gregor.

"Even a rager can be outnumbered, Gregor," said Ripred. "I start to crack at about four hundred to one. You, I hear, crumbled in the face of three. Of course, there were extenuating circumstances."

"What is he talking about?" asked Luxa.

Gregor didn't answer. It was too embarrassing to think that Ripred knew about his episode with Twirltongue. That all the rats knew and were laughing at him.

"You might as well tell her, before someone else does," said Ripred.

"Three rats kicked my butt in the tunnels under Regalia," said Gregor.

"What were you and three rats doing under Regalia?" asked Luxa accusingly.

"I'll take that. See, I'd brought the Bane with me to echolocation lessons, so Gregor could meet him and help me kill him. Unfortunately, my pearly friend sneaked off in the night. I had to chase him, of course, and when Gregor came down the next day for the assassination, he found not me or the Bane but three of the Bane's pals," said Ripred. "Now the warrior, as I understand it, was actually doing quite well, until... ?" He looked pointedly at Gregor.

"Until I lost my light," muttered Gregor.

"And at that moment he realized that all along he'd been wrong about being so uncooperative during his lessons and that... ?" Ripred waited again.

"You were right, Ripred," said Gregor.

"You were right, Ripred," said the rat slowly, savoring every word. "You know, I think it's all been worth it just to hear those words, from that mouth," said Ripred. "Any more fish mash? I'm hungry again."

Ripred stuck his nose in the remaining fish mash and lapped it up.

Gregor could feel Luxa's eyes burning holes in him.

"So when did you plan on telling us about the Bane and his three friends running around under our palace?" said Luxa.

"Never, if possible," said Gregor. "It didn't seem to matter."

"It would matter a great deal to you, if it was your home," said Luxa.

"Vikus said the door was solid," said Gregor.

"And was that door barred when you were fighting those rats?" asked Luxa.

"No," admitted Gregor. If he had not waylaid them with the lamp, nothing would have stopped the rats from entering the palace. "But I didn't know they were there. I thought it would only be Ripred and the Bane."

"They are everywhere, Gregor," said Howard softly. And that's when Gregor knew how careless he had been. Howard didn't fly off the handle like Luxa. If he was concerned, there was a real problem.

"I always left the door unbarred during my lessons," said Gregor. "Vikus never told me different."

"Because he knew I was there and I wouldn't let anyone up to the palace. Lay off the warrior. Blame me, blame Vikus, if you want to blame someone," said Ripred.

"I blame you all," said Luxa.

"If you must. But it's not fair," said Ripred.

"It is not your city!" said Luxa.

"It may not be yours much longer, either, Your Highness, if such incompetents as Gregor and I do not choose to defend it!" snarled Ripred. "Or have you not kept up on your prophecies?"

"Your defense is no guarantee of anything, or have you not kept up on your prophecies?" retorted Luxa. "And finding you languishing in a pit does little to reassure me of your worth!"

"Stop!" Howard sprang to his feet. "You upset the children. You upset us all. You gain nothing by being at each other's throats."

Gregor looked around. Howard was right. Hazard and Boots stood by Temp, holding each other's hands tightly, worried looks on their faces. The bats were rustling their wings in agitation. Cartesian tossed in his sleep.

"Who are you again?" said Ripred to Howard.

Gregor thought the rat was just trying to be insulting. "Shut up, Ripred. You know who he is," he said.

"No, I actually don't," said Ripred.

"Oh. His name's Howard. He's Luxa's cousin. His dad runs the Fount," explained Gregor.

"Well, all I was going to say was that I thought Howard made a good point," said Ripred. "Fighting gains us nothing, Your Highness. We have much to do if we are to help your friends."

"I do not need your help, Ripred," said Luxa.

"I suppose you can take on the Bane's army yourself," said Ripred.

"The Regalian army will be here in a few days. They will free the nibblers," said Luxa.

"In a few days, there will be no nibblers left to free," said Ripred.

CHAPTER 20

The rat's comment was enough to make Luxa drop her hostile manner. "What do you mean?" she said.

"What do you think the Bane's doing out here, anyway?" asked Ripred.

"We heard him speak. He said he was driving the nibblers to a place from which there is no return," said Howard.

"And did he mention where that would be?" asked Ripred.

"Somewhere outside of the Underland," said Gregor uncertainly.

"In the Uncharted Lands," said Luxa.

"The nibblers could return from the Uncharted Lands. They would only have to retrace their steps," said Ripred. "My dears, there is only one place from which there is no return."

The rat waited while it sunk in.

"Death," Luxa whispered.

"So it would seem," said Ripred.

"Are you saying he means to kill them? All of them?" said Howard.

"That is the general idea, yes," said Ripred.

"But there are thousands of nibblers. They may allow themselves to be driven somewhere, but they will not lose their lives without a fight," said Howard. "How can he kill so many?"

"Now there you have me," said Ripred. "Nibblers are good fighters, when backed against a wall. They outnumber the gnawers here, I would guess, ten to one. It would be bloody, they would lose many lives, but they could overpower the Bane's forces now if they wished to. So, they must believe, as you did, that they are only being moved to a new home. That they are saving their lives by not resisting. But have no doubt about it. The Bane means to kill every last nibbler."

"So say I!" a raspy voice choked out. "So say I!"

They all turned to see Cartesian. He had rolled onto his stomach and was struggling to lift himself up on his front legs.

Howard hurried to his patient. "Easy now. I will give you something to help you heal." He removed the large green bottle and pulled the stopper.

"We must fight! This is not like the other times. The gnawers do not want this land by the Fount. The humans will not allow them to have it!" said Cartesian.

"Stop, Howard! Let him talk!" exclaimed Luxa. She ran over and kneeled by the mouse.

"He believes he is still at the Fount," said Nike.

"Yes," said Luxa. "Cartesian. Cartesian, I am Queen Luxa of Regalia."

"Oh, the good queen. The good queen," said Cartesian, calming a little. "Tell them, 'Fight now! Fight here by the Fount!'"

"I will tell them," said Luxa, running her hand down his back.

"I told them so, but few will take my side. Most believe the gnawers when they say they will only take us to other lands," said Cartesian. "Do not believe it!"

"No, I do not believe it. I believe you!" said Luxa.

"Why would the gnawers want this land by the Fount? You humans will not let them keep it," said Cartesian.

"Why would they want the jungle, either?" said Ripred. "No rat would live there by choice."

"So say I!" said Cartesian, and then his fevered eyes locked on Ripred and he went wild at the sight of the rat. "Where are the others? Where are the others?" He bared his teeth at Ripred and tried to attack. Cartesian's broken leg crumpled beneath him. "Where are the others?" he demanded.

"Now might be a good time for that medicine," said Ripred.

"Where are the others?" shrieked the mouse.

Howard quickly dosed Cartesian before he could really lose control. Within a few minutes, the mouse went limp.

Cartesian's words had given Gregor insight into the rats' invasion of the nibbler colony. The mice had argued then, about whether to fight the rats or go quietly. And Cartesian's side had lost. Gregor bet it was Cartesian who had scratched the scythe into the cave wall.

"So, you can believe me and your nibbler friend there, or you can continue to console yourselves with the idea that the nibblers are going to some lovely new life somewhere," said Ripred.

Gregor thought of the baby mice, the twisted bodies beneath the cliff, the Bane's speech. "No, I can't. We've got to find the mice and warn them. Can you travel?" he asked Ripred.

"Yes. I'm a bit stiff, but give me a few miles and I'll loosen up," said the rat.

"I have not agreed to let you join us," said Luxa.

"Fly on ahead, then," said Ripred. "You may miss me when you reach your destination."

A line appeared between Luxa's eyes as she pondered what to do.

"It is better to bend a little than to break, Cousin," said Howard. "We do need him. Let him pay off his debt to you."

"Yes, let me make things even between us," said Ripred.

"I will not be taking orders from you," Luxa snapped at the rat. "You will be following mine."

Ripred shrugged. "Fine. I have given enough orders for a lifetime. You make the plans. Of course, if you'd like my advice at a given moment, don't hesitate to ask."

"Let us go forward, then," said Luxa. "Keep to the gnawer's pace."

They climbed back on the bats and took off, flying at Ripred's running speed. The rat made pretty good time given that he'd been confined to a pit for several weeks.

Gregor was preoccupied with the nibblers. How could the rats kill them all? Drive them off a cliff maybe, like they had in Hades Hall? Drown them? He was pretty sure the mice could swim. Starve them? That seemed like a popular choice in the Underland. Or maybe they would try to infect them with a plague....

After about half an hour Gregor looked down and realized that Ripred really needed a break. He was panting hard and foaming slightly at the mouth. Gregor knew the rat would be too obstinate to ask to stop.

"Ripred can't keep going like that," said Gregor to Luxa.

"It is good for him," said Luxa.

"He's going to have a heart attack or something," said Gregor.

"Do not worry about Ripred," said Luxa.

"You just planning on running him into the ground?" said Gregor. Luxa leaned over Aurora's wing and watched Ripred struggling to keep up. Then she sat up. "He is too rotten to die," she said.

"Luxa!" Suddenly Gregor had had it with her. "Okay, stop! Everybody land!" he shouted.

"You do not give orders here!" said Luxa.

"Neither do you. Not to me, anyway," said Gregor. He swung off Aurora's back while she was still in flight and crossed to Ares as the bat touched down. Thalia and Temp were piled on top of Ares. "Thalia, can you fly?"

"Yes, if we do not go too fast," said the little bat.

"Ares, can you carry Ripred?" said Gregor. Ares was the one bat who might have the strength to do it.

"I can try," said Ares.

"No, Ares, you do not need to carry that rat," said Luxa.

"Yes, he does," said Gregor. "Thalia, take Temp."

"Oh, now you are in charge?" said Luxa.

"Why does one of us have to be in charge? We were doing fine until you declared war back there and started bossing everybody around!" said Gregor.

"I recall it starting much earlier," said Ripred, dragging himself onto Ares's back. "Even as a baby she was very pushy."

"I am trying to help the nibblers!" said Luxa.

"Really? Well, you're not helping them by hurting Ripred," said Gregor. She scowled and opened her mouth to speak, but Gregor didn't give her time. "And I don't care if that makes you mad, Luxa. Get mad! Don't talk to me! How will that be different from about ninety-five percent of the time, anyway? You're always mad at me for something. Usually, I can't even remember what! What's it matter? I don't live here. I'm just visiting. Anything that I've been doing to help you, that's just a favor! Not something I owe you. And when we get back to Regalia, I'll be sent home and we can forget we ever knew each other! Okay?"

The last word hung in the tunnel. The outburst surprised even Gregor. It was too extreme. Where had it come from? Was it connected to his rager thing? Why had he said it? What, in fact, had he said? He couldn't quite remember, but whatever it was, he could tell by the look in Luxa's eyes that he had actually hurt her feelings.

"Gre-go is too loud," said Boots. She scooted up to Luxa and held her hand protectively. "Shh, Gre-go."

Everyone was staring at him, waiting for his next move. "I really think this will be faster," said Gregor in a gruff voice.

"Fine," said Luxa, and crossed back to Aurora with Boots trotting beside her.

Howard touched Gregor's shoulder. "Perhaps I will ride with —"

"Yeah, I'll go on Nike," said Gregor. "Don't worry; I'll hold on to Cartesian."

As he climbed up on Nike's back, he felt Ripred's eyes on him. "What?"

"Nothing," said the rat innocently, but Gregor noticed his nose give a deep and distinct sniff.

They did move more quickly now. Gregor tried to justify yelling at Luxa with that thought, but it didn't really work.

A light wind blew over his face. It was more than the usual breeze he caught by just being on a moving bat. The air was warm, too, and smelled more pun-gently of sulfur. A bit of something blew into his eye and he blinked repeatedly to get it out. It was hard to get any tears going in the wind.

What had he said that had hurt Luxa? It wasn't just that they had argued; they were always arguing. He tried to recall his speech. Something about the nibblers. Ripred. Go ahead and get mad. So, what? "We can forget we ever knew each other! ..."

That last part. He tried to imagine Luxa saying those words to him and realized how awful it would be. To suggest it would be possible to forget the last year. To forget what they owed each other. Without Luxa, he would have been killed his first night in the Underland. He would never have gotten his dad back. Boots would have died in the rats' maze. And he had done things for Luxa, too. Good things. Things he was proud of. Saved her from the spinners. Helped find the plague cure. He was here now tracking down the nibblers, wasn't he? For better or worse, their lives had wrapped in and around each other since the moment they'd met. He didn't ever want to forget he had known her.

"Nike, can you speed up?" said Gregor. "I need to tell Luxa something."

Gregor worked on his apology as they caught up. "I'm sorry," he thought; that would be a good opener.

Nike's nose was even with Aurora's feet. Hazard was asleep, his head on Luxa's lap. Howard sat with his back to her, holding Boots. Luxa looked at Gregor, waiting.

Gregor swallowed and leaned forward so he could speak quietly. "Look, I just wanted to say, I'm —"

And that's when the currents hit them.

CHAPTER 21

The first blast of air caught Nike from below and tossed her upward, slamming Gregor and Cartesian into the ceiling and pinning them between the bat and the stone. Luckily, Gregor had been leaning forward. His backpack cushioned the blow somewhat, although he could feel the edges of his extra flashlights and the binoculars cutting into his back. His face was pressed into the fur on the back of Nike's head. He struggled to turn his head sideways, so he could at least breathe.

Nike was battling to free herself from the powerful current when it suddenly abated. They dropped down a few feet and the second blast hit them from behind. Nike's wings shut as they shot like a bullet through a gun barrel through several hundred yards of tunnel and then out into wide-open space.

Then the winds took over.

There was not one or two but dozens of currents competing in the cavern. You could see the individual airstreams. Each had the same misty look as the one that had first brought Gregor to the Underland from his laundry room and gave off a faint white light. Gregor was ripped off Nike almost immediately and then buffeted by the currents that accosted him from all sides. He felt like a kite being flown in a storm. A kite whose string had snapped that had no hope of being reeled in.

Fortunately, his flashlight was securely hooked to his belt loop. As he whipped around he caught glimpses of the others. They seemed as helpless as he was.

He panicked for a moment when his flashlight beam revealed the cavern floor fifty feet below. But then he realized he wasn't falling. None of them were. The currents held them aloft, swirling them around like leaves on a fall day.

Gregor got his hand on his flashlight and felt a tiny bit more in control. A particularly strong wave of air caught him from behind and he struggled to break its hold.

Ripred sailed by him with his legs stretched out flat like a flying squirrel. The rat shouted something at Gregor, but he couldn't hear over the roar of the winds. A few minutes later, after slamming into Howard and almost catching Boots as she whizzed by looking puzzled but not

particularly upset, Gregor passed Ripred again, flying in the same position. This time Gregor could just make out the rat's words: "Stop fighting!"

Stop fighting? Gregor realized every muscle in his body was so tense, it could snap, because he was, in fact, trying to fight off the wind. To somehow gain control of the currents with his arms and legs. "Stop fighting," he thought. "Just relax!" It couldn't hurt to try. He made an enormous effort to unlock his muscles. It wasn't easy. Every new wave of air made him tense. "Relax!" he ordered himself. "You can't fight it. Think of Ripred!" Gregor stretched his arms over his head and straightened his body out. Suddenly he was not being attacked by the wind; he was being carried by it. He got thrown off course almost immediately but fought the impulse to struggle. "Relax!" he ordered himself, stretching out again. The stream of air swept him along easily. And this time, he understood. If he didn't fight the current, he could ride it. Exhilaration flooded through him. "I'm flying!"

For a minute, he was completely absorbed by his newfound talent. This was nothing like riding the bats, where he was merely a passenger. This was just Gregor zooming around in the sky — well, not the sky — but zooming around in the air like a superhero. The freedom, the sense of power, was amazing. If he could always have wings, Gregor didn't think he would ever be afraid of any creature the Underland could dish out. He gave out a wild whoop and rode smack into Ripred. Gregor slid down the rat's body but managed to grab hold of his tail and hang on.

"Having a good time, are we?" called Ripred over the wind. "Checked up on your friends lately?"

Instantly ashamed that he was enjoying himself, Gregor shot his flashlight beam around. He spotted Luxa above him, and it was clear she had mastered the trick of riding the winds. She had one-upped him, actually, because she seemed able to move from current to current without losing control. When Luxa rolled sideways to catch another wave, Gregor saw Boots was on her back. The little girl had her arms and legs wrapped tightly around Luxa's body. Temp coasted by with Hazard clinging to his shell. Cartesian was having no difficulty, as the mouse was asleep and riding easily around. Howard was still getting tossed around quite a bit, as he was trying to make his way to the bats. But the bats! They were the ones having the most trouble of all.

Those long, beautiful bat wings were not an asset in this situation. They picked up several competing currents at once. Having ridden milder currents all their lives, the bats could not suppress the instinct to try to navigate these. But every time their wings opened even a foot or two, they'd get spun around like a top. Ares, who was the largest and had the greatest wingspan, was in the worst trouble.

"Ares!" Gregor cried out. He let go of Ripred's tail only to find the rat had reached out and snagged his backpack with his back claws.

"What's your plan?" called the rat.

Gregor had no plan. He was merely following an impulse to help his bat. "I don't know! I don't know!"

"We have to land!" shouted Ripred. "Form a base!"

"Okay!" said Gregor, although he really had no idea what Ripred was talking about. The rat began to maneuver from one current to another, moving them farther away from the center of the windstorm with each shift. Gregor, who was still being dragged around by his backpack, twisted his head around to see where they were going and realized they were headed straight for one of the stone walls of the cavern. "No!" he cried out, thrashing around to get free before they crashed. But at the last minute Ripred caught another current and Gregor found himself being dragged along the floor of a cave.

"A little trust, please," said the rat in disgust.

"Sorry," said Gregor. He sat up, rubbing his elbow that had been scraped on the floor. Outside the cave, he could see his friends flying around. "Now what?"

"We have to find some way to bring them in. You don't have anything handy like a rope in there, do you?" said Ripred, nudging Gregor's backpack.

"No," said Gregor.

"No," sighed Ripred. "Well, then, I suppose it will have to be my tail."

Ripred positioned himself backward at the edge of the cave, gripping the floor with his claws and letting his long rat tail blow out into the currents.

"Now what do we do?" asked Gregor.

"Wait," said Ripred. "Don't worry, they'll catch on."

Gregor moved his flashlight in a figure eight at the cave mouth to attract attention. Ripred was right. In a few minutes Luxa had made her way

through the currents and grabbed hold of his tail. The rat pulled her into the cave and Gregor scooped Boots up off her back.

"Hey, what's going on?" he asked Boots.

"Luxa is a bat," said Boots. "I ride. I fly, too."

"You did a good job," said Gregor. "Now we have to get the others in."

"I can help!" said Boots, and ran for the cave mouth.

As she launched into the air, Gregor barely caught her by the ankle and pulled her back in. "Whoa! No, Boots. I've got a special job for you."

"For me?" said Boots, immediately interested.

He didn't. Gregor considered having her sing again, but that probably wouldn't hold her attention if nobody was falling asleep. He dug in his backpack looking for an idea and came upon the binoculars. "Here," he said. "You're our scout. You look through these and tell us when you see somebody fly by."

It was a pointless task. Between the light the currents put off and his flashlight beam, they weren't having trouble spotting the others. But it gave Boots something to do. "Temp is big. Temp is small. Temp is big. Temp is small," she said importantly as she raised and lowered the binoculars.

"Heads up, here comes the crawler," said Ripred.

Temp sailed in and clamped on to Ripred's tail. The rat hauled him in and Hazard slid off his shell.

"Hazard, are you well?" asked Luxa, hugging him.

"Yes, I am fine. But the fliers are not," said Hazard.

Things looked bad for the bats. They were still being hopelessly tossed around, unable to manage the currents.

Howard made his way in next, dragging in Cartesian by the tail. "I do not know how to get the fliers in," Howard said. "I tried to ride Nike, to help her, but I only added to her difficulties. They are tiring quickly."

"We must do something!" said Luxa.

"We could form a human chain maybe," said Gregor.

"All holding on to my poor tail, I suppose?" asked Ripred. "I'll never be able to manage the lot of you with that wind force."

"We cannot just leave them there!" said Luxa. "I am going back in!" She was about to dive back into the winds when Ripred blocked her with his tail. "What's your plan?"

"I... I do not have a plan," said Luxa.

"Oh, that's too bad," said Ripred. He dropped his tail, but she didn't jump.

"Do you have one?" demanded Luxa.

"I might, if someone asks nicely," said the rat.

"Will you tell me your plan?" asked Luxa stiffly.

"Pleeeeeease," instructed Ripred.

"Please," said Luxa through gritted teeth.

"All right. Get to the fliers. Start with the little one. Pin her wings down with your legs; you'll have to fight her. I doubt they can help trying to fly any more than you can help breathing. Ride her in," said Ripred. "Don't let her open her wings. Understand?"

"Yes," said Luxa, and dove into the currents.

"Yes, *thank you!*" Ripred called after her.

It didn't take Luxa long to get to Thalia. It took not only Luxa's legs but also her arms to hold down the bat's wings. Then Luxa was able to guide Thalia to the cave. When Thalia came in reach of Ripred's tail, she caught it the only way she could, with her teeth.

"Ouch!" said Ripred, dragging them in. "All right, all right, let go, you little viper." Thalia unclenched her teeth and lay exhausted on the cave floor.

"I think I can bring Aurora in. I do not know about the others," said Luxa, panting with exertion.

"Do you want me to take Ares, Gregor?" asked Howard. He was a lot bigger and stronger than Gregor. It would make sense for him to have the biggest bat.

"No, he's my bond. I'll do it," said Gregor. He had no idea what he was in for. He made his way out to his bat without too much trouble, switching from one current to the next until he was only a few feet away. Only at that distance did he realize how much Ares was suffering. The bat's body was contorting violently as he tried to break free of the currents. It was as if he was trapped in some horrible force field that would allow him to move only a few feet in any direction before it yanked him back to its center. The thing that unnerved Gregor the most was the sound Ares was making. Not words or the clear, high bat squeaks Gregor could sometimes hear. It was like a scream. A continuous, tormented sound of pain. Being caught in the currents seemed to be literally driving Ares insane.

Gregor felt a hundred times guiltier for having enjoyed flying and not realizing Ares's predicament. Getting his arms around Ares's neck was the first challenge. Every time Gregor would move into range, one of the bat's powerful wings would jerk out and send him spinning off to the side. It hurt and it prolonged the rescue, because then Gregor had to work his way back to Ares and start all over again. Ripred was right. The bat had no control whatsoever over the impulse to fly.

On about the tenth try, he finally managed to dodge the spastic wings and fasten himself on to Ares's neck. The rest of Gregor's body whipped around wildly. There was no opportunity to lock his legs around the wings. He knew Ares wasn't intentionally trying to shake him off, but that's what it felt like.

"Stop fighting!" he told the bat, just as Ripred had told him. But he wasn't even sure Ares heard him. The screaming continued unbroken and there was no perceptible difference in Ares's body movements.

"Stop fighting! Give up!" ordered Gregor. Still no change. Gregor didn't know how much longer he was going to be able to hang on. Then a fortunate current blew Gregor flat against Ares's back just as his wings shut. Gregor clamped his legs around Ares's sides. "It's Gregor!" he shouted right into Ares's ear. The screaming cut off, and Ares seemed to be aware of Gregor's presence for the first time. "I've got you! Don't open your wings! Do not open your wings, Ares!"

Now Gregor could feel a different kind of struggle as Ares fought the instinct to open his wings as the different currents struck him. "Overlander ... I cannot — !"

"Yes, you can. Hold them closed. I'll fly for a change. Okay?" said Gregor.

"O — kay!" said Ares back. "Do not... leave me!"

"I won't leave you! I promise!" said Gregor.

It was slow going. Gregor was still pretty shaky at flying on his own. Directing his bat's body through the maze of currents was an entirely new skill to master. Especially since he felt he had to keep talking the whole time, reassuring Ares, reminding him to keep those wings shut. If he took even a slight pause, he could hear the beginnings of the scream starting to build in Ares's throat again.

Gregor had thought they were almost at the cave once, only to turn and discover its light receding from him as another powerful current swept them

away. His legs began to shake with the strain of holding down Ares's wings. Gregor needed help, but there was no way to go back for it. No way he could possibly let go of Ares after his promise.

He realized he no longer had the strength to try to guide Ares anywhere. All Gregor could do was hold on. Maybe they'd both just pass out soon and then the others could —

Someone landed behind him. Gregor almost went limp with relief. Then he remembered he was not the one being rescued and reinforced his grip on Ares's wings. Gregor leaned his head against the bat, shut his eyes, and just kept talking, kept talking until somehow they were lying on the floor of the cave.

Gregor released his stiff limbs and turned his head. Both Howard and Luxa were behind him on Ares.

"It took both of us to bring in Nike," said Howard. "We thought you might need a hand."

"I did. Thanks," said Gregor. He looked at Luxa. Remembered that he had been about to tell her something when the currents had knocked him into the tunnel ceiling.

Ripred's nose pushed him off Ares. "Off. Off. Let him breathe."

Gregor rolled off on to his side and wobbled to his feet. All four bats were lying on the floor, too traumatized to get up.

"Well, there goes our ride," said Ripred in frustration. "It will take hours for them to recover."

"It would help if they could hang," said Howard, running his hands over Nike.

"There's a ledge in the back," said Hazard.

"Good, Hazard. Excellent," said Howard. "Let us see if we can get Thalia on it."

Gregor was not sure exactly what they were doing, but he helped Howard carry Thalia back to a rock ledge and flip her upside down. Her claws immediately fastened on the rim, and her body seemed to relax. On trips the bats usually slept huddled together on their feet, but of course, this was their most natural resting position.

One by one, Gregor and Howard moved the bats to the back of the cave and hung them from the ledge. They shifted their claws only enough to move into a tight line. None of them spoke, but they seemed calmer.

"Rest," Howard said to them. "All is well. Rest."

Everyone gathered near the bats, as far away from the howling winds as possible. Temp discovered some mushrooms that were edible. They broke the mushrooms off the cave wall and ate them straightaway, ravenous from the workout. Then they passed around a water bag.

"To sleep, go you all, to sleep," said Temp. "Watch, will I, watch."

Since there seemed little danger of anything getting into the cave, everyone took him up on his offer.

Sometime later, Gregor awoke to the sound of the others breathing. The wind noise was gone. He could see the outline of Temp, sitting patiently at the front of the cave. As Gregor rolled over, his ear pressed against the stone and he heard another sound. A faint scratching intermingled with a sort of tapping. He sat up and found Ripred awake beside him in the dark.

"I can hear something. Scratching around," said Gregor.

"I know. It's nothing to worry about. Go back to sleep," said Ripred.

Feeling secure under the rat's guard, Gregor did as he said.

Hours must have passed when Gregor felt Howard shaking his shoulder. "Gregor, the currents come and go. We need to move on while they are still." Gregor was so stiff and bruised, he had trouble getting to his feet. He could only imagine how bad the bats must feel. They were on the ground now, nibbling some mushrooms. Gregor crossed to Ares. "Hey. Are you all right?"

"Yes," said Ares, but his voice was weak.

"We must never be in those currents again," said Nike.

"It is madness," said Aurora.

And Thalia began to cry just at the memory of it. She huddled in Nike's wings miserably.

"Hey, Thalia, I've got a special one for you," said Gregor gently. "What did one wall say to the other wall?"

"I do not know," sobbed the bat.

"Meet you at the corner," said Gregor.

It took a few moments for the joke to sink in, and then Thalia's sobs were interwoven with giggles and finally she was just laughing. A little more shrilly than usual, but laughing all the same. The other bats laughed, too, happy to see Thalia distracted.

They had to move on. Somewhere the nibblers were in peril. Precious time was running out. The bats were still in need of recovery, but it couldn't be helped.

"Do we have any idea where the rats have the mice?" asked Gregor.

"I believe if we follow this cavern we will intersect the path the rats were driving them along," said Ripred.

"Do not fly out into open space. Stick close to the walls. Always keep a cave or two in sight that we may take cover there if the currents resume," said Luxa.

"Now that is a good plan, Your Highness. And how refreshing that you have one," said Ripred. But Luxa was too tired to do more than shoot him a look.

They took off, flying close to the walls. Gregor kept expecting the cavern to end or dwindle into a series of tunnels. Instead it went on and on. It was by far the largest open space he had seen in the Underland, except for the Waterway. He saw his first volcano after about an hour. It was quiet, except for the plumes of smoke that wafted out of its top. They passed others. Some rumbled threateningly. One had a few steady streams of lava leaking from it. None of them were really exploding, but they made the air hot and fetid.

Occasionally the currents picked up and they would quickly dive into nearby caves until the winds died down enough for safe flying. On the good side, after a windstorm the air was usually somewhat more breathable. About the fifth time they headed in for a landing, Gregor thought the bats were overreacting. The currents were barely more than a breeze. Then he realized the stop had nothing to do with the wind.

Ripred ordered them all to flatten out on the floor before he remembered he wasn't in charge. "Sorry," he said to Luxa. "Old habit."

"Do as he says," said Luxa. She was already on the floor, peering out from behind a small pile of rocks. Gregor got on his stomach and then scooted up beside her.

At first, he didn't know what he was looking at. There was a volcano. A golden glow issued from the top. That wasn't a reason for pulling over, though.

Then he heard Cartesian's voice behind him as it whispered, "The others."

CHAPTER 22

Gregor squinted into the ashy gray light and finally made out the nibblers. They were walking single file down a long curved path that began at what looked like the mouth of a tunnel high in the rocks and that led to a pit at the base of the volcano. On one side the path ran along the edge of a sheer cliff with sharp rocks at the base. A stone wall ran along the other side of the path, blocking the view of the pit from their sight. It wasn't until the nibblers were almost at the bottom that they realized where the rats were sending them.

The nibblers who had reached the pit began to squeal out warnings to those following them. Gregor could see the alarm spreading up the path. Mice turned and tried to force their way back up, some literally crawling over the backs of the others to try to reach the tunnel at the top. A handful made it only to be driven back by rats. Then the mice began to shriek as a large boulder was rolled into place, sealing the mouth of the tunnel. They threw themselves against the boulder but could not budge it.

"Let us go!" cried Luxa, jumping to her feet.

"And do what?" asked Ripred, stepping in front of her. "You, all of you, you've got to stop running into dangerous situations without using your heads! There is no faster way to get killed!"

"We can carry them out of the pit to safety!" said Luxa.

"Yes, a handful of them. But there are hundreds trapped down there. Do you not think the rats might notice an airlift going on? And then what? We lose the one element we have in our favor. Surprise," said Ripred.

"Then what do you want us to do?" demanded Luxa. "Wait for the volcano to smother them in lava?"

"I want you to think about it a moment!" snapped Ripred.

"Vis for volcano," Boots reminded everyone. "And valentine." She poked Ripred on the haunch with her scepter. "Valentine!" Ripred sighed. "Why are you here?"

A gust of wind swept by, drawing everyone's attention. "Oh, great. The currents are starting up again," thought Gregor. If they became too strong, the bats wouldn't be able to navigate them. At least they were clearing the air a little. One overriding current seemed to be blowing out of a nearby

cave. It was sweeping the ashy haze toward the nibblers and giving Gregor his first breath of clean air in hours.

"Look, the nibblers are taking action," said Howard.

The mice had overcome their initial panic and were organizing themselves to carry out an escape plan. They had begun to build a pyramid by bracing themselves along the far wall of the pit. A single row of mice formed the base. Others were swarming onto their backs swiftly. The pyramid was rising before their eyes.

"That's smart. A pyramid," said Gregor.

"No, it is the Isosceles Maneuver," said Cartesian.

Gregor looked at him. For the first time since Cartesian had joined them, the mouse seemed lucid. "What's that?" Gregor said.

"It is not a true pyramid, for it has three, not four, points. Rather, they aspire to mimic a two-dimensional triangle," said Cartesian.

"Oh," said Gregor. It seemed to him that at home almost anything with people standing on top of other people was called a pyramid, but he didn't feel like arguing the point with Cartesian, especially after all the mouse had been through.

"See, they have a plan. Let's work with it," said Ripred. "What they need is someone to hold that path if the rats come through."

"Then we will do so," said Luxa.

"Agreed. Temp, watch the pups. The rest of you mount up," said Ripred.

Gregor was about to jump onto Ares when Ripred stopped him. "No, I'll need him to get to the path. Ride with someone else and change over when he drops me off."

"Here, Gregor," said Howard. He extended a hand and pulled Gregor up behind him on Nike.

"We should wait until the boulder begins to move. That will give us time to reach the path but not alert the rats to our presence beforehand," said Luxa.

"Good. Very good. Now you are thinking," said Ripred. "Everyone wait for it, as she says."

They sat watching, tense and poised for takeoff.

The mouse pyramid was nearing the top of the pit. Soon they would be able to begin freeing themselves. Still the boulder didn't budge.

"If there were to be lava, would we have some warning?" asked Howard.

"Generally, I believe there's a rumbling, some sort of sound," said Ripred. "Although I am no expert."

The first nibblers began to climb over the edge of the pit. The escape plan was working.

"Maybe the rats won't come back," said Gregor. "Maybe they didn't figure the mice could get out."

The mice were sending the pups up now. Trying to save them first. When five little ones had reached the top, a pair of full-grown mice began to corral them away from the pit as fast as possible. No rats appeared to interfere.

Back in the tunnel, they watched silently for a few more minutes.

Then Luxa broke the silence. "Something is wrong. Why would the rats allow this?"

"They wouldn't," said Ripred. He paused. "Unless they were expecting something else to do their work for them."

"But there's no lava. The volcano isn't even erupting," said Gregor. Suddenly Temp began to wave his antennas, his feet stepping nervously on the ground. "Not lava, it be, not lava," said the cockroach.

"What is it, Temp? What's wrong?" asked Gregor. One thing he had learned from past experience: If Temp was alarmed, there was good reason.

"Not lava, it be ... it be —" Temp did not know the words for it. He broke off and began clicking in agitation.

"What's he saying, Hazard?" asked Gregor.

"I don't know. It doesn't make sense. I think he's saying the volcano is breathing," said Hazard.

Boots puffed out her cheeks and blew a stream of air in Gregor's face. "Like this. It goes breathing like this." She blew again. "Like balloon goes out."

"The nibblers. Something is happening to them!" said Howard.

Gregor squinted to make out the scene in the distance. His eyes flew to the boulder first to see if the rats had pushed it aside, but it was still fixed in place. He scanned the mice. They looked okay. They looked fine. Then one mouse at the top of the pyramid fell. Then another. Then the entire pyramid disintegrated.

Every last mouse left in the pit had collapsed in a heap. But they weren't dead. He could see their bodies flailing around.

Chaos broke out in the cave.

"What is going on?" cried Gregor.

"We must go!" cried Luxa.

"Not go, you do, not go!" begged Temp.

"Take flight, Aurora!" insisted Luxa.

Aurora seemed as eager to go as her bond. She extended her wings to take off. With lightning-fast speed Ripred leaped at the pair, flipped Aurora onto her back, and threw himself across her body. Luxa, who was trapped under Aurora's shoulder, yelled at him furiously, but Ripred completely ignored her.

Gregor upended his backpack, dumping the contents on the ground, and snatched the binoculars. He trained them on the mice and felt his heart start to pound.

"What do you see, boy? What's happening to them?" said Ripred.

Gregor stammered as he tried to describe the nightmare unfolding before his eyes. "I don't know! They can't! They —" The mice were rolling on the ground, pawing at the air, at their necks, their bodies wracked with terrible spasms. "They can't breathe!" he finally burst out. "They're suffocating!" Luxa was screaming like a maniac. Hazard pushed on Ripred's shoulder, trying to move him. "Let her up! Let her up!"

Howard grabbed Hazard and forced the boy's face into his shoulder.

"No, Hazard. She cannot go. She cannot help them," he said. Tears streamed down his cheeks.

Now they could hear the desperate screams coming from the pit. Cartesian limped to the cave opening and tried to fling himself into the air, to either catch a current to help the other nibblers or simply kill himself. Gregor didn't know which. But Ares caught Cartesian before he fell.

"It's poisonous gas," said Ripred. "It must be leaking from the volcano."

"But I can't see it! I can't see anything!" said Gregor. His hands shook as he tried to adjust the binoculars.

"It has no color," said Howard.

"Nor odor that I can detect," said Ripred, his nose twitching furiously.

"Of course, the wind carries it away from us — will you hold still!" he growled at Luxa. "Temp, are we in any jeopardy here?"

"Heavy, the poison be, heavy," said Temp.

"Then it's all settling in the pit," said Ripred grimly. When Gregor saw a pup, gasping to draw air, fall lifeless from its mother's back, he had to drop the binoculars. But now that the currents had cleared the air, the nibblers'

agony was visible from the tunnel. They went into convulsions, teeth snapping on empty air, claws lashing out to battle an enemy they couldn't see.

"Nike, can you shield Thalia's view?" said Howard. "She has seen too much!" Nike enveloped Thalia in her wings.

"Come here, Boots!" said Gregor, scooping up his sister and laying his hand over her eyes to block the gruesome scene, although it did not seem to be upsetting her. She wriggled to get free.

"No, Gre-go, I want down!" said Boots.

"Get off of me!" Luxa freed her sword and stabbed it into Ripred's shoulder.

"Aah!" cried the rat, leaping back. Blood poured from the wound. His gums pulled back, showing his newly sharpened teeth.

Aurora righted herself and Luxa sprang to her feet, Ripred's blood dripping off her blade.

Gregor dropped Boots and was pulling his sword to step between them when Ripred snarled at Luxa,

"Fine, you stupid brat! Fly right into it and get yourself killed!"

"Shh," said Boots, putting her forefinger to her lips. "You are too loud."

Luxa spun around to the cave mouth, preparing to mount Aurora. Then Luxa saw the mice and froze, one hand clutching the fur at her bat's neck.

The screams had faded away. Here and there was a bit of movement. Then all was still.

The only sound in the cave was Howard, softly weeping.

"Shh," said Boots, patting him. "Shh. The mice are sleeping."

CHAPTER 23

"They sleeping? Right, Gre-go?" asked Boots, frowning slightly.

"That's right, Boots," said Gregor, trying to keep his voice steady.

"They're sleeping." This was what he always told her when something died. Even if they found a dead bird on the playground, he'd tell her it was asleep and then pick it up with an old newspaper or something and hide it in the trash when she wasn't looking. Later she'd see it was missing and be happy it had flown away to its home. And Gregor would act happy with her. If he couldn't tell her that a pigeon had died, there was no way he could tell her about the mice.

"I know. They take a nap. Like in the song," she said, reassured.

"That's right. Like in the song," said Gregor.

"Ripred. Is there anything we can do?" said Luxa hoarsely. "Please."

"No, Luxa," said Ripred. Gregor thought this was the first time he had ever heard Ripred call her by name. "Nothing can be done for them."

"May I see your glasses, Gregor?" she asked.

Gregor was reluctant to give her the binoculars. It was bad enough from a distance. Magnified, the scene was even more horrific. "They're not really working," he mumbled. But she took the binoculars from his hand and pointed them at the mice.

"So this is it," she said. "This is how they plan to kill them all."

"Without the nibblers resisting," said Ares.

"You may let me go," said Cartesian quietly, and Ares released him. The mouse curled into a ball and buried his face.

"I thought they would starve the nibblers, attempt to drown them perhaps. But this ... this has no precedent," said Nike.

"This has too much precedent," said Ripred grimly. He began lapping away the blood from his shoulder.

"Let me," said Howard. He gave Hazard to Luxa and got out his medical kit. "It is not too deep," he said, examining Ripred's shoulder.

"It's deep enough," said Ripred, shooting a look at Luxa. "I consider my debt paid. My life for your life."

"Yes. Paid in full," said Luxa.

Everyone sat there stunned, watching Howard bandage Ripred's wound. They avoided looking out where the murdered mice lay in the pit.

Gregor could not make sense of what had just happened. He had seen death before, plenty of it. But nothing like this. It was not just the number of dead. When they had fought the ants in the jungle, the ground had been covered in corpses. But that had been a battle, with two armed forces facing each other. It had been horrible, but at least everyone had had a fighting chance to survive. What had happened to the mice ... trapped in the pit... unable to even defend themselves against the gas ... not just soldiers but everyone, even the pups ... it was murder on a grand scale. It was a massacre. And probably only one of many.

Only Boots seemed unaffected by what had just occurred. "Hazard dances with me?" she said, tugging on her friend's hand.

"No, Boots, I cannot," said Hazard.

"I dance myself," said Boots. She began singing as she spun in a circle.

"Dancing in the firelight

See the queen who conquers night.

Gold flows from her, hot and bright.

Father, mother, sister, brother,

Off they go. I do not know

If we will see another. "

Gregor vaguely wondered if he should stop her. It seemed disrespectful to the nibblers. But he could not seem to speak.

Boots turned into a mouse now, pawing the air and spinning here and there.

"Catch the nibblers in a trap. Watch the nibblers spin and snap. "

It was too awful, watching her dancing around like a mouse after what they had just witnessed. With Cartesian lying beside him. "Stop it, Boots," Gregor said, but she was caught up in the song. She curled right up on the ground and pretended to sleep.

"Quiet while they take a nap. "

"Stop it!" repeated Gregor, more harshly than he had intended. He grabbed her by the arm and pulled her to her feet. Her lips pressed together and he could see tears filling her eyes. Gregor hugged her close to him.

"Sorry, I'm sorry. It's just not a good time for dancing," he told her.

"Mouses do dance," she said. "I just do dance like mouses."

"I know," said Gregor. "You didn't do anything wrong."

"I want to dance like the mouses do dance," said Boots, sniffing.

"It's okay. Don't cry," said Gregor, stroking her curls. He guessed the writhing of the mice had looked like a dance from the distance. In fact, the words from the song: *Catch the nibblers in a trap*. Watch the nibblers spin and snap.

They very accurately described what he had just seen....

Quiet while they take a nap.

Gregor turned and took in the lifeless bodies in the distance. If you didn't know they were dead, like Boots you'd think they were taking a nap. The words of the song began to drum in his brain.

Catch the nibblers in a trap.

Watch the nibblers spin and snap.

Quiet while they take a nap.

"She's right," he said aloud. "How so?" asked Ares.

"That song. That part about the nibblers," said Gregor. "We just watched it happen."

Father, mother, sister, brother.

Whole families had died out there.

Off they go. I do not know If we will see another. They wouldn't see another, if the Bane had his way. He was determined to kill them all and — "That's not a song," said Gregor suddenly. "That's a prophecy! Don't you see?"

He could tell by the expressions on their faces that they didn't. It had been a song so long, for hundreds of years. It was like someone telling him that "Hey Diddle Diddle" would explain a train wreck in Nevada. But Gregor had not grown up singing the song and doing the happy little dance that accompanied it. To him, the words were still new, and now they were sinister.

"Sandwich wrote it, right?" said Gregor. "He carved it in the nursery."

"Yes, he carved it in the nursery, not the room of prophecies. And we do not know who wrote it, it is so old," said Luxa.

"It didn't come from the Overland. We don't have nibblers. It's from down here and Sandwich made it up and it's happening now!" said Gregor, totally convinced. "We just watched the nibblers get caught in a trap and dance all around and take a nap, only it isn't a nap, not the kind you wake up from! 'Father, mother, sister, brother, off they go!' To die! Don't you see?"

The others didn't look convinced, but Ripred pushed aside Howard's hands and began to pace. "What is it? That nonsense in the first verse. How does it go? Someone sing it!"

Hazard's high voice piped up.

"Dancing in the firelight

See the queen who conquers night.

Gold flows from her, hot and bright. "

"That's enough. 'Dancing in the firelight...'" The rat stared out at the glowing volcano. "We've got firelight, anyway."

"See the queen who conquers night," said Nike. "Luxa, you could be the queen."

"I am not dancing," said Luxa. "Nor have I been."

"Maybe it's not the queen who dances," said Howard. "Things may be said to dance in the light. When it flickers. Someone's eyes, water, anything really...."

"The nibblers danced in the firelight," said Aurora.

"We still need a queen," said Ripred.

"Gold flows from her, hot and bright," said Ares. "Luxa has no gold."

"I have nothing but rags," said Luxa, looking down at her tattered clothes. "I cannot be the queen."

There was a low but unmistakable rumble. Everyone's head turned to the volcano. A thin stream of lava bubbled out of the top and ran down the side toward the pit. As gold as gold can be.

"Gold flows from her, hot and bright..." said Nike. "You do not think —"

"I think the Overlander's right," said Ripred. He nodded at the volcano. "There's your gold."

"And there's your queen," said Gregor.

CHAPTER 24

A second, louder rumble shook the ground under their feet. "Get out of here!" shouted Ripred. Everything fell into confusion as they tried to mount the bats. They had changed riders so many times during the trip that no one was sure where their designated seat was. Gregor grabbed Boots and jumped on Ares, only to remember that no other bat could carry Ripred. He slid off and slipped on a battery, which was lucky, because it reminded him to scoop all the stuff he had dumped out earlier into his backpack and sling it over his shoulder. By that time, Boots had run off and had climbed on Temp's back.

"Stop!" called out Ares. "Luxa, Hazard, Gregor, and Boots on Aurora. Howard, Temp, and Cartesian on Nike. Thalia, fly under me in case you tire." He assumed the takeoff position and said to Ripred, "Let us go."

Everyone stumbled around but by following Ares's directions managed to get a seat. Gregor ended up at the front of the bat with Boots hugging him around his neck. Hazard and Luxa swung up behind them.

The second the bats left the cave they were swept up in the strong current that was blowing in from a cave overhead. It was the same current that had cleared away the ashen air and assured that the poisonous gas did not drift their way. Now it was carrying them directly toward the glowing volcano.

Gregor was afraid the bats were going to flip out again, but they were doing all right. It was not one current that overwhelmed them but the convergence of multiple airstreams that had occurred earlier. Almost immediately he felt Aurora turn away from the volcano and begin to head into the wind. It was so strong, they made little forward motion. He wrapped his arms around Boots, trying to block as much of it as possible. Switching tactics, all the bats suddenly whipped back around and flew straight for the volcano. At first it seemed insane, but then Gregor realized that the only way they could get away from the volcano was by riding the current that blew right over it.

Between the force of the wind and the bats' own wing power, they were moving through space at an incredible velocity. The volcano, which had been a distant vision, quickly rose up in front of them.

Gregor was awestruck by the "queen." She was majestic and imposing but most of all furious. Clouds of steam hissed from fissures in her sides. Molten lava oozed out of her top and flowed downward in fiery streams. Even with the wind whistling in his ears, Gregor could hear her rumbling growing into a roar.

As they flew out over the volcano, Gregor could see the bubbling lake of lava brewing inside. The air seared his lungs. Everything was suffused with a hot red light, including the pit where the dead mice lay. Gregor pressed his cheek against Boots's so she couldn't turn her head in the direction of the mice. But he forced himself to look at the bodies, to keep the image clear and alive in his brain. He knew he had to be able to tell their story, and tell it as fully as he could, when he returned to Regalia. He had to be able to impress upon people the magnitude of what had happened. Was happening. So much counted on it. Gregor began to feel dizzy. Some of the fumes rising out of the volcano must be riding along the current with them. He knew the fumes must be affecting the bats as well, but none of them showed any sign of slowing. They left the volcano behind as quickly as they had approached it.

Another ominous rumble rattled the earth below them. Gregor was feeling sicker, not better, as they flew on. What if they were just riding along in a pocket of poisonous gas and it was only a matter of time before they were overcome? He tightened his hold on Boots.

"You okay, Boots?" he hollered over the wind.

"I sleepy," she said. "I take a nap."

"Oh, no. No naps!" shouted Gregor, alarm shooting through him. "You stay awake, okay?"

"Okay," said Boots faintly, but he could feel her trying to nestle up against him.

"A tunnel! Find a tunnel!" he heard Ripred shout.

They were approaching a giant stone wall that signaled the far end of the cavern. The bats began to dodge in and out of openings on the wall, trying to judge what was merely a cave and what might be a tunnel and a means of escape. Above him Gregor saw Nike begin to circle at an opening. Howard was waving his arms wildly for them to follow. Aurora made straight for the tunnel. Nike disappeared inside it first, followed by Ares, who now had Thalia locked in his claws. Aurora brought up the rear.

Gregor immediately felt safer when they entered the tunnel. The air was still nasty, but at least they were out of the volcano's reach. He relaxed his grip on Boots a little and was just turning to check on Luxa and Hazard when the "queen" erupted.

Nothing else could account for the deafening explosion, which rattled his teeth, sent flares of color shooting before his eyes, and left him unable to hear anything but a shrill ringing in his ears.

A blast of hot air hit them and then there was no air, only a stinging cloud of ash and dust that blocked out everything else. He struggled to breathe, to see, thought he must pull Boots's T-shirt up over her face to protect her. He could feel himself losing consciousness and felt Luxa's grip on his shoulder loosening. "No," he wanted to cry out. "Hold on! Hold on! Boots!" That was the last thing he remembered... .

When he came to, Gregor was lying facedown on what felt like a large rock. His chin hung off a sharp ledge. He began coughing immediately. As he sat up he could feel the ash falling from his body, sending up a cloud, making it even harder to breathe. He staggered forward a few steps and fell off the rock hard, landing in at least four feet of ash. Struggling back to his feet, he began to wade through the stuff, waving his hands blindly in front of him. His head pounded so badly, he thought the pain might actually split it in two. Making it to a wall, he braced himself and vomited until nothing but bile came from his stomach. Trembling and disoriented, he leaned against the wall and tried to clear his thoughts.

"What happened?" he thought. He remembered the volcano ... flying ... a vision of the mice glowing in the red light... light... he needed light....

Gregor fumbled for the flashlight at his belt and found the switch. At first he thought it was broken. Then he realized the plastic face was obscured by ash. He knocked the flashlight against the wall and wiped it as best as he could on the inside of his shirt.

The light revealed a large tunnel blanketed in gray dust. It had drifted into deep banks like snow in places. In others, just a fine layer covered the floor. Gregor waded to a relatively clear spot to try to get his bearings. He must have passed out and slipped off Aurora's back at some point. But then where was Boots? She had been in his arms. Where were Luxa and Hazard? Where were the others?

"Where are the others?" Gregor remembered Cartesian's panicked cry. "Where are the others?"

Gregor plowed back to the rock, dragging his feet through the ash, trying to locate anyone else who might have fallen with him. By the time he had covered the area, he was choking on a cloud of dust but had discovered no one. He started down the tunnel in the direction his head had been pointing when he awoke, hoping that he might find the rest of the party ahead.

The smooth surface of the ash was unbroken by footprints. It muffled his footsteps, making them barely audible to his still ringing ears. He had never felt so alone in his life. Never had been, probably. There was no sign of life anywhere. It was a miracle he was even alive, that he had not suffocated in the eruption. Probably he would have if his chin hadn't been hanging off the rock. If he'd landed on the ground, most likely he'd have been buried alive and died under the ash.

"Where are the others? Where are the others?" Cartesian's voice screamed in Gregor's brain.

What if none of them had survived? What if they had all fallen unconscious to the tunnel floor? Maybe he was passing by them as he shuffled along, unaware of their bodies under ...

Gregor stopped and pressed his palms against his eyes. "Don't. Don't think like that. Just keep walking. You just keep walking."

It was impossible to gauge how much time was passing. The tunnel remained unchanged. His breath came in short ragged gasps. Every inch of him, inside and out, seemed coated in a layer of ash.

He remembered the water in his backpack and popped it open. The first mouthful he just swished around his mouth, rinsing the grit from his teeth, and spat on the floor. Then he took a long, deep drink, not bothering to ration it. Feeling slightly better, he trudged on.

At some point, he became aware of a faint breeze on his face. "Another current," he thought, and wondered if he should try to take cover behind a rock. But the breeze remained gentle and carried air that was definitely sweeter than what he'd been breathing. It eased the pain in his chest and the ache in his temples.

He thought the twinkle of light in the distance was only a reflection of his own light. But when he directed his beam to the ground, he could still see it there. He moved faster, causing more dust to rise. "Hey!" he tried to call. "Hey!" But he couldn't even hear his own voice.

Then he could make out a figure, as ghostly and gray as his surroundings. He caught glimpses of the light again, brighter now. Gregor broke into a run, more like a clumsy gallop really, because his knee had been damaged when he stepped off the rock.

"Hey!" he called again, and this time he heard himself and the figure turned.

Gregor stopped short. One look at Howard's face confirmed what Gregor had been dreading. Someone was dead.

"Who is it?" said Gregor, his heart slamming against his chest. "Not Boots?"

Howard stepped aside, squinting at the gray figures before him. Boots was all right. She was sitting on Temp's back, holding her scepter with its tiny light. At first glance, everyone looked all right. Ripred, Cartesian, Luxa, Hazard, the cluster of four bats. But he had miscounted. Only three bats huddled together. Lying on the floor, almost obscured by the dust, her head cradled in Hazard's lap, was Thalia.

CHAPTER 25

"Oh ... not Thalia," he said. Silly, laughing little bat. But brave, too. Going under the river water to retrieve Hazard. Trying so hard to keep up with the full-grown bats. Still trying after the flood and the scorpions and the nightmarish currents.

Gregor thought of the last joke he'd told her. "What did one wall say to the other wall?" And how her frightened sobs had turned to giggles at the punch line. "Meet you at the corner." She was barely more than a baby really.

He walked over and knelt by Thalia's side. She looked so tiny, with her wings folded against her. Without that bright bubbly thing that was Thalia radiating from inside her. He gently laid a hand on her chest, brushing away some of the ash, revealing a small patch of peach-colored fur.

Hazard wept inconsolably, his tears raining down on Thalia's face. "It was the mark. The mark of secret. It took my mother and now it took her."

Under the gray powder, Luxa's face was still and distant. "It was my fault," she said. "I should never have allowed any of them to come on the picnic."

"The picnic was not the danger, Cousin," said Howard. "I was the one who insisted on trying the Swag, and it was there our troubles began."

"No, I did not fly fast enough," said Ares. "I had her, but I did not fly fast enough."

"Stop it, all of you," said Ripred. "She died from poisonous fumes, not by any of your hands. She was flying, so she breathed deeper. She is small, so she succumbed more quickly. None of you are to blame."

The whole episode was beginning to worry Boots. She slid off Temp's back and came over to Thalia. "Wake up! Wake up, Thalia!"

"Don't, Boots," said Gregor, catching her hand.

"She needs to wake up," said Boots. "Hazard is crying. When does she wake up?" Gregor could not find it within him to give his standard reply. To pretend that in a short time Thalia would be back with them, laughing and happy. And somehow it seemed wrong to try. Boots was getting older. Very soon, she would begin to realize the truth on her own, anyway. "She's not going wake up," he told her. "She's dead."

"She doesn't wake up?" said Boots.

"No, not this time," said Gregor. "This time, she had to go away."

Boots looked around at all their faces, at Hazard crying. "Where did she go?" No one had an answer. "Where is Thalia when she doesn't wake up?"

The question hung in the air for an eternity. Finally, it was Howard who spoke up. "Why, she's in your heart, Boots."

"My heart?" said Boots, putting both hands on her chest.

"Yes. That's where she lives now," said Howard.

"She can fly away?" asked Boots, pressing her palms tightly against her heart as if to keep Thalia from escaping.

"Oh, no, she will stay there forever," said Howard. Boots looked up at Gregor for confirmation. He gave her a nod. She went back over and climbed onto Temp's shell thoughtfully.

"If you mean to do something with her, do it now. We cannot stay here long or this dust will finish us all," said Ripred.

"I will take her," said Ares.

"Hazard, you must say good-bye now," said Luxa.

"No!" cried Hazard. "No! You can't take her! I won't let you!"

And then an awful scene followed where they literally had to drag Hazard from Thalia so that Ares could take her body away. To where, Gregor did not know. There was no comforting the little boy. Howard finally got a dose of sedative down his throat between wails, and his sobs quieted.

Ripred sent Aurora and Nike ahead to scout for a less toxic area. While they were gone, Howard cradled Hazard in his arms and rocked him back and forth. "You know, I lost my bond, too," said Howard. Thalia and Hazard had not been officially bonds, but it seemed a minor detail now. "Pandora was her name."

"What happened to her?" asked Hazard.

"We were on the Waterway. She flew out over an island and was attacked by mites. They killed her," said Howard.

"Couldn't you help her?" asked Hazard.

"No. I wanted to. Even when she was lost I still wanted to try. But there was nothing I could do," said Howard. "Nothing but cry, just like you are crying now."

"What was she like?" asked Hazard.

"Funny. And curious. She always had to be the first one to see something new. And she loved to eat shellfish," said Howard with a smile.

"Great big piles of them."

Gregor thought of the slimy shellfish Howard had kept insisting were a delicacy, and wondered if his passion for them had anything to do with how much he associated them with Pandora.

"You're not crying about her now," said Hazard.

"No," said Howard. "I have become used to carrying her in my heart."

"My heart is so crowded already," whispered Hazard. "But I'm sure the others will make room for Thalia. She is not a very big bat." And with that, he drifted off to sleep.

Gregor thought about all the others Hazard had lost... his mother, his father, Frill... and now Thalia had gone to join them....

They were all silent for a while. No one wanted to be responsible for waking Hazard up and bringing him back to this aching reality.

Finally Ripred spoke to Gregor. "Well, at least you showed up. Thought we'd lost you for good."

"I'm all right," said Gregor. "What happened?"

"Not exactly sure. You blacked out and fell. Fortunately you had the sense to push your sister onto the bat's head," said Ripred. "Ares tried to go back for you, but we had no idea where you were and the ash was so deep."

"I'm all right," Gregor repeated, although this was one of the worst days of his life.

Aurora and Nike flew up. They had discovered a tunnel that led upward to cleaner air. Everyone could squeeze on to the two bats, except Ripred, who said he would wait for Ares, anyway, and then follow their trail. It was only a short flight to the passage. The higher they traveled the sweeter and cleaner the air got. Eventually they broke free of the tunnel and came out on a rock formation with a flat top and vertical sides. Fresh breezes washed over them. A cold spring bubbled out of a crack and fell hundreds of feet, where it disappeared into a dimly lit tangle of thick vines.

"We're back at the jungle," said Gregor.

"Yes, it borders the Firelands," said Howard.

They took turns gulping down the spring water and washing the ash from their skin. Boots said she was hungry, and Howard gave her the last piece of stale bread. She curled up next to Hazard on a blanket and went to sleep. Cartesian had fallen into some kind of stupor as well, although he often sat up and looked around, squeaking rapidly, before collapsing back on the ground.

No one else seemed able to sleep. Or talk. They just sat around, staring at the flashlight, or down at the jungle. Gregor watched Luxa watching the spring for a while. She seemed unnaturally calm.

About an hour later, Ares arrived with Ripred. "Where did you take her?" Howard asked.

"Back to the queen. So she might lie with the nibblers and not alone," said Ares. "The lava will claim them all soon. Half were already covered."

"Yes. The Bane does not only want to kill them. He wants them to disappear without a trace," said Ripred.

"So, it seems the Overlander was on to something about the song."

"You mean that it's a prophecy," said Gregor.

"If it is, we should name it," said Aurora.

"I have already done so in my head, but the name need not stick," said Nike. "I call it 'The Prophecy of Secrets.'"

"It is well named," said Ares. "Since the marks of secret led us to it."

"And even its nature was a secret," said Howard. "No one suspected our childish song to be a prophecy."

"One we still need to break," said Ripred. "I think we understand the first two parts now. We know who the queen is. We know about the nibblers. How does the last part go?"

Luxa spoke the last verse. Without the playful melody, they were just words. And loaded words at that.

*"now the guests are at our door
Greet them as we have before.
Some will slice and some will pour.
Father, mother, sister, brother,
Off they go, I do not know
If we will see another. "*

"I suppose the first question is who the guests are?" said Howard.

"Well, if the door opens to Regalia, which I'm assuming since Sandwich called it 'our door,' then given the circumstances, the guests are probably someone Her Highness has recently declared war on," said Ripred.

"The gnawers," said Luxa. "And we will greet them as we have before."

Gregor remembered that this was the part in the dance where everybody pretended to pour tea and serve cake.

"Some will slice and some will pour."

"What does that mean?" he asked.

"Swords slice," said Luxa. "And when the city is under siege, we pour boiling oil over the walls and onto our enemies."

She said the words without any particular sense of fear or revulsion. But Gregor was filled with both.

"I wonder when the attack will be," said Howard.

"Someone must return at once to warn the Regalians," said Nike.

"No point in me coming, of course. Neither side would welcome me. No, I think I may hang around here for a while," said Ripred.

"And do what?" asked Gregor. Ripred always had a plan.

"Those nibblers we saw today ... they're only a fraction of the ones who've been driven here. The others might still be alive. I was thinking ... they'd make a likely army," said Ripred.

"For you?" said Luxa. "They would never follow you."

"That's where you come in, Your Highness," said Ripred. "If we go together, we might be able to mobilize them."

"I might alone. What do you add to the mix?" asked Luxa.

"Don't be impertinent. Is it yes or no?" said Ripred impatiently.

Luxa only took a second to consider the proposition. "Yes," she said. "Howard, will you come?"

"I will have to, Cousin, if you insist on doing this," said Howard doubtfully. "Cartesian will want to join us."

"He's too beat up," said Ripred. "But with you two on fliers and me on the ground, we might be able to break them out."

"I am sure they will follow me, if we can get in close enough for them to hear my voice," said Luxa.

"I'm counting on that," said Ripred. "Let's say four hours' rest, and we begin."

Gregor had begun feeling like he was invisible. No one was involving him in the plans at all. "I'll be ready," he said.

"No!" Ripred and Luxa spoke in the same breath and with the same intensity.

"What?" said Gregor in surprise.

"Not you, boy. You're taking the pups back to Regalia," said Ripred.

CHAPTER 26

"No, I'm not!" said Gregor. "I'm going with you!" "You cannot!" said Luxa. Her eyes darted around as if she was trying to find a reason. "What about Boots and Hazard?"

"I don't know, they can ... Howard, you could take them back," said Gregor.

Ripred, Howard, and Luxa exchanged glances. Gregor had an awful realization. They didn't want him to come. They were thinking about how he had choked in the fight with Twirltongue and they thought he would fall to pieces again.

"You don't think I can fight," he said bluntly. "Well, fine, okay. Maybe I did freak out when I lost my light, but it's not really dark here, with the volcanoes and all and I think there's been a few other times when I've shown that —"

"It's not that, Gregor. Everyone knows you can fight. Far better than I can," said Howard.

"Then what? You're still mad at me?" he asked Luxa.

"No, I am not," said Luxa.

"So?" said Gregor.

"Has he not been told anything?" asked Howard.

"About what?" said Gregor in frustration.

"Just this. You've got to get back to Regalia. Now that the war's begun, you're of no use to us without your sword," said Ripred.

Gregor's hand went to his hip in confusion. His fingers wrapped around the hilt of his weapon. "I've got a sword."

"Not any sword. Your sword," said Ripred. His eyes narrowed. "You didn't lose it in the tunnel, did you? When you fought Twirltongue?"

"What?" said Gregor, totally confused. "Yeah, I lost that sword. I threw it behind me at the rats. So, what? There's, like, thousands of them."

"No, Gregor. He means the sword Vikus gave you. Sandwich's sword," said Howard.

"Oh, that," said Gregor. It was true, Vikus had tried to give him an impressive, jewel-studded sword that had once belonged to Sandwich, but Gregor had refused to take it. He knew where it was, though. It was in the museum, which had always seemed an odd place to keep it, since the

museum held items from the Overland. It was on a shelf wrapped in the same silken cloth that Vikus had originally presented it in. For the first time Gregor wondered if Sandwich's sword was there because everyone believed it belonged to him now, whether he had accepted it or not. "That's not really mine."

"Yes, it is. It says so in that prophecy I mentioned to you, about killing the Bane. 'The Prophecy of Time,'" said Ripred.

"And it says I need Sandwich's sword?" asked Gregor.

"Among other things. I had assumed Vikus had at least let you know of the sword's importance. That you were destined to inherit it," said Ripred.

"That we all believe it is your sword. Any of that sound familiar?"

"No. He just seemed happy I wouldn't take it," said Gregor.

"Ever the optimist, your grandpa," said Ripred to Luxa and Howard.

"Yes. Perhaps we should arrange for him to spend a bit more time in the field," said Luxa grimly.

"Listen to you," Ripred said with a chuckle.

"Do you know what he said when we were taken prisoner by the spinners that time? He said he thought things would be different because of some recent trade agreements he'd made with them," said Luxa. "I was eleven and I knew that was idiocy."

Ripred grinned. "He might have been right."

"We might have been dead," said Luxa.

"We *would* have been dead if it wasn't for your grandpa," said Gregor, suddenly protective of Vikus. "The spiders were going to kill me until I mentioned his name."

"Yes, yes, you don't have to defend Vikus. But the sword. You know where it is?" said Ripred.

"Yeah," said Gregor.

"Good. Go back and put it in your belt and don't let it leave your side again," said Ripred.

"What is the big deal about telling me about the prophecy?" said Gregor. "I've been through four of them now. How much worse can they get?"

"We didn't really know if it was going to happen. Some thought certain events were supposed to occur. But after today, it seems they have," said Howard.

"And?" said Gregor.

"And no one wants to tell you because ... the odds are ... look, we don't even know if we're interpreting it right," said Ripred. "We're usually wrong, aren't we?"

Gregor knew he could no longer wait for Vikus to explain things.

"What's it say, Ripred?"

"It says ... well, it suggests ... you're probably going to —" Ripred broke off abruptly. "Vikus will tell you. That crazy girl, what's her name? Nerissa. Ask her about it. She'll explain it better than me," said Ripred.

"But I —" said Gregor.

"No!" said Ripred. "You ask in Regalia. As soon as your bond is rested, you can leave. Take the pups and Cartesian and Temp."

"To fight, I stay, to fight," objected Temp.

"No, Temp," said Luxa, kneeling before him. "I would wish you at my side, but we have much greater need of you at home. You must go to the crawlers, tell them what has happened, and rally them to our cause."

Temp shifted back and forth on his feet in indecision.

"And I beg another favor as well," Luxa continued. "I need you to look after Hazard now as you have looked after Boots for Gregor. I put him in your care."

"My care, the boy be in, my care?" said Temp in surprise.

"If you will take him. For there is no one among us who perceives danger so quickly and accurately as you do," said Luxa. "Or meets it with such courage."

This was true, as they had all found out the hard way. Temp had warned them against exploring the island with the mites, they had ignored him, and Howard's bond, Pandora, had been eaten alive. Temp had warned them not to wander into the jungle after the sweet odor of fruit, they had ignored him, and one of the rats, Mange, had been swallowed up by a carnivorous pod. Temp had warned them about the volcanic gas, Luxa had ignored him, and both she and Aurora would have ended up poisoned if Ripred hadn't listened. Yes, this was true, but...

Gregor flashed back to the girl he had met when he first arrived in the Underland. The girl who had made fun of the roaches ... their slowness, their inability to fight, their cowardliness ...

She had certainly come a long way.

"You, so say, you?" said Temp.

"I, so say, I," said Luxa. "Will you do this, Temp?"

"Yes," said the cockroach.

"Thank you," said Luxa. She laid her hand on his head and his antennas gave a quiver. It was the only good moment in a very dark day.

Gregor volunteered to watch while the others slept. He was just going to spend the next day riding on Ares, anyway. Luxa said she could not sleep and walked off to the edge of the rock. She sat, her legs hanging in space, unimpressed by the sheer drop below her. The sadness on her face made Gregor's heart ache. He couldn't seem to take his eyes off of her. It didn't matter. She didn't even notice. But someone else did.

"What's the story with you and the queen?" said Ripred softly.

"Nothing," said Gregor. "I thought you were asleep."

"You've become very fond of her," said Ripred.

"I don't know. I guess," said Gregor.

"You want a piece of advice?" said Ripred.

"Don't bother. I know what you'll say. The whole thing's stupid," said Gregor.

"Quite the contrary. I was going to say that life is short. There are only a few good things in it, really. Don't pretend that one isn't happening," said Ripred.

It was the most un-Ripred-like advice Gregor could imagine. Was the rat just making fun of him? No, he sounded on the level.

"That's crazy. I mean, it's not like the two of us could ever ..." Gregor didn't even know how to finish the sentence.

"Boy, there's a war on. We might all be dead in a day or two. I wouldn't project too far into the future if I were you," said Ripred. He gave a gigantic yawn. "Well, I'm done in." He circled around three times and lay down. In less than a minute he was snoring.

Gregor sat there a few minutes more, watching Luxa. Then he found himself walking over to her. He hadn't figured out what to say to her, how to tell her that he cared about her, about what happened to her. So he just sat near her. Off to one side, but not hanging his legs off the edge. After all the hours in the air, he still avoided heights. Luxa spoke first. "Those nibblers in the pit. They were not from the Fount. They were from the jungle. Many of them were my friends. I saw several of the pups born. I even named one."

She hadn't cried yet. Neither had he. Not about the nibblers or about Thalia. That would come later. If there was time.

"They love mathematics, you know," she said. Gregor didn't particularly know that, or much else about the mice, but he didn't say so. "So, I called him Cube."

"That's a good name," said Gregor.

"He was in the pit today," said Luxa. "I recognized his marks."

A light breeze blew over them, warm and muggy and bringing up the smells of the jungle below them. Gregor's thoughts shifted from the victims in the pit to Hamnet and Frill, who had died in the jungle during the battle with the ants. He wondered if the vines had grown over their bodies.

Probably by now ...

"Gregor, I was thinking about what you said in the tunnel," said Luxa. "About you being only a visitor here."

"Forget about that. I was just going off," said Gregor.

"No, listen. You were right," said Luxa. "When you get back to Regalia, no matter what people tell you, you have no obligation to stay. This is not your world or your war," said Luxa. "If you were to return home after you read the prophecy, I would not hold it against you."

"This must be some prophecy," said Gregor.

But she avoided the topic and went on. "To even involve you in the nibblers' plight was unfair of me. You owe them nothing."

"I didn't try to help them because they owed me anything," said Gregor. "What was happening to them was wrong."

"But when you see what the prophecy demands of you, that may not be enough," said Luxa. "I declared the war for the nibblers' sake. You share no history with the nibblers. We humans here have many reasons to be indebted to them. What have the nibblers ever done for you?"

The breeze ruffled her hair, pushing it back from her face, giving him a clear shot of her eyes. They were asking for an answer. Needing to know if she could count on him.

"They saved your life," he said.

And for just a moment, Luxa's face softened and she smiled.

CHAPTER 27

Gregor insisted Luxa try and rest. He didn't want her going into battle dropping with fatigue. She resisted at first, and he had to threaten to wake Ripred for backup. "And then, he won't shut up until you're begging to sleep," said Gregor.

"All right, then, all right," she said. She laid down with Hazard and Boots and he was gratified to see she soon drifted off.

Gregor went back to being on guard. He didn't have a watch or any means of telling the time. But it wasn't a problem. Ripred woke himself up at what was probably precisely four hours and roused everyone but Hazard, Boots, and Cartesian.

The mouse began to stir as they readied themselves and soon was on his feet. When he found out about the plan, he was determined to join the party to liberate the nibblers.

"I must go! I must find Heronian! You will need her to break the code!" insisted Cartesian.

"Heronian? I'll keep an ear out for her. But you're going to Regalia," said Ripred.

An argument ensued and was about to get ugly when Howard suddenly shouted, "Enough! Cartesian is right. They are his family, his friends. He must be allowed to go! But first..." Howard dug through his medical kit and removed a small reddish bottle Gregor had not noticed before. He held it up to Cartesian. "But first you must take a dose of this. It is an elixir of potent herbs to give you strength."

Cartesian gulped down the liquid without hesitation, blinked a few times in confusion, and then fell to the ground like a stone.

"What did you give him?" asked Gregor.

"A very powerful sleep agent. We use it only rarely, when a patient must lose consciousness immediately so that we can operate. To remove a limb or some other drastic measure," said Howard. "Was this wrong of me?"

"Quite the contrary. But obviously, the rest of us need to keep an eye on you," said Ripred, only half-joking.

They loaded Cartesian, Boots, Hazard, and Temp onto Ares's back. Gregor rinsed out his water bottle and filled it with clear spring water. He placed it in his backpack with the binoculars, duct tape, batteries, and all the

flashlights, even the one he usually wore on his belt. Then he slid the backpack around Luxa's shoulders.

"What is this?" she asked him as he adjusted the straps. While the supplies from Regalia were common property on trips, Gregor's backpack was always treated as if it was exclusively his.

"I don't need it. You might," he said. "You know how to change the batteries in the flashlights, right?"

"I think so. But what will you do for light on the way back to Regalia?" she asked.

Gregor held up Boots's scepter and hit the on button. "I've got it covered."

When they hugged good-bye, there was one moment where he thought he wouldn't let go. But he did. He embraced Howard, too. Kind of patted the bats. Nodded to Ripred since the rat wasn't particularly physical unless he was knocking you down. Then Gregor climbed up on Ares. He took them all in ... Luxa, Howard, Nike, Aurora, and Ripred ... knowing there was a good chance, a really good chance, he might never see them again.

"Run like the river, boy," said Ripred.

"Fly you high," said Gregor back. But it was Luxa's face he could not take his eyes off of as Ares lifted into the air.

He lay down between Boots and Hazard and put an arm around each of them. Temp sat at his feet, to watch over Cartesian.

Gregor turned off the scepter to save whatever light might be left in it. The thing had already performed way beyond expectations. For a while, there was a faint aura from the jungle below. Then it was pitch-black.

He wanted badly to sleep, knew he needed to. But sleep did not come. The darkness made him highly sensitive to sound. Sometimes he would hear a rushing stream or a cry from some kind of animal, but mostly there were the sounds they carried with them. The flap of Ares's wings, Boots's soft breathing, and Hazard's ramblings in his drugged sleep. Gregor caught words here and there ... Thalia ... mother ... secret...

Secret. The very word filled Gregor with weariness. How exhausting it was to keep a secret, to hide a secret, to discover a secret, to know a secret existed and waited for you in the dark.

This summer had been nothing but secrets. The scars on his legs that no one in New York could see. The clandestine visit to Queenshead. The hidden mark of the scythe under Cevian's body. Lying to Vikus about the

picnic. Sandwich's concealing the prophecy as a song. And the worst secret of all... the truth of what the rats were doing to the mice.

There was another secret waiting back in Regalia — at least it was a secret to Gregor — about what Sandwich had written in "The Prophecy of Time."

But Gregor didn't think it was as big a mystery as his friends imagined. No one could even begin to tell him the truth about it. So he could only assume one thing. That in no uncertain terms, the new prophecy called for death. Either his own, or that of someone he deeply loved. What else could make even Ripred stumble around for an explanation when it was mentioned?

A new sound filtered through his thoughts. The sound of claws, rat claws, against the stone surface below him. Gregor rolled over onto his stomach and looked over Ares's shoulder, but of course he could see nothing without light. The rats picked up on their presence, though, smelling them, even recognizing Gregor's scent because they were screaming his name, calling for his death.

In a few minutes, it was quiet again.

"How many were there?" Gregor asked Ares.

"Six or seven hundred," said Ares.

"Heading to Regalia or the Firelands?" said Gregor.

"Regalia," said Ares.

"Do you think the Regalians know the rats are coming?" said Gregor.

"I do not know," said Ares and his wings began to beat even faster.

Gregor thought of the unsuspecting city lying in wait, of all the people, of his mom in her hospital bed ... and Ares could not go fast enough.

By the time the bat had reached High Hall, it was clear no one knew about the approaching army of rats. They were waved through the gate without any special clearance, although they did get some worried looks. No extra guards were posted. In the city, people were going about their regular business.

The instant they landed, Gregor ordered the guards to take the rest of his party to the hospital. "And tell Vikus the city is about to be attacked by gnawers."

Before they could ask any questions, Gregor took off down the hall. His knee was swollen and pain stabbed him at every step, but he didn't stop. He

knew his way around the palace now. It didn't take long to get to the museum.

Sandwich's sword was in its usual place, still carefully wrapped in cloth. It hadn't been touched since he'd last seen it. He reached for it and something caught his eye. Mrs. Cormaci's camera. He'd put it in here after the party, so it wouldn't get broken or anything. Beside it was the stack of photos he'd taken the day of Hazard's party. His mom had suggested Gregor take them home and put them in a special album for Hazard.

He couldn't stop himself from lifting the photos. On the top of the stack was the first picture he'd taken of a beaming Hazard and Thalia. It was only about a week ago, but it seemed like another lifetime. Now Hazard was crazed with grief and Thalia lay dead in the pit with the nibblers. Five of his friends were on a desperate mission in the Firelands to warn the nibblers and try to assemble an army. Rats would surround the city in a few hours, fueled by the Bane's hatred.

Gregor's hands began to tremble. A few of the photos fell to the ground. He quickly scooped them up and found himself looking at one he'd never seen. Who had even taken it? It was a picture of him dancing with Luxa. The camera had caught the moment where he lifted her up in the air. They were both laughing. He remembered just how happy he'd been....

Then the trumpets began to blare out their warning. Frightened voices called to one another in the hall. Everyone knew now. The rats were coming.

Gregor tucked the photo of the dance in his pocket and piled the rest on the shelf. He pulled the sword from his belt and tossed it away. The soft, silky fabric was cool on his hands as he unrolled Sandwich's sword. The sight of it, covered with jewels and intricate carvings, took his breath away. He had forgotten how awesome it was.

He hesitated a moment. To take up Sandwich's sword. But why? He had already made his choice, back when he had watched the mice dying in that cloud of poison gas. He would fight because he could think of no other option. But what would that mean for him, the warrior? Who would he be ... if he survived ... who would he be when he laid down Sandwich's sword?

No, not Sandwich's. It was his now. His hand grasped the hilt and he made a few cuts in the air. A deep, satisfying swish accompanied each movement. It was heavier than he expected but perfectly balanced. It made

every sword he'd ever held seem like some cheap plastic thing you might wear as part of your Halloween costume. He slid the blade in his belt, letting his hand rest on the hilt, feeling its weight, its Tightness. Something new welled up inside him. A sense of power he was not accustomed to. It came from wearing the sword. "Don't let it leave your side again," Ripred had said. Gregor didn't think there was any danger of that.

"Have you found all that you need?" Vikus's voice was infused with sadness. He had never wanted to give Gregor the sword in the first place.

"Yeah," said Gregor without turning to see him at the door. He tightened his hand on the jeweled hilt. "Yeah, I think I've got it."

**GREGOR
AND THE CODE OF CLAW
BOOK FIVE OF THE BESTSELLING
UNDERLAND CHRONICLES**

SUZANNE COLLINS

SCHOLASTIC INC.

New York Toronto London Auckland
Sydney Mexico City New Delhi Hong Kong

PART 1
The Code

CHAPTER 1

Gregor's back pressed into the cold stone floor as he stared up at the words on the ceiling. His eyes and skin were still stinging from the volcanic ash that had engulfed him hours ago. Between the burning in his lungs and the rapid beating of his heart, it was hard to get a full breath. To steady himself, he tightened his grip on the hilt of his newly claimed sword.

As soon as he had retrieved the sword from the museum, he had run to this room. Every inch of it — walls, floor, and ceiling — was covered in prophecies about the Underland, this gloomy warring world far beneath New York City, which had consumed Gregor's life for the past year. Bartholomew of Sandwich, the man who had founded the human city of Regalia, had carved the prophecies some four centuries ago. While most of his words were for the benefit of the Regalians, they also made reference to many of the giant creatures who lived in the neighboring lands down here — the bats, the cockroaches, the spiders, the mice, and, most often, the rats. Oh, and Gregor. Several were about Gregor. But they didn't call him by his name. In the prophecies, he was known as "the warrior."

Gregor hadn't allowed anyone to enter the room with him. He'd wanted to be completely alone when he first read this prophecy. Everyone had taken such pains to keep its contents from him in the last few months that he had known it must say something awful. And he had wanted to be able to react to the awfulness without anyone watching him. Cry, if he needed to cry. Scream, if he needed to scream. But it turned out it didn't really matter, because he'd barely reacted at all.

"You've got to face this thing. You've got to understand it," he told himself. So he forced himself to focus on the precisely chiseled letters again.

As he reread the words, it was as if he could actually hear a clock ticking along with the lines. It was, after all, "The Prophecy of Time."

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick

...

The war has been declared,
Your ally been ensnared.
It is now or it is never.
Break the code or die forever.

Time is running out Running out
Running out.

To the warrior give my blade. by his hand your fate is made.

But do not forget the ticking

Or the clicking, clicking, clicking.

While a rat's tongue may be flicking,

With its feet it does the tricking.

For the raw and not the jaw

Makes the Code of Claw.

Time is standing still Standing still Standing still.

Since the princess is the key to unlock the treachery,

She cannot avoid the matching

Or the scratching, scratching, scratching.

When a secret plot is hatching,

In the naming is the catching.

WHAT SHE SAW, it is the flaw

Of the Code of Claw.

Time is turning back

Turning back

Turning back.

When the monster's blood is spilled,

When the warrior has been killed, *you* must not ignore the rapping, or
the tapping, tapping, tapping.

if the gnawers find you napping, you will rot while they are mapping
out the law of those who gnaw

In the Code of Claw.

The ticking stopped with the words. Gregor closed his eyes as that one
phrase hammered in his brain: *When the warrior has been killed*

That was it, obviously. The part that nobody had wanted to tell him.

When the warrior has been killed

Not even Ripred — and you had to figure that rat was used to breaking
bad news to people after all those years of fighting in wars.

When the warrior has been killed

Not even Luxa — who was only twelve, yet seemed much older
because she was a queen and had lost her parents and all. What was it that
she had said to him on the edge of the cliff a few hours ago? "If you were to
return home after you read the prophecy, I would not hold it against you."

"Really, Luxa?" thought Gregor. "You wouldn't hold it against me? Because if the tables were turned ... I'd never forgive you in a million years."

When the warrior has been killed

In theory, sure, Gregor could still go home. Pack up his three-year-old sister, Boots, get his mom out of the hospital, where she was recovering from the plague, and have his bat, Ares, fly them back up to the laundry room of their apartment building in New York City. Ares, his bond, who had saved his life numerous times and who had had nothing but suffering since he had met Gregor. He tried to imagine the parting. "Well, Ares, it's been great. I'm heading home now. I know by leaving I'm completely dooming to annihilation everyone who's helped me down here, but I'm really not up for this whole war thing anymore. So, fly you high, you know?"

Like that would ever happen.

When the warrior has been killed

It simply didn't feel real. Any of it. Maybe it was because he was so tired. Gregor hadn't slept in days. Not since before he'd watched the rats murder hundreds of mice in a pit at the base of a volcano in the Firelands. He'd fallen unconscious for a while from the poisonous fumes the volcano had emitted when it erupted. Did that count as sleep? Maybe. But it had been only a short time before he'd come to and waded through deep ash in search of his friends. Before he could even experience the joy of finding them, he'd learned that Thalia, the sweet little bat who had mistakenly been caught up in the ill-fated trip, had suffocated as she tried to escape the volcano. Hazard, Luxa's seven-year-old cousin who had planned on bonding with Thalia, had been so distraught they'd had to sedate him. Later, when they had finally found some clean air on a cliff overlooking the jungle, Gregor had volunteered to keep watch while the others rested. On the flight home, packed onto Ares's back with Boots, Hazard, their cockroach friend, Temp, and a heavily drugged mouse, Cartesian, he had been unable to sleep. Now he was numb....

When the warrior has been killed

And unable to muster any real emotional response to the prophecy. "What's wrong with me?" Gregor thought. "Shouldn't I be freaking out?" He should, of course, he should. Only after all that had happened, he just

didn't have it in him. "It'll hit me later, I guess. Maybe in a couple days. If I last that long ..."

Rotten as the prophecy was, Gregor supposed it could have been even worse. On the good side, Boots and his mom might make it out of the Underland alive. It looked like Boots, who was known to the giant cockroaches as "the princess," had some important role to play in breaking this Code of Claw thing. But the prophecy didn't call for anyone else's death.

Wait, yes it did.

When the monster's blood is spilled

After what Gregor had witnessed in the last few days, he couldn't imagine anyone being the monster but the Bane. The enormous white rat, whose life Gregor had spared as a baby, had grown up to be a vicious leader consumed with hatred and was at least somewhat insane. Life had twisted and tormented that fragile rat pup into a monster, but there was no helping the Bane now. He had given the order to wipe out the mice and there was no telling what he would do next. He had to be stopped. In the Overland, he might be imprisoned for life or something. But that wouldn't be an option in the Underland. Down here, he would have to be killed.

"I guess I should get started. Eat something at least," he thought. An army of rats would be here soon. Ares had flown over them on their way back to Regalia. Gregor should be getting ready. He knew he had to fight.

But he seemed frozen in place, as if he had become part of the stone, too. He remembered something he'd seen on a field trip he'd made to the Cloisters in New York City. It was an old museum filled with medieval stuff. One room held tombs. On top of each tomb was a life-size image of the dead person carved in stone. There was this one guy — had it been a knight? — who'd had his hands folded over the hilt of his sword. In fact, he'd been lying in almost the exact position Gregor was in now. "That's me," thought Gregor. "That's me. I've turned to stone and I'm as good as dead." How perfect for Sandwich to have put "The Prophecy of Time" smack in the middle of the ceiling so that Gregor would have to be lying just like this to read it. How perfect that the sword under Gregor's hands had once belonged to Sandwich and would now carry out his visions. How perfect and horrible the whole thing was.

The door swung open softly and footsteps crossed to him.

"Gregor? How fare you?" said Vikus. The old man's voice sounded as exhausted as Gregor felt. He probably hadn't had much sleep, either. As head of the Regalian council, Vikus was overworked, anyway. His wife, Solovet, who'd been in charge of the Regalian army until recently, was about to go on trial for ordering research that had created a plague, and Luxa, his granddaughter, was in terrible danger in the Firelands. No, Vikus couldn't be getting much rest.

"Me? I'm good," said Gregor evenly. "Never better."

"What think you of 'The Prophecy of Time'?" asked Vikus.

"It's catchy," said Gregor, and slowly, painfully got to his feet. He'd messed up his knee on this last trip.

"I came in to remind you how easy it is to misinterpret Sandwich's prophecies," said Vikus. Gregor pulled his sword from his belt and tapped the line about his death with the point of the blade.

"This? You think it's easy to misinterpret this?"

Vikus hesitated. "Possibly."

"Well, it seems pretty clear to me," said Gregor.

"Believe me, Gregor, if there was any way I could take your place, fulfill this prophecy myself ... I would do it in a moment...." Vikus's eyes filled with tears.

Despite his own situation, Gregor had to feel sorry for him. Life had not been particularly kind to Vikus, either. "Look, I could've died fifty times down here already. It's a miracle I've lasted this long." If Vikus was this upset, how would Gregor's family react? He didn't ever want to find out. "Just don't tell my mom about it. Or my dad. No one in my family can know. Okay?"

Vikus nodded in agreement.

As Gregor slid the sword back in his belt, Vikus reached for it. Gregor instinctively covered the handle. "It's mine. You gave it to me," he said brusquely. How quickly he'd become protective, even jealous of the weapon.

Vikus's face registered surprise, then concern. "I had no thought of taking it, Gregor. Only you must wear the sword so." He placed his hand on top of Gregor's and gave the handle a twist. "At this angle, you will avoid cutting your leg."

"Thanks for the tip," said Gregor. "Well, I'd better go get this stuff off of me." Although he had washed as best he could at a spring on the cliff, much

of the volcanic ash was still eating away at his skin.

"Go to the hospital. They have a salve for that," said Vikus.

Gregor started for the door but Vikus stopped him with his voice.

"Gregor, you have demonstrated an extraordinary ability to kill. But a year ago, you refused to even touch that weapon. Remember that even in war there is a time for restraint. A time to hold back your sword," said Vikus.

"Will you do that?"

"I don't know," said Gregor. He was too tired to make any noble promises. Especially when once he began to fight, he usually lost control of himself. "I don't know what I'll do, Vikus." He sensed the answer was insufficient, so he added, "I can try." Gregor left the room quickly to avoid any further discussion of what he might and might not do.

Down in the hospital he was immediately sent to soak in a tub bubbling with some kind of herbal mixture designed to remove the ash from his skin. As the steam from the concoction filled his lungs, Gregor began to cough up a lot of junk he had inhaled over the last few days. It took not one bath but three until the doctors were satisfied that he was free of the ash, both inside and out. Then they covered his skin in a pleasant-smelling lotion. By the time the process was over, Gregor could barely keep his eyes open. He drank the broth in a bowl held against his lips. He thought he swallowed some medicine, too. And then fatigue began to take over. Gregor grabbed the nearest doctor's sleeve. "I have to go fight!"

"Not like this," said the doctor. "Do not worry. Wars are not fleet. There will be much fighting left when you awaken."

"No, I..." said Gregor. But somewhere inside himself, he knew the doctor was right. The sleeve slipped from his hand and he gave in to sleep.

When Gregor opened his eyes it took him a minute to realize where he was. His hospital room was so clean and well lit after his days on the road. He drowsily took stock of his body. His skin had absorbed the lotion and felt soothed and cool. His knee, which he had injured falling from a rock, had been wrapped and was less painful. Someone had trimmed his ragged nails. He was dressed in fresh clothes.

Suddenly he sat bolt upright, his right hand clutching the empty space on his left hip. His sword! Where was his sword? He saw it almost at once, propped in the corner of the hospital room, the sword belt dangling from it. Of course they had not put him to bed with it. That would have been dangerous. And no one had stolen it. Still, even the twelve feet that

separated him from the weapon caused him unease. He did not like it to be out of his reach.

Gregor was swinging his stiff legs to the floor to retrieve the sword when a nurse came in with a tray of food and ordered him back in bed. He didn't want to argue with her, so he obeyed. But after she left, he slid the tray onto the sheets, got the sword, and propped it right against the side of his bed. Now he could eat.

Food had been scant over the last days of the journey. Some fish, a few mushrooms. He was so hungry he ignored the utensils and scooped up the food with his hands, stuffing it into his mouth. The bland meal — bread, fish chowder, and pudding — tasted wonderful and he ate every bite. He was wiping his finger around the pudding bowl, trying to get out the last bit, when his old friend Mareth came into the room.

"You are allowed to have seconds," said the soldier with a smile. He called down the hall for them to bring Gregor more food. Then he limped to a chair by the bed. Gregor noticed he was doing a lot better with his prosthetic leg, but he still needed the help of a cane to walk. "You slept for a full day. How do you feel?" he asked Gregor, giving him a significant look.

"Fine," said Gregor. He hadn't been injured badly on this trip. Mareth didn't need to look so concerned. Then Gregor realized he was referring to the prophecy calling for the warrior's death. "Oh, you mean ..." Dread began to seep into his brain. He pushed it away, still unable to deal with it. "I'm okay, Mareth."

Mareth gave his shoulder a squeeze but didn't pursue it. Gregor was glad they didn't have to have some big talk about it. "How's Boots and Hazard and everybody?"

"Well. They are well. They have all been purged of ash. Hazard is confined to bed until his head wound has healed fully. But Howard's medical training has paid off. He did an excellent job of stitching it," said Mareth. His friend Howard and his bat, Nike. Luxa and her bat, Aurora. Ripred. They were not safe and clean in the hospital but fighting to free the mice who were still alive in the Fir elands. "Any word from them?" asked Gregor.

"None," said Mareth. "Two divisions of soldiers have been sent after them. We hope to hear soon. But our normal channels of communication are somewhat disrupted now that Luxa has declared war."

Luxa...

Gregor felt the back pocket of his pants, but it was empty. His old clothes had probably been destroyed. He felt slightly panicked. "I had a picture. In my pocket —"

Mareth lifted a photograph off of the bedside table and handed it to him. "This?"

There they were. Luxa and Gregor. Dancing. Laughing. Captured in one of the few really happy moments they had shared. Just a few weeks ago at Hazard's birthday party. Gregor slid the photo into the pocket of his shirt. "Thanks."

Mareth did not make him explain that, either. Which was good because Gregor was not sure how to put into words what had begun to happen between himself and Luxa. How their rocky friendship was transforming into an entirely different relationship.

"My parents?" Gregor asked.

"Your father has been told of your safe return. A bat was sent to the Overland with the news as soon as you arrived. He said to tell you that your grandmother and sister Lizzie are well," said Mareth. Then he paused.

"And my mom?" Gregor prompted him.

"She has had a relapse," said Mareth.

"You mean the plague came back?" said Gregor anxiously.

"No, no, but an infection of her lungs," said Mareth. "She will mend but it has weakened her greatly."

This was not good. Whatever else happened, Gregor needed to get her home. If he had to die, he had to die. But that made it a hundred times more crucial for his mom and Boots to get back to New York City safely. His parents and grandma and sisters had to have one another.

The nurse brought another serving of pudding and left. Gregor no longer felt so hungry. He poked at the pudding with his spoon.

"Where are the rats now? The ones Ares and I saw headed for Regalia on our way back?" asked Gregor. "Have they attacked the city yet?"

"No. The rats turned back to the Firelands when they saw our troops fly over," said Mareth.

"What?" said Gregor in surprise.

"I am sure they mean to bolster the Bane's defenses," said Mareth.

"You mean... there's no one here to fight?" Gregor's mind suddenly cleared. He had completed this phase of his mission. He had brought back the kids and the wounded to Regalia. He had read "The Prophecy of Time."

And most of all, he had taken possession of Sandwich's sword. His next step, he'd assumed, would have been to help defend Regalia from a massive rat attack. But there was no attack on Regalia. "This is bad," he mumbled. A rat army waiting at the walls of a well-fortified city was scary, but a rat army descending out in the open was much worse. So what was he doing here, lying in bed stuffing his face with pudding, while his friends were caught in a battle in the Firelands?

Gregor shoved his tray off of his legs so quickly that the bowls clattered to the floor. He jumped out of bed and grabbed the sword belt.

"What are you doing?" said Mareth.

"I'm going back," said Gregor. "I'm going back to fight those rats."

CHAPTER 2

Mareth rose to block his way. "Wait, Gregor. It is not so simple now. We are at war."

"Yeah, that's what I'm talking about," said Gregor. His fingers fumbled in their eagerness to buckle on the belt. "Is Ares still in the hospital?" He knew his bond would be as anxious as he was to rejoin their friends.

"Yes, down the hall. But listen a moment —" Mareth began.

"Great, then we can get going," said Gregor. He moved for the door only to find he was being lifted in the air and thrust back against the bed. Mareth might have lost his leg, but he could still toss Gregor around, no problem.

"Listen!" said Mareth. "During wartime, you are a soldier. Perhaps the most valuable one we have. You cannot go running off when the mood strikes you. You will be expected to follow orders."

"Whose orders?" asked Gregor.

"Solovet's," said Mareth.

"Solovet's?" said Gregor, genuinely thrown. As far as he knew, she was no longer in a position to give anyone orders. "I thought she was locked up in her room and had to go on trial for causing the plague."

"The trial was put on hold once it was known that Luxa had declared war," said Mareth.

"But... why? That doesn't change what Solovet did," said Gregor. "She still ordered the doctors to make the plague into a weapon. She still killed all those people and bats. She almost killed my mom."

"By accident. Her plan was to kill rats," said Mareth. "Now that we are at war with them, a person who thinks of little but killing rats is of great value. So the council has reinstated her as head of the Regalian army."

"The head of — no way!" exclaimed Gregor. He'd thought that maybe they'd made her the leader of his squadron or something. But now she was back in charge of everything? "Couldn't they get someone else?"

"There is no human, save yourself, who the rats fear as much," said Mareth. "Solovet is both cunning and ruthless in war. It was felt we needed her to survive."

"But — that trial will never happen now!" said Gregor bitterly. It wouldn't. The war would erupt and blank everything else out. As the hatred

against the rats built, the humans would think that Solovet had had a good idea in turning the plague germs into a weapon. Despite all of the deaths she had caused to her own people, she would be seen as heroic, not criminal. Gregor thought of his mom struggling to breathe somewhere in the hospital. The purple scars that Ares's fur still could not quite cover. All of the people and bats and rats who had died. "That's not right, Mareth," said Gregor. "Do you think it's right?"

Mareth sighed and averted his eyes. He released Gregor and took an awkward step back. "Whatever my private opinion of the situation is, it is of no matter. Solovet is now in command."

"Not of me," said Gregor. Of one thing he was certain. He was not going to go to his death on Solovet's terms; he was going to go on his own.

"Be careful to whom you say that, Gregor," said Mareth quietly. "Not everyone here is your friend." With that, the soldier limped out of the room. Gregor took a few deep breaths to get a handle on himself, then unbuckled his sword belt and placed the blade back in the corner of the room. He wiped up the pudding he'd knocked to the floor and neatly reset the tray. Then he lay back down in bed to look like a model patient while he worked things out in his head.

Mareth was right. Not everybody in Regalia was Gregor's friend. Plenty of people would be more than happy to spy on him for Solovet. Gregor didn't know what she had in store for him, but it was unlikely it involved him hopping on Ares and flying straight back to the Firelands. Probably he would be part of some master plan. Whatever Gregor wanted would be of no consequence. She would view him as a weapon to be used at her discretion. If he was going to get back to the Firelands, he would have to do it in secret. And he would have to do it carefully.

"What's your plan?" he heard Ripred's voice in his head. The rat was trying to break him of the habit of flying off the handle and taking action without thinking of its consequences. "What's your plan?"

"First of all, I can't let anyone else guess that I want to go back," Gregor thought. He was pretty sure Mareth wouldn't tell anyone. But he couldn't count on other people's loyalty. Gregor's initial impulse had been to run straight to Ares, but that would be odd. If he were not obsessed with returning to the Firelands, if he were planning to stay in Regalia like a good little soldier, wouldn't he ask to see his mom first? He felt a flush of shame. Shouldn't he have asked to see his mom first either way? Yes. Only the truth

was, if she was well enough to see him, she was going to be both furious about his trip to the Firelands and adamant that he return immediately to New York City. Which he wasn't going to do. So he would either have to fight with her, openly defy her, or lie to her. All three options were lousy. Underneath it all, though, he was still aching to see her.

When a doctor came by a few minutes later, Gregor asked if he could visit her and was given permission to do so. Briefly. "It is fine to use your knee, good even. But take it slowly for the first few days," said the doctor, helping him into a pair of sandals.

"Got it," said Gregor, and made a big show of walking carefully down to his mom's room. He had to wear a mask, not for his own protection but for hers.

Gregor had underestimated what a relapse could be. His mother was as sick as she'd been when he'd first seen her with the plague. Sicker, maybe. Then, at least, she'd had the energy to order him home. Now she was too weak to even speak. All of her effort went into breathing. When he held her hand, the skin was hot and dry from fever. Her eyes had a distant look.

"This isn't the plague, right?" Gregor asked the doctor.

"No, this is a lung infection. I believe you call it 'pneumonia' in the Overland," said the doctor.

"But she could go home, if she was well enough to travel?" said Gregor.

"If she was well enough to travel, but she is not," said the doctor.

Gregor stroked his mother's cheek. "Don't worry, it's going to be all right. It's going to be all right." He couldn't tell if she understood him or not.

Outside the room, the doctor took Gregor aside and spoke in a whisper. At first Gregor assumed it was for his mom's sake, but then he realized the doctor was afraid of anyone hearing his words. "Warrior, if she were my mother, I would use whatever influence I have to get her back to the Overland. Your hospitals could treat her as well as ours now. And with the war commencing, the palace may come under attack. She may even have to be moved to the Fount."

"But you said she was too sick to travel," said Gregor.

"That is what I must say. And it is true. For a time of peace," said the doctor. "But now you must weigh the dangers of her staying here during a time of war." He looked nervously around. "Please, keep my counsel to yourself." Then he walked swiftly away.

For a moment, Gregor felt torn as the desire to get to the Firelands fought with the need to get his mother to safety. His mother won. His friends in the Firelands had one another and an army to lean on. His mother had no one but himself.

Gregor left the hospital without permission and found Vikus in the room off of the High Hall. "When are you sending the next message to my father?" he asked.

"I was about to do so now, Gregor. Is there something you wish me to include?" asked Vikus.

"Yeah, my mom," said Gregor.

Vikus rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I have tried, Gregor. Three times already. The council has denied the requests." Gregor knew Vikus couldn't officially move his mom without the council members' authority, but he couldn't help being frustrated by the way the old man constantly deferred to them. "But she can't stay here during the war. What if the rats attacked the palace? You'd have to move her somewhere else, anyway." Gregor thought he could say that much without getting the doctor in trouble.

"I have made this argument," said Vikus. "But the council does not accept it. They refuse to let her go. My wife has convinced them that your mother's health will not bear the move."

Suddenly Gregor understood what was going on. "It's not about her health. It's about me. It's about keeping me here," he said. Solovet was holding his mother hostage down here. She knew Gregor would never leave without his mom.

Vikus's silence confirmed his words.

"You tell the council they'd better keep her alive. If she dies, you just lost a warrior!" said Gregor.

"Are you sure you wish me to say this?" asked Vikus.

"Why wouldn't I?" said Gregor.

"It gains you nothing and it reveals much of your hand," said Vikus. "I myself find it wiser to keep certain thoughts to myself until they can be to my advantage."

Vikus was right. The doctors in the hospital would do their best to heal his mother. Threatening the council members would only increase their suspicion of Gregor at a time when he was trying to appear tractable. "I see what you mean. Thanks," said Gregor. At least Vikus was still looking out for him.

He headed back to the hospital, gripped by fear for his mother. Could he move her on his own? No, she was way too sick. That would take a whole team of doctors. When she got home she'd have to go straight to the hospital and then the questions would begin. Even so, Gregor would rather gamble on his dad and Mrs. Cormaci coming up with some crazy story to explain his mom's condition than to risk having her down here during the war.

It was all a moot point, though, because of Solovet. She would never let his mom go until she was through using Gregor. A voice came out of the past: "I was just thinking, it did not take long for my mother to get her claws into you." Hamnet. That's what Hamnet had said on their first meeting in the jungle, before he had been Gregor's guide, before the ants had killed him. Hamnet, a famous warrior himself, had fled Regalia because his conscience would no longer allow him to fight, and he knew his mother, Solovet, would try to force him. Who would know better than Hamnet what it felt like to have Solovet's claws in him? Well, they were digging into Gregor now, in a whole new way. But it only increased Gregor's resolve to defy her.

He returned to his hospital room to find that another meal had showed up. He ate it to keep up appearances. Probably needed it, anyway. He might be back on a diet of fish and mushrooms pretty soon. Then he went to find Ares. Since he'd seen his mom, this would not raise any red flags.

Ares was just finishing up his meal when Gregor came in. A nurse was gathering up the platters that had held the bat's food.

"How you feeling, man?" asked Gregor.

"A bit stiff, but I am well," said the bat. His voice, which was usually a low purr, was hoarse from the volcanic ash.

"Think you'd be up for a game of chess later?" asked Gregor. This was entirely for the nurse's benefit. Gregor and Ares had never played chess before. Never even spoken about it. But Gregor had seen a lot of people and bats playing in the hospital while they were recovering. It seemed like something the nurse would be in favor of.

"The question is, are you up for it?" asked Ares.

"That sounds like a challenge," said Gregor with a grin.

The nurse seemed to approve. "I will see if we have a board available." She collected the dishes and left the room.

Gregor and Ares waited a few moments, then spoke in urgent whispers.

"We must get back to the Firelands," said Ares.

"I know. But Mareth says we're under Solovet's command now," said Gregor. "Can you meet me at the place?" "The place" was a pretty general term, but he knew Ares would understand he was referring to the spring-fed lake known as the Spout. There was a secret passage that led to it from a stone turtle in the old nursery.

"In one hour," said Ares. "The nibbler pups are still in the nursery. If your sister is not with Hazard, she will likely be there, too."

"I'll find a way," said Gregor. Although persuading Boots, a litter of mouse babies, and probably their nanny, too, to look the other way while he flipped open that big stone turtle shell and climbed through it was going to be some trick.

The nurse came in holding a chessboard. "I have a board but no pieces at the moment. Some will be available soon."

"You know, I think there's a set in the museum," said Gregor. "I'm supposed to exercise this knee some, anyway. I'll get it." There actually was one of those little magnetic travel chessboards complete with pieces in the museum. It was the perfect excuse.

Gregor stopped by his hospital room and buckled on his sword belt. If anyone asked, he could always say he was just trying to get used to the feel of wearing it. But he still waited until the hall was free of doctors and nurses to slip out of the hospital. He took a less-traveled route to the museum as well, and managed to avoid running into anyone but a group of school-children.

When he got to the museum, the first thing that caught his eye was a brown cardboard box that was sealed with masking tape. The words for Gregor had been printed neatly across the top in red marker. He recognized the handwriting as Mrs. Cormaci's. When had this box come? Today? Yesterday? Or during his week or so of absence in the Firelands? Gregor ripped open the box and found a note right on top. As he read the words, he could hear Mrs. Cormaci's voice in his head.

Dear Gregor,

Well, this is a fine how-do-you-do. Everyone's in a state because you've disappeared on some picnic, but I feel certain you've got yourself mixed up in some kind of funny business down there. I know it's strange, but I'm not even worried. Not about you or Boots. Although your parents ... well, that's another story. Do you realize, I wonder, what it does to your family when you go off?

Gregor felt like someone had hit him in the stomach. Yes, he realized! Of course he knew! Hadn't he been the one waiting for his dad for two and a half years? Didn't his family's situation gnaw away at him every time he was on some mission?

Now you're in Regalia because you're reading this. So it's a good time to step back and take a hard look at things. I know most of what happens to you down there is out of your control. I know you're only doing what you feel you have to do. But your family is hurting right now. All I'm saying is, don't let yourself get killed, or you'll have an awful lot of explaining to do.

Love, Mrs. Cormaci

Why had she written that about him being killed? It was almost as if she had read the prophecy. But if she had, she would also know that his death was one of those things out of his control. As for explaining things once he was gone... well, that didn't even make sense. Why was she even saying this stuff to him? Maybe she meant it as a joke. Of course, it being Mrs. Cormaci, maybe she didn't. Wait, there was something at the bottom....

P.S. Lizzie helped make the cookies. She says to share them with the rat. So Lizzie was home from sleepaway camp. He knew she'd be a wreck. Even when things were going fine, his sister was anxious. He could see her face now, her brow furrowed the way no eight-year-old kid's should ever be. Skinny, little, nervous, way-too-smart-for-her-age Lizzie. Worrying about him and Boots. Worrying about his mom and dad. Even worrying about cranky old Ripred.

"Next time I see Lizzie —" Gregor thought. And then he realized he would never see her again. Or any of them back home. Because he was never leaving the Underland. He was going to die down here....

Gregor watched as the note floated from his hand and came to rest gently on the floor. And that's when Sandwich's words finally hit him.

When the warrior has been killed

The room spun around and he clutched a shelf to keep from falling. He felt an immense pressure in his chest, as if he were in danger of breaking into a thousand pieces, and was unable to draw a breath. "No! I don't want this! I don't want to die!" he thought. His entire body began shaking as he tried to push the threat from his mind, but it was too powerful. "I can't do this. I can't. I've got to get home." Luxa was right. It was too much to ask of him. To give his life, his future, to give everything he had for the

Underlanders. "I'm getting out of here. Going to get Boots and my mom and get home and — never — look — back!"

For an instant, he thought he really might do it. But then what? What? What happened to everyone he loved down here? They would all die as the prophecy foretold. He could never let that happen. Would never let that happen. So then —

Gregor sank to the floor, panting, as the waves of tremors ran through him. He struggled to get ahold of himself. This had to stop! He couldn't flip out every time he thought about what lay before him. Of all the people he would never see, or all the things he would never do. He would be worthless. Of no use at all. He had to have something in his mind to hold on to. Something that gave him strength. Images flew through his head, of his family, of his friends, of places and things he loved. None of them were of any help.

Then he remembered the stone knight in the Cloisters. Cold, hard, unyielding, long since removed from anything in life that could hurt him. A long time ago, the knight had fought ... maybe died in a horrible battle, too ... everybody had to die eventually ... but now he was invulnerable. Sleeping on his marble bed. Safe. Peaceful even. Somehow the thought of this other soldier from another time comforted Gregor in a way that nothing living could. He had gone through something awful, but it was over, and he was now in a place where no one could ever harm him again. The shaking began to subside. Gregor inhaled and the pain in his chest lost its grip. "That's me. I have to remember that's me from now on," he thought. "I'm that knight, I'm made of stone, and in the end nothing can touch me. Okay. Okay, then. That's how it is."

As he calmed down, he remembered that Ares was waiting for him. He had things to do. People to help. And time was short.

Gregor retrieved the note and pulled himself to his feet. He saw a foil-wrapped package that had to be the cookies. But the box was too deep to hold only cookies. He lifted out the foil package and his heart skipped a beat. Two flashlights. A big stack of batteries. And a brand-new pair of sneakers. The good kind. Mrs. Cormaci. How did she know? How did she always seem to know what he needed? The waterproof flashlight she had given him before he'd crossed the Waterway. The work boots that had saved his toes from being destroyed by acid in the jungle. Could she see the dangers he would encounter in those tarot cards of hers, even though

Gregor would never let her do a reading on him? Or was she just a good guesser?

Gregor added a new roll of duct tape and two water bottles to the box. The bottles were the kind joggers used in Central Park. They were empty, but he could fill them up at a stream along the way to the Firelands. He looked for a new backpack, but all he could find was a small pink one with thin cords for straps. He emptied out a lady's wallet, a makeup case, a book of maps of Manhattan, and a hairbrush, and stuck it in his box. It didn't look like something a warrior would carry, but it would hold his supplies and that was all that really mattered. Then he placed the cookies back on top of the whole thing. He wouldn't get ready to travel until he was in the secret passageway that led to the Spout. Remembering his story to the nurse, he placed the magnetic chessboard on top of the cookies. He probably wouldn't see her again, but he wanted to cover all of his bases. Now he had to get to the old nursery and into that passageway.

Gregor picked up the box. He walked out of the museum and down the hall. "Taking your time. Looking natural," he thought. "You can do this."

Then he turned the corner and pulled up short.

Solovet was standing in front of him. Behind her were two men.

The last time Gregor had seen Solovet was months ago, when he had arrived back from the jungle. She had been in the council meeting where they had arrested Dr. Neveeve. By the time Gregor had been treated for his injuries and come out of the anesthesia, Dr. Neveeve had been executed and Solovet confined to her rooms. Gregor had been glad she'd been taken away to a place where he couldn't see her. Where he didn't have to deal with what she'd done to his mom and Ares and Howard and countless others. But here she was. The woman who wouldn't think twice about letting his mom die if it meant holding on to Gregor. In one second, he realized both how much he hated her and how careful he had to be. She was now in command of him.

"Gregor," she said with a warm smile. He smiled back. "Hey, Solovet. How've you been?"

"Very well. And yourself?" she asked.

"Doing all right," he said.

"What have you there?" she asked, nodding at the box;

"Mrs. Cormaci sent me some cookies. Thought I'd take them back up to the hospital. Spread the goodness around," said Gregor. "Want one?" He

peeled back the foil on the cookies and the delicious smell of oatmeal raisin filled the hallway.

"Why not?" Solovet accepted a cookie and took a bite. She chewed it thoughtfully and nodded her approval. "Excellent."

"So, I need to talk to you pretty soon, right?" asked Gregor as he shifted the box to his hip. "See what you want me to do. Mareth says you're running the war."

"Yes. Yes. And you are, of course, very precious to me. Know you Horatio and Marcus?" Solovet casually gestured to the men behind her.

"Hi." Gregor gave them a wave and they nodded back. For the first time he noticed how they were dressed. They each wore protective gear made of leather and metal on their chests, legs, and arms. Helmets covered their heads. Wicked-looking swords and daggers were at their belts. "Are they, like, generals or something?"

"No, Gregor. They are your personal guards," said Solovet. "We are very concerned with your safety."

"My personal guards? Great." Her real meaning was beginning to dawn on him, but he just laughed. "I sure could've used them a few days ago. Doesn't seem like I'd need them in here, though. Aren't even any rats around."

"The guards are not to keep the rats out," said Solovet pleasantly. "They are to keep you in."

CHAPTER 3

Gregor just stared at her as his options flipped through his head. Run. Fight. Laugh. Protest. Act offended. Lay his cards on the table. Do nothing. Do nothing won out.

"I cannot afford to have you running off on any more picnics," said Solovet. "Come to see me in an hour. We will discuss your future then."

She walked off, leaving Gregor with the two formidable soldiers. He sized them up and determined it had been a good decision not to start a fight. They were tall with rippling muscles and hardened looks on their faces. Solovet's men through and through. Gregor had no idea if he would have stood a chance against them if they had all drawn their weapons. Maybe, if his rager side kicked in. When Gregor became what the Underlanders called a rager, he transformed into an accurate and deadly fighter. But he could never count on that happening. Better to be on good terms with his guards.

"Cookie?" said Gregor, holding out the package. They both shook their heads no. "Well, my sister will want some. She's probably with the mice. Come on. This way." Gregor gestured for them to follow him and started for the old nursery. He limped a lot, to show his knee was really badly injured and there was no way he could run. "Now what?" he thought. "How on earth am I going to lose these guys?"

He took his time getting up to the nursery, hoping for some brilliant plan to strike him like a lightning bolt. None did. He was just going to have to do his best with whatever circumstances he found.

The nursery was in an almost deserted wing of the palace. As far as he could tell from the glimpses he caught through doorways, most of the other rooms in the hall seemed to be used for storage.

A warm light shone out of the nursery door. He stepped inside and heard a pleased squeak. "Gre-go!" Boots ran over and flung her arms around his knees. He set the box down and lifted her up into his arms for a real hug.

"Hey, Boots," he said, pressing his face into her curly head. She smelled like an herbal bath and milk and her own sweet self. It was a comforting smell, and for a minute, he almost felt okay. Then he caught a glimpse of

the stone turtle at the far end of the room, its face in a vicious snarl. "What's going on?"

"I helping Dulcie take care of the baby mouses," Boots said. She pointed over to the alcove where the nanny, Dulcet, had made a nest out of blankets. Dulcet sat among the blankets now with the six baby mice crawling around her.

Cartesian, the adult mouse Gregor had brought back from the Firelands, lay in the nest as well. Both of his front legs were in casts. He was still very weak. But he looked far better than he had when Gregor had first seen him, left for dead at the base of a cliff, surrounded by scores of mice who had not survived the fall. One of the baby mice climbed up on Cartesian's back. It must have hurt, but he made no move to stop it.

"Greetings, Gregor," said Dulcet. She raised her eyebrows slightly. "I see you have brought company."

Gregor looked behind him and saw that Horatio and Marcus were standing on guard at the doorway. "Yeah, these are my new bodyguards."

"Horatio, Marcus, would you mind very much standing outside of the door? I am afraid you may frighten the nibbler pups," said Dulcet.

"We have orders to attend the Overlander at all times," said Horatio doubtfully.

"I promise he shall be safe in my hands," said Dulcet with a laugh.

For a moment, Horatio's face lost its hard edge, and Gregor realized he had a soft spot for Dulcet. "Man," he thought. "Is it that easy for people to tell I like Luxanow?"

"I suppose we may risk standing outside of the door," conceded Horatio. "Come, Marcus."

"Thank you, Horatio," said Dulcet. Gregor examined her face for any sign that she returned Horatio's feelings. She didn't. Or else she was just a lot better at hiding it. He wondered briefly if he might be able to get her to distract the guards while he sneaked through the turtle shell, but then abandoned the idea. He didn't want to get Dulcet in trouble with Solovet. Somehow, he was going to have to get her out of the nursery before he made his escape. Boots got down and climbed into the nest. "I rock the babies." She picked up the nearest mouse pup and cradled it in her arms. It let her rock it for a bit, then wiggled free, placed its front paws on her shoulder, and played with one of her curls. Boots giggled. "Mouses like my hair."

Gregor squatted beside the nest and stroked one of the velvety pups. "Do you remember me?" he asked Cartesian. The mouse had been either so delirious or so heavily drugged in the Firelands that Gregor didn't think he'd made much of an impression. But he was wrong.

"You are the warrior," said Cartesian. "Yes, I remember you. Have you any word of our friends in the Firelands?"

"No, Mareth said they sent two divisions to help. Haven't heard back yet," said Gregor, not letting himself imagine what might be happening on that battlefield now. "Do you know these pups?"

"They are my sister's children," said Cartesian. "She felt they would fare better on the river than under the gnawers' control."

"She was right," said Gregor, remembering the mouse pups he had seen suffocating to death in the volcanic pit. "Did their mother —?"

"I do not know. I do not wish to speak of this before them," said Cartesian, indicating the pups with one of his casts. "They are beginning to understand English and they have enough fodder for nightmares already."

"I'm sorry," said Gregor, feeling bad he had even brought up the subject. "Hey, Boots, you want to give the babies a treat?"

Boots trotted over to the box with him and was delighted to find the cookies. She stuck one in her mouth right off. "Mmm," she said.

"Good, huh? Why don't you give one to everybody?" suggested Gregor. He piled cookies into her hands, careful not to remove the foil package from the box and reveal his travel supplies underneath.

"I have treats!" crowed Boots, spraying crumbs everywhere. She excitedly passed around the cookies to everyone in the nest.

The pups made happy smacking sounds as they munched away on the cookies. Gregor plastered a smile across his face as he watched the scene, but inside his mind was racing. "I've got to get out of here. Now!" he thought. Ares was probably flying around the Spout at this moment. But how could he get everybody out of the room? Suggest a visit somewhere in the palace? That would be weird because Cartesian couldn't travel far with those legs. Pretend to accidentally knock over a torch and start a fire? No, bad idea. That would only bring in more people. And if the fire got out of hand someone could get hurt. The babies might get scared and try to hide and — wait! That was it!

"Who wants to play a game?" asked Gregor, clapping his hands for attention. The pups did seem to understand that much, because they

gathered around him, hopping up and down expectantly.

"Me! Me!" said Boots.

"What should we play, Boots?" asked Gregor. Boots could almost always be counted on to pick one game.

"Hide-and-seek! Hide-and-seek!" she squealed, and Gregor exhaled in relief.

"All right, great. Hide-and-seek. Do the mice know how to play?" he asked.

"Oh, yes," said Dulcet. "We have played many times in here. You will be hard-pressed to find a hiding spot they have not already discovered."

"That's no good. Maybe we could use some of the other rooms out in the hall," said Gregor.

"Yes, I had considered that, but with only myself to watch them I felt it too unmanageable," said Dulcet.

"Perhaps with you and Cartesian here, we could do it. I know they are becoming bored with this room."

"Sure, I'll help," said Gregor. "Wait, let me take this thing off." He removed his sword belt and set it on the box. It was hard, letting go of his weapon.

"Oh, and we have Horatio and Marcus!" said Dulcet. The guards were in the doorway the moment they heard their names. "We are to play hide-and-seek. Can you help us?"

The guards did not want to at first, but soon Dulcet had them positioned at either end of the hallway. That way, the others could play the game using six rooms, but no one could leave the area without going by them. Or so everyone but Gregor supposed.

Gregor and Dulcet did a quick check of the rooms, but there was nothing particularly dangerous in any of them. A couple held old furniture. Blankets, baskets, and coils of rope were stored in some of the others. One had once been a bathroom, but there was no water flowing through it now, so it was more like a stone playground. Lots of good safe places to hide.

Cartesian hobbled out in the hallway to watch. First Boots was "It," then a couple of the pups, then Dulcet. While the others hid, whoever was It sat by Cartesian. He was in charge of making sure no one peeked, and he helped the little ones count slowly to twenty. Gregor went into the nursery twice, hoping for a chance to escape, but both times a mouse pup hid in there as well. Time was running out. The game would end soon. Even if

Ares had managed to slip out of the hospital unnoticed, they might be looking for him now.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick

...

"Okay," Gregor announced at the end of Dulcet's round. "My turn to be 'It.'"

He placed himself as close to the nursery as he could, to discourage anyone from hiding there, covered his eyes, and began to count to twenty. "One, two, three, four ..." Gregor could hear the scampering of mouse feet, Boots's sandals, giggles, and hushed squeaks. No one hid in the nursery. "...eighteen, nineteen, twenty. Ready or not, here I come!"

Gregor surveyed the hall. Horatio and Marcus were in their places, arms crossed, eyes trained on him. He looked in one room, then pretended to hear something from the nursery and crossed into it. The second he was out of his guards' sight lines, Gregor grabbed the box and sword belt and sprinted for the stone turtle. He shoved his hand in the thing's mouth and found the latch that popped open the shell. He lifted it, quickly climbed inside, and closed it quietly behind him. Afraid any light might be seen shining from the turtle, he went down the first flight of steps in total darkness. There were still no footsteps from above. He pulled out a flashlight from under the cookies and snapped it on. "Go," he thought. "Go as fast as you can." His feet flew down the stairs. He didn't even try to be quiet anymore. Once he'd turned up missing, there'd be confusion, and then Solovet would have that room turned inside out until she found the stairway. He wished he could have kept the secret longer, for Luxa's sake, but it was for her sake that he had needed to use it.

At the bottom of the stairs, he almost ran into the second turtle, the one with the awful leer. As he opened the shell, he could barely make out the shouts coming from several floors above his head. He leaned his head into the damp air over the Spout.

"Drop, Overlander," he heard Ares say in an urgent tone, and Gregor jumped into the void. Ares caught him instantly and took off at warp speed.

"Barely got out," said Gregor, putting his box behind him as he fastened on his sword. "You?"

"The doctors gave me fifteen minutes to exercise over the river. That has long passed," said Ares. "They will be after us."

"Oh, yeah," said Gregor. "No one saw me go through the turtle, but they saw me go into the room. They'll find the passage now."

"Maybe this is a good thing. If all who know the secret should perish in the Firelands, someone should know of it," said Ares. "It may provide a means of escape if the castle is under siege."

"That's true," said Gregor, thinking of his mom and Boots.

Gregor immediately organized himself. He secured one flashlight on his left forearm with duct tape and hooked the other to his belt. The tape, batteries, shoes, water bottles, and remaining cookies went into the pink backpack. He stuck the chess set in, too, although he couldn't think what use it might be. Then he tossed the box into the darkness and flattened himself on Ares's back to provide as little wind resistance as possible.

Ares took a completely new route back to the Firelands. They did not fly through the usual wide caverns but through a series of smaller, twisting tunnels. At one point Gregor had to dismount so they both could squeeze through a crack in a rock wall. Then they took off down a whole new set of tunnels.

"How did you find this way?" asked Gregor.

"With Henry. We spent many hours finding alternative paths. It was essential, since much of what we did was unsanctioned," said Ares.

Henry was Luxa's cousin and Ares's old bond. He had betrayed them all to the rats on Gregor's first trip to the Underland. Neither Luxa nor Ares spoke about him very often. At first, Gregor had supposed this was because they now hated him so much. Later, he'd understood it was because they still loved him so much, too. When Henry came up, their voices would become tight, their eyes pained. That was the hard part. Still caring. Not being able to simply write Henry off.

"So this route is pretty safe?" asked Gregor.

"No one will find us," said Ares. "Sleep if you can."

Although Gregor didn't think he would sleep with his mind so full, he stretched out, anyway. But he must have still been really tired because the next thing he knew, Ares was waking him. They were back on the cliff overlooking the jungle where they had said good-bye to their friends a couple of days ago. The trip must have taken six or seven hours. Ares was beat.

"I must sleep," said the bat. "But it will not be for long."

Ares went right out while Gregor kept watch. He cleaned the water bottles and filled them at the spring. Put on his new shoes and laced them up. Practiced making cuts in the air with Sandwich's sword. What a weapon! It was almost as if he had only to think of a motion and the sword was already there. At first he gave the sword all of the credit. Then he realized he had to give himself some credit as well. Although he was in no danger at the moment, the rager sensation was humming quietly deep inside him. He stopped practicing and it turned off. He started practicing and it came back to life. Could it be that he was finally getting a small amount of control over it? The idea gave him confidence but it was tempered by the memories of past failures. Still, if he could learn to turn that rager switch on and off ... that would be amazing.

Ares awoke after a couple of hours. He caught a fish that they ate quickly. They both drank their fill at the spring.

"Ready?" asked Gregor. He tried to feel as impervious as the knight back in the Cloisters. . "Yes," said Ares. "I am ready for whatever lies ahead. Shall we go back to the Queen?" This is what the previous prophecy had called the volcano that had been the death of the nibblers. It was the last place they had seen both the mice and their rat captors.

"Yeah, let's start there," said Gregor, taking his place on Ares. Ares retraced their path back to the volcano, flying through the tunnels still covered in deep layers of ash. When they came out at the Queen, she was quiet. The mice and the little bat Thalia, whom Ares had laid to rest in the pit where the mice had died, had all been buried under the lava flow. There was no trace of them at all.

It didn't take Ares long to hone in on a destination. He jetted across the large cavern and into a long, low tunnel. Gregor's ears began to catch sounds as well. Screams, shrieks, metal against stone. The air thickened with dust.

Gregor drew his sword, wanting to be prepared for what awaited him. But as they burst out of the tunnel, he gasped and almost lost his grip on his weapon.

Nothing in his experience had prepared him for the sight of a battle between the humans and the rats.

CHAPTER 4

Ares had blasted straight into the war zone. Gregor's senses were assaulted by what lay before him, beneath him, and all around him.

They were in one of the Firelands' enormous caverns. The battleground was brighter than Gregor had expected because the walls were studded with burning torches held in globs of something. Clay, maybe? He saw an Underlander woman toss a burned-out torch to the ground and replace it with a new one.

Despite the extra light, it was still difficult to see because the army of rats had churned the volcanic dust on the floor into a choking cloud that rose to the ceiling. Bats swirled around Gregor, carrying their human bonds. Most of the humans had drawn swords. Something obscured the faces of the people and the bats. A person flew by and a packet hit Gregor on the chest. "Don you this!" he thought he heard them shout, but he wasn't sure because the cavern was filled with a din of voices. Gregor unrolled the packet and found two face masks, one for him and one for Ares. That's what everybody was wearing. He quickly positioned the bat mask on Ares and slipped his own over his mouth and nose. The mask was stuffy, but using it sure beat inhaling that junk in the air — and it cut down on the reek of blood.

Blood seemed to be everywhere. Dripping off of people, staining bats' fur, pouring out of rat bodies on the ground. It dawned on Gregor that the main goal of each side was to relieve the other of its blood, thereby eliminating it. For a moment, he felt sickened; then he remembered why he was here.

"Do you see Luxa?" he asked Ares.

"No!" replied the bat.

It was next to impossible to find anyone in this mess. It wasn't just the masks that made it difficult. Where they weren't bloodstained, the rats, bats, and humans were coated in dust, making everyone largely unrecognizable. He could fly around for hours looking for Luxa and still not find her. Then his thoughts turned to the Bane. Even in the dust he might be able to see that monstrous figure. But he could not spot any rat that was larger than average.

Gregor was just going to have to keep an eye out and hope for the best. In the meantime, he didn't exactly know how to join in the battle. Should he

report to someone? Was there some plan being executed? Because if there was, he couldn't see it. The whole thing just looked like some big free-for-all.

"What do we do?" Gregor said. "Can we jump in anywhere?"

"Anywhere," said Ares.

But even now, even after all he had been through and witnessed, something in Gregor balked at the idea of simply going down and running his sword through a rat. His ambivalence was interfering with his ability to connect with his rager side. He concentrated hard for a second to establish his place in all of this chaos. The reason he must kill the rats, the reason they must die had to do with ... had to do with ... the gasping mice in the pit and his mother lying in the hospital and Boots and those baby mice in the nursery — and Luxa, who must be, had to be somewhere out in this mayhem. It had to do with what had happened, and would happen, not only to him but to those who were not warriors, if these rats were not stopped.

"Down there! By the right wall!" cried Ares.

Gregor could see a woman trying unsuccessfully to rise from the ground. Blood poured from a gash in her leg. A bat hovered over her, slashing at an oncoming rat with its claws.

The buzzing began in Gregor's veins. "Go," he said.

They had never flown in a battle together, Gregor and Ares. The one real battle Gregor had fought in had been with the ants in the jungle. At that time, Ares had been struggling to survive the plague in the hospital in Regalia. But they had trained for hours and hours in the arena and had been in enough tight spots together to know they could count on each other completely.

Ares dove for the charging rat, tipping sideways to allow Gregor the closest possible range. The rat was leaping for the injured woman just as Gregor's sword made contact. His blade severed one of the rat's ears. The rat turned on him with a ferocious hiss.

"That got its attention," said Gregor, as Ares looped back for another attack.

A look of shock crossed the rat's face as it recognized them. Even in this mess, it would be hard to overlook a bat as imposing as Ares with an Overlander rider. "It's the warrior! The warrior!" the rat screamed.

Gregor could hear the phrase rippling through the army of rats as word of his presence spread. He knew the rats had been laughing at him of late

because of an encounter he'd had a few weeks ago under Regalia. Twirltongue, the hypnotically persuasive rat who advised the Bane, had sicced two of her buddies on him. Gregor had been fighting very well until one of the rats had smashed his flashlight, leaving him in darkness and reducing him to helplessness. He had crawled around on the tunnel floor like a mouse cornered by a couple of alley cats and barely escaped with his life.

"Good," thought Gregor. "Let them laugh." Because now, with the numerous torches, there was no danger of being without light. Now he had seen what they had done to the mice. Now everything was different.

The bat they had come to aid had swept up the wounded woman and flown off, so Gregor redirected his attention to the scene below him. A group of about eight rats had gathered beneath him, no doubt eager to claim him as a prize. Ares could easily fly elsewhere, but Gregor wanted to see how high the rats could jump. Ares dipped down and the entire pack leaped up. The most athletic made it a good fifteen feet in the air. Gregor's sword made contact with a pair of claws that was just about to shred a spot on Ares's left wing.

"Watch your wings," said Gregor.

"That is the trick," said Ares. "To fight them we must be close, but if we are too close, I cannot evade them. When things move quickly, you will have to trust my choices."

Gregor understood what Ares meant. In the heat of battle, they could not stop and have some detailed conversation over what target to attack next. Ares was going to have to make most of those decisions, and Gregor was just going to have to go with them.

"Whatever you think, I'm with you," said Gregor.

And with that, Ares threw them into the battle. Wherever they turned, a group of furious rats awaited them. It was less a question of attacking than of countering the attacks of the mobs of rats. He was surrounded by a blur of razor-sharp claws and deadly teeth that all seemed bent on tearing open one of his main arteries. But he had no intention of dying. Not while the Bane was still alive. If he was going out, he was determined to fulfill the prophecy and take the white rat with him. The rager sensation was pulsing through him but he was managing not to give in to it completely. Perhaps all of the hours of training in the arena were helping him stay focused. The movements were so familiar. Mareth had put Gregor and Ares through their

paces a thousand times this summer — dive attack, feint right, wing block, loop back — but in the arena, Gregor's sword had been encountering air or strategically placed sand-bags. Sometimes they had worked with cow carcasses that were headed for the kitchen. Mareth had wanted him to get the feeling of driving his sword into a real body. It was a lot harder than it looked. The blade had to pierce the hide, then muscle, and then sometimes ran into bone before it could reach the vital organs inside. It took a lot of power. The lessons with the dead cows had always made Gregor somewhat queasy, but he was grateful for them now. Grateful, too, for the superiority of the sword he had inherited from Sandwich. Sandwich's sword was to a common Underlander sword as a steak knife was to a butter knife. It moved like lightning and slid far more easily across a throat, between ribs, through the joint above a foreleg. It could even cleanly cut off a row of rat teeth in one stroke. At least it could in Gregor's hand. Soon Gregor was covered in blood, and Ares's fur had become damp and sticky with the stuff, but neither of them had more than scratches. He didn't have to think about how to wield his sword; it moved instinctively from target to target. And every time it connected, Gregor became more confident, more powerful. He injured many rats, some of them fatally, he thought, although he couldn't be sure, but the numbers attacking him only increased. If he had needed the images of the mice and his loved ones to propel himself into battle, they were rapidly replaced by the desire for self-preservation. "You really have no idea how much they hate you, do you, Overlander?" Luxa had said to him when they'd been arguing about her starting the war. Well, he did now.

"Man, these rats want me dead!" Gregor remarked to Ares when they had lifted above the fighting to take a breather. On the ground, a snarling group of two dozen rats ran to stay directly under Ares.

"Has this only just occurred to you?" asked Ares, and Gregor could hear the rare *Huh-huh-huh* that meant Ares was laughing. Gregor laughed, too. They were both in uncharacteristically good moods.

In fact, Gregor felt better than he had in ages. "It's the rager thing," he thought. The last time he had fought — it had been against snakes in the jungle — he had apparently been grinning his head off, which had upset him at the time. But here, with the battle around him, he didn't care.

And as for Ares laughing... for the first time. Gregor had to wonder if his bat might not have a little rager blood in him, too. Or maybe it was just the relief of finally doing something, something real. Of obliterating that

feeling of intense frustration they had experienced as they watched the mice suffocate to death while they were helpless to stop it.

At any rate, they were both flying high.

"Ready for more?" asked Ares.

"Yeah, go for it," said Gregor. Then something caught his eye. "No, hang on a minute, Ares!"

For the first time, the action on the ground seemed to have taken on some kind of order. Gregor and Ares were among a group that was dealing with the rats along one front. But there was a second line of intense fighting on the far side of the cavern, nearly blocked out by the dust cloud it caused. "What's happening over there?"

As Ares flew toward the cloud, Gregor began to make out more of the scene. A long shelf of rock jutted out of the cavern wall about twelve feet from the ground. Under the edge of the shelf, a wall of humans was on the ground trying to hold off an intense rat attack. Their bats were performing some kind of strafing maneuver from the air, diving down on the rats and literally ripping chunks of flesh off of their bodies.

"It is the nibblers! Our army is trying to get them to safety!" said Ares.

Gregor squinted into the dust and could just make out a line of mice. The humans were protecting them as they scurried from a cave along the cavern wall to a tunnel opening some twenty yards away. But it was a very dangerous task, since the humans were at a complete disadvantage fighting on the ground. There was no choice, though. Gregor could see that. The stone shelf made aerial fighting unthinkable. The rats would be picking the bats off right and left at that altitude.

At the mouth of the tunnel, the onslaught was the heaviest. Both human and rat bodies were piling up at an alarming rate. The humans had formed one of their standard defenses, an arc. But holding down the center point, the key position in the formation, was a rat. Ripred. He was spinning so fast that a funnel cloud of dust had risen up around him. Any rat that came into his reach was instantly killed. Gregor did not know how long he had been holding that position, but he did know that even Ripred had a breaking point. What was it he had said once? "I start to crack at about four hundred to one."

Just then, Ripred's spin was thrown off as an enormous rat drove straight into him. Ripred still managed to tear its throat out, but he was knocked backward hard and seemed stunned.

"I've got to get down there!" Gregor shouted.

Ares didn't question him, but as he angled in, Gregor heard him call, "I am here!"

The rats had immediately sensed the opening made by Ripred's incapacitation. Seven gathered into a pack, obviously preparing to charge the cave entrance.

Gregor landed squarely in the spot where Ripred had been standing, sinking up to his ankles in the muck of dust and blood. He slashed his blade across the air and then hit a defensive position.

For a moment, the rats hung back, surprised by the appearance of their new opponent. Then the leader let out a growl, and the entire pack went for Gregor's throat.

CHAPTER 5

Gregor's feet automatically began to pivot. He just had time to turn once before the rats were within sword's reach. He'd gathered enough momentum to damage the two coming in on his left — one in the neck and one in the eyes — with the first cut. The person fighting to his right drew off another pair. But a trio of nasty-looking rats was still coming at him.

He dug his sneakers into the grit and stood his ground. These three made Twirltongue's buddies seem like cream puffs. They were larger for one thing, nearer to Ripred's size. A combination of drool and blood dripped off of their fangs. Their scarred faces indicated years of fighting. But it was the look in their eyes, the pure viciousness that told Gregor that he was dealing with a whole new level of opponent. They knew how to fight as a team, too, coming at him with multiple attacks, so that it was nearly impossible to fend off both blows at once. He did, though, he did, because now the rager effect was in full gear, splintering his vision, allowing him only to perceive the deadly teeth and claws and, in rare moments when he was not simply defending himself, get glimpses of their vulnerable eyes and necks where he could counterattack.

The sort of white-noise roar that sometimes accompanied his rager state was there, but a voice was managing to cut through it. Although it was hoarse almost beyond recognition, it could only belong to one creature.

"Oh, look who's decided to show up! Smelling like pudding and bubble bath. *Mmm-mmm*. So glad you could make it. Had a nice little vacation, did you? While the rest of us were out here breathing sulfur and eating ... well, not *eating* exactly. Howard had the idea of cutting off the leather pocket on your old back-pack. That gave us something to chew on for a while but I can't really call it filling. No, not satisfying in the way one might have hoped. Oh, and then there's been the little matter of freeing the nibblers. As you can see, the rats didn't especially go for the idea." Gregor wanted to tell Ripred to shut up, tell him he was being distracting. But he didn't have a breath to spare and forming words at the moment seemed very difficult. Like when he was trying to talk to someone in a dream but no sound came out. A claw came within inches of his throat and he took off the rat's foreleg at the joint. It fell back with a scream of pain. Two to go.

"You know, I've been getting to know that girlfriend of yours," Ripred continued almost lazily, as if they had all the time in the world to chat.

"She's not my girlfriend!" Gregor wanted to yell at Ripred, but the words wouldn't come. Besides, Ripred already knew his feelings about Luxa. Denying it would only bring on another speech.

"She's got grit, I'll give her that. You should have seen her taking those nibblers right out from under the Bane's nose. Would have made her grandmother proud," said Ripred.

The last thing Gregor needed now was to think about Solovet, who was Luxa's grandmother, and how she might be reacting to his running off.

"But frankly I'm a bit concerned about her," said Ripred. Gregor caught one of the rats in the windpipe and it retreated. But now Ripred's words had his attention. Why was he concerned about Luxa? Was she sick? Injured? "What?" he managed to bark out. The last rat was a huge brute with teeth gnawed into razor-sharp points.

"She needs some clean air. We didn't have masks until the army showed up and by then she'd been breathing this stuff for days," said Ripred. "I'm not wearing a mask, of course, could hardly fight in the thing. But as a rodent, my lungs are tougher than hers."

"She's sick?" Gregor got out. His opponent was relentless. Gregor had stabbed him twice, but it only seemed to enrage him.

"Sick? Well, yes. Frankly, I'm not even sure she's still alive," said Ripred.

Gregor's hand faltered, and the rat he was fighting nailed his head with its tail. He fell to the right, pinning his sword arm beneath him. The rat immediately lunged for him. Gregor braced himself for the teeth when suddenly the rat was yanked up into the air, howling in rage. Ares had sunk his claws into the thing's rump and he carried it high into the cavern. The rat tried to twist around to attack the bat, but it was hopeless. When Ares released it, it screamed all the way to the ground, and then was still and silent.

Ripred stepped over Gregor, cuffing him upside the head with a paw as he went. "You're going to have to have a little more mental discipline than that, boy. Now get up!"

Gregor rubbed his head in confusion. Was this Ripred's idea of on-the-job training? Had that thing about Luxa been just a test? Was she really

okay? Gregor wanted to ask, but he was pretty sure Ripred would knock him into next week if he did.

"Get up!" Ripred repeated with even less patience.

Gregor sprang to his feet. Ripred had the center point of the arc again. On his left was a woman Gregor recognized, Perdita. She had almost been killed the very first night Gregor had fallen to the Underland. He had tried to escape, ran into two rats on a beach, and was rescued by a party of humans and bats. Perdita had been badly injured that night. But she'd recovered from her injuries since then, and Gregor had trained with her. She fought with a sword and a dagger and could hit almost as many bloodballs during drills as Gregor could, which made her one of the Regalians' top fighters. On Ripred's right was a man who Gregor had never seen before. He would have remembered him, too, because he must have been close to seven feet tall. With both hands he wielded a thick broadsword that would easily have come up to Gregor's shoulder. He hollered a lot when he fought.

"By me!" Ripred ordered and flicked his tail to indicate where Gregor should fight next to Perdita.

"She lives, Overlander!" said Perdita as he stepped into place, and she managed to shoot him an encouraging look between attacks.

"Thanks," said Gregor. He was at first grateful, then embarrassed because he realized Perdita now knew about him and Luxa. Maybe everybody knew. But Ripred was right. He couldn't think about that now. He had to focus on the battle.

Gregor wasn't the only one joining up with the forces at the tunnel mouth. Both the humans and the rats seemed to be directing all of their soldiers there. There was no time to ask for an explanation of the battle orders. It was all he could do to keep alive.

He knew Ares was an excellent fighting partner, but the bat was proving to be quite remarkable in his own right. Since so many of the humans were now fighting on the ground, their bats were executing a full-scale aerial attack on the rats. Mainly they would dive down, rip a clawful of flesh from a rat's backside, and whip quickly back into the air to escape damage to their wings. But Ares was one of a handful of bats with the strength to lift a full-grown rat off of the ground and drop it to its death. Again and again he picked off the deadliest fighters, saving many humans besides Gregor. And as the battle continued, Gregor could hear desperate people begin to call out, "Ares!" hoping for a last-minute rescue from a rat attack. Despite the

grim circumstances, Gregor could not help taking satisfaction that his much maligned bond was finally getting some appreciation.

It was hard to tell how much time had passed — thirty minutes, maybe forty-five — when people began to call, "The nibblers are in! The nibblers are in!" He guessed this meant that all of the nibblers had made it into the tunnel. He'd yet to get a good look at them, so he had no idea what condition they were in. Pretty bad, probably.

A few minutes later, an order was given to retreat into the tunnel. Ripred took a second out to growl, "Not you, boy!" at him, so Gregor just held his position. This was getting trickier by the moment because he was now up to his knees in bloody ash, and keeping a foothold was harder than ever. Around him, humans and bats carrying wounded began to make for the tunnel. He heard repeated cries of "No torches! No torches inside!" and could only wonder what that was about. Those carrying torches hurled them like javelins into the army of rats, causing some welcome disruption.

Retreat seemed to be something the humans and bats could execute quickly, because in a matter of minutes, only twenty or so were left defending the tunnel mouth. Then they, too, under the tremendous pressure of the rats, began to slowly fall back. Soon, even the front line, still composed of Perdita, Gregor, Ripred, and the giant man Gregor didn't know, was forced into the tunnel.

"Fliers, go!" Perdita called. Ares and the last two bats swept across the rat army, peppering them with torches, and then dove into the tunnel.

Gregor had backed only a few steps into the tunnel when he knew he was going to run into trouble. "Why no torches?" he yelled, but no one had time to respond. Maybe there was some plant in the tunnel that was flammable. Some weird moss or something. The light from the cavern was growing faint. That meant he was going to have to rely entirely on the flashlight taped to his arm to see. He clicked the switch to turn it to high beam and was reassured by the amount of visibility it restored. But what about the others? Ripred didn't need light to fight. He could "see" by echolocation if need be, as could the oncoming rats. Perdita could probably get by on what his flashlight was putting out. But that big guy with the broadsword on the other side of Ripred, he was going to have problems.

"Retreat! It's too dark for you!" Ripred said to the man, whose only response was a string of curses.

Gregor yanked his spare flashlight off of his belt and turned it on. "Hey! You on the end!" he yelled. No response.

"York," Perdita prompted him.

"Hey, York!" said Gregor. The man looked over and Gregor tossed him the flashlight. "In your teeth!" he instructed. There was no time to tape it to York's arm or even explain what the flashlight was. But York seemed to get the idea. He yanked off his mask, crammed the end of the handle between his teeth, and kept hacking away.

Somewhere behind him, Gregor supposed, were backup soldiers, but he never saw them. As the rats drove them deeper into the tunnel, all of the light disappeared except the beams from the flashlights. And between handling his own rats and trying to keep Perdita from falling into darkness, there was no time to turn his head. He was still managing, but in this gloom, could it be that some of his confidence was slipping away? A rat's tail came frighteningly close to taking out his flashlight, cracking the glass. A claw caught the duct tape, almost ripping it free. Gregor realized they were targeting his light. They must know, after his humiliating encounter with Twirltongue and her pals, that he was worthless without it. He ripped off his mask, pulled the flashlight free, and stuck it between his teeth as he had instructed York to do, just barely blocking a tail that came straight for his mouth. The bulb was beginning to dim. He could feel the power draining out of him and the seeds of fear beginning to grow. What should he do? Tell Ripred? Keep fighting? Cut and run? Because frankly, if his rager abilities left him he was just another twelve-year-old kid who'd had a few sword lessons. And, as he was realizing, a really tired one at that.

A rat claw got through his defenses and opened up a cut on his calf. The tip of a tail made contact with his flashlight and knocked the beam sideways. As Gregor straightened it, another claw tore through the laces on one of his shoes.

"I can't hold on!" Gregor wanted to scream, but the flashlight made it impossible to talk, anyway. But he had to at least let someone know that he was fading, that they couldn't count on him, that —

"Hey!" Gregor yelped as his feet flew out from under him. He landed on his back in a pool of thick, slippery liquid and came up sputtering.

"Run! All of you!" snapped Ripred, and began a spin attack.

What was going on? Gregor scrambled to his feet and saw — by the light of York's flashlight, his own having dropped somewhere into the pool

when he cried out — that York and Perdita had not hesitated to follow Ripred's instructions. So Gregor ran after them as well.

That is, he tried to run, but he was doing more wading than anything else. The floor sloped down and the liquid rose up to his chest. It was all he could do to sort of bob forward. York's light showed they were in a shiny, black pool that filled the floor of the tunnel. "Oil," he thought. What else could it be? Gregor held his sword high over his head as he went along, hoping the stuff wouldn't get any deeper. Moving forward, moving forward, until there it was. The light at the end of the tunnel. Literally.

The pool became shallower and now Gregor could run, but carefully, carefully because the stuff was so slick. He went toward the light, breaking out of the tunnel but still up to his knees in oil. Before him lay a huge cavern, at least a quarter-mile long, that was much less dusty than the one they had battled in. At the far end were lit torches but they were placed very high on the walls. Huddled far below on the ground lay hundreds upon hundreds of mice.

Gregor didn't know exactly what was happening, but he got a grip on the blade of his sword and began to sprint. This was one thing he could do, whether he was raging or not. He could hear his track coach's voice coming from what seemed like another lifetime, calling pointers to him. The oil disappeared, his sneakers hit cinders, and he accelerated.

Humans on bats were flying by, picking up mouse stragglers and wounded. Ares flew in for him but Gregor waved him toward the mice, some of whom were unable even to get to their feet. Suddenly the cinders vanished and he was wading again, this time through a shallow river with a current. He plucked a struggling mouse pup from the water and hoisted it onto his shoulder. Fortunately it was able to cling there on its own because his arms were soon full of a second pup. As he came to the bank at the far side, hands reached for the pups and pulled him up onto a beach.

Gregor collapsed, gasping for breath. He looked back across the cavern. The last few mice were being lifted from the ground and flown here. Three humans on bats were jetting toward the tunnel with the black pool. They each carried a bow in one hand and a flaming arrow in the other.

"Shall I give the signal, Your Highness?" shouted a voice.

"Not yet." Gregor could barely make out the hoarse voice. He turned and there was Luxa, just a few yards behind him, eyes fixed on the tunnel. She was drenched in oil and so weak she had to support herself on a rock.

"Now, Your Highness?" The voice was tense with urgency.

"Just give him a few more moments," said Luxa. "There!" Gregor looked back, straining to see the tunnel opening. A large, glistening form barreled out of the mouth and made for them. Ripred. Any second now, the army of rats would be after him.

Behind him, Gregor could hear Luxa whispering, "Wait for them, wait for them." Then, as the first rat heads appeared, he heard her say quietly, "Now."

A signal must have been given because the three archers shot their flaming arrows into the pool of oil spilling out of the cave. As the first made contact, a ball of flame burst toward the ceiling, igniting the rat army. Gregor knew it must have blasted back into the tunnel, across the pool, incinerating everyone in its path. For a moment, he couldn't help thinking of what that must have meant, the rats burned alive, the black smoke suffocating those who had been far enough up the tunnel to escape the fire, the horror of it all.

Then another danger arose. So much oil had been dragged across the cavern that the fire spread toward them as well. Although it was not as fierce, it would be deadly if it caught on any of their oil-soaked bodies.

Gregor sprang to his feet. "Ripred? Where's Ripred?" he shouted, only to see the big rat splash into the river before him. He looked up to where Ares was circling overhead.

Ripred slowly dragged himself onto the beach and surveyed the scene. There was no trace of the rat army, only a roaring fire before the tunnel. The flames had stopped at the far side of the river, cut off by the water. They were safe. "Now whose idea was this?" he croaked out.

"Queen Luxa's," said a nearby Underlander.

Ripred turned his head, spotted Luxa leaning against the rock, and glared at her a moment. Then he gave her a nod of approval. "Good plan."

Luxa opened her mouth to answer but instead began to cough into her hand. It was a horrible, rasping cough that shook her entire body. When she removed her hand from her mouth, it was covered in red. She stared at the blood for a moment, as if faintly surprised, and then collapsed to the ground.

CHAPTER 6

A dozen people ran for her but Gregor reached her first. "Luxa? Luxa?" He could not keep the desperation out of his voice. He rolled her onto her back and gently propped her head up on his lap. She was still conscious, but barely. Another wave of coughing racked her body and fresh blood ran from the side of her mouth.

An Underlander, dressed in white to signify that she was a doctor, uncorked a bottle and held it to Luxa's lips.

"Look at her! She should have been sent home days ago!" bellowed a man. Gregor looked up and saw York striding toward them.

"We could not make her go," another voice rasped out. Howard, who seemed nearly as bad off as Luxa, crouched down to wipe his cousin's face with a cloth.

"You are still here as well?" asked York in exasperation.

"I was needed," said Howard faintly. "So many wounded, Father."

Father? So this giant of a man was Howard's dad? Gregor tried to remember what he knew of him. He was the governor at the Fount. He had been kind to the mice. Not much else.

"You are no help like that. The pair of you! To Regalia! Now!" He raised his head in the air. "I need a flier with some life in it!" shouted York.

Ares fluttered to the ground. "I have life," said Ares. "I have been in the ash but a few hours."

"We can take them," said Gregor. "He's really fast."

York gave them each a piercing look and then handed Gregor back the flashlight he'd used in the cave. "Load them up!" he ordered, and lifted Luxa in his arms as if she weighed no more than a doll.

Gregor scrambled onto Ares's back before anyone could say he couldn't go.

"It would be best if she could remain sitting up," said the doctor. "Easier for her to breathe." York placed Luxa in front of Gregor. "Can you keep her upright?"

"Yeah," said Gregor. He wrapped his arms around her waist and pulled her back so her head was resting on his shoulder. "I can do it."

"Give her sips of this when the coughing resumes," said the doctor, and pressed the corked bottle in Gregor's hand. "Howard will advise you. Other

than that, her hope lies in getting to the hospital in Regalia."

As Howard was being lifted onto Ares's back, Luxa began to struggle. "Aurora ..." she said.

"On my own flier, niece. She will be right behind you," said York, smoothing back Luxa's hair.

"Ripred," Luxa got out. The rat appeared and stuck his nose up to hers.

"Right here," he said.

"The nibblers. If I die ..." said Luxa.

But Ripred cut her off. "You? Die? You're too mean to die." Luxa actually managed a smile. "But don't worry, Your Highness, I'll look after them." Ripred nudged Ares with his head. "Fly you high and fast."

Ares lifted into the air and shifted his powerful wings into high gear. They did not need to take the secret, winding tunnels that had brought them here. But even though they flew through the main thoroughfares, the trip was excruciatingly long.

Nothing Gregor had experienced in the battle came close to filling him with the terror he experienced on the flight home. Luxa was so ill — barely able to breathe, wounded in several places, burning up with fever — that at times he truly doubted she would make it home alive. At one point, in fact, when she became very still, he thought he had lost her. "Luxa!" he cried out and gave her a shake, and she began to cough again, bringing up more blood but still with him, still there.

"Talk to her, Gregor," said Ares. "As you did to me in the currents."

Once, when they had been caught in a web of powerful air currents, Ares had nearly gone insane. Gregor had launched into a nonstop monologue to distract the bat and keep his spirits up. And so he began to talk to Luxa about anything and everything he could think of. New York City, funny things Boots had done, a paper he had written on spiders, what winter was like, Mrs. Cormaci's recipe for spaghetti sauce — anything — anything to keep her from drifting away.

Somewhere behind him, Howard lay in the darkness. Gregor was reminded of his presence by an occasional cough or an order to dose Luxa with more medicine. But as poor as Howard's condition was, he was able to stay conscious, unlike his cousin.

After what seemed like an interminable amount of time, Gregor began to recognize the landmarks around Regalia. They were flying down the wild river that ran from the Fount past Regalia to the Waterway. Only it didn't

look as wild as Gregor remembered it. The surface was not churned to a white froth — it was several feet lower than usual. The earthquake that had altered the landscape by the mouse colony near the Fount must have affected the river flow as well.

"Almost there now," he told Luxa. "Almost home." She made no response. She hadn't even coughed in probably an hour. But he could still feel her chest rising and falling.

Ares flew directly to the dock on the river. Even before they had landed, Gregor was yelling, "Help! Doctor! Medic! Help! Help!" Underlanders unloaded Luxa and Howard directly off of Ares and onto stretchers. They tried to place Gregor on a stretcher as well but he pushed them aside and ran after Luxa. She was whisked into some kind of emergency room, surrounded by a team of doctors snapping orders. Gregor tried to see what was going on but was unceremoniously shoved out of the room. A stone door swung closed in his face.

He stood in the hall, panting and trembling, brushing aside the doctors who tried to treat him. It was not until Mareth appeared and grasped him firmly by the arms that he began to come back to himself. "Gregor," said Mareth. "You have need of medical assistance as well. You must come with me."

"Is she going to live?" asked Gregor.

"I cannot say. But she is getting the best treatment we are able to give. You do not help her, or anyone, by letting your wounds inflame," said Mareth. "Come."

Then Gregor was in one of those herbal baths again, soaking the oil and ash from his skin. The rats had gotten him good in a few places, particularly the one who had cut his calf open in the cave. He was stitched up and rubbed down with salve but he pushed away the medicine that he knew would make him sleep. Mareth took care to see that the photograph of Gregor and Luxa made it into the pocket of his new shirt, that his sword was propped up against his bed. But Gregor insisted on getting up. Ordinarily, that would not have been allowed, but the hospital was becoming flooded with human and nibbler casualties and no one had time to deal with him. He prowled up and down the halls, trying to get news of Luxa but hearing very little. Periodically he stood at the window to his mother's hospital room — she looked better at least — watching her sleep. Then he'd pace the halls again.

Finally Mareth took charge of him. "They are overwhelmed in the nursery with pups from the Firelands. We are only in the way here. Let us see if we cannot put ourselves to use."

After exacting a promise from a doctor that he would be sent updates on Luxa's condition, Gregor followed Mareth to the old nursery. It was total chaos. The mouse pups had been among the first to be air-lifted out of the Firelands. While those in the worst state had been sent directly to the hospital, the others had been assigned to the nursery while they awaited care. The shell of Sandwich's hateful turtle was open — Solovet had found the secret passageway as Gregor had predicted — and the babies were being carried in from the Spout. The nursery could hold only a fraction of them, so the entire wing was swarming with sick, frightened pups.

Attempts were being made to accommodate them. In the bathroom in which Gregor had played hide-and-seek less than a day ago, every tub had been filled with herbal bathwater, and a marathon session to clean the pups was under way. Two other rooms that had held supplies had been fashioned into giant nests made of great piles of blankets. Another room was completely devoted to feeding the starving creatures.

Dulcet rushed by them, carrying a screaming pup wrapped in a towel, then did a double take. "Gregor! Mareth! Can you help in the baths?"

"You got it," said Gregor, glad for some way to occupy himself. In another minute he was up to his waist in water in one of the deep tubs, receiving a mouse pup. The baby was trembling so hard its teeth were chattering. Separated from its parents, ill and starving, of course it was a wreck.

"You're okay. You're all right, little guy," said Gregor soothingly. The pup's fur was caked with oil and dust, and it was no easy matter getting it clean. Eventually, with the help of some kind of shampoo and a comb, Gregor got its coat to its normal gray color. As soon as he passed the pup on to be dried, another was placed in his arms.

There were scores waiting to be cleaned and more arriving all the time. Gregor worked tirelessly, bathing the pups, calming them with his words. But his mind was in the hospital with Luxa, willing her to keep breathing. Once, when a doctor came through, he got a piece of real news. They were trying to rid the ash from her body, but it was a delicate process since her lungs were damaged by days in the foul air. At least she was still alive.

Periodically Dulcet or Mareth would try to make him leave his post in the bath, but he couldn't, wouldn't. Then, as he was handing off another mouse pup, he realized Boots was crouching at the edge of the tub with a plate, waving at him.

"Hey, Boots," said Gregor, and crossed to her. "What's going on?"

"I helping Dulcie feed the babies," said Boots. "Now she says I feed you."

On the plate were a slice of meat, some bread, and a mug of tea. Gregor ate, more to please Boots than anything, but he did feel a little better with something in his stomach. "Thanks, Boots."

"I'm going to feed the babies more," said Boots.

"Good work," he said.

"You give baths," she reminded him.

"Right," said Gregor, and reached for another pup. And so it went on for several hours, until Dulcet tapped him on the shoulder.

"Gregor, you are being called to the hospital," she said.

Without hesitation, Gregor gave the mouse pup he was holding to a nearby Underlander and hoisted himself from the water. His skin was wrinkled and tingling from the hours in the herbal bath and his legs felt slightly numb. "Is she all right? Can I see her?" he asked.

"I do not know," said Dulcet. "Only that you were summoned." Her eyes darted over to the doorway and back again significantly. In the entrance stood Horatio and Marcus.

"Oh, my bodyguards are back," said Gregor, buckling on his sword belt. He didn't care. As long as he got to go see Luxa. He walked right past them without a word but he could hear them fall into step behind him. Through the crowds of mouse pups, along the hallways, down the steps that led to the hospital, they followed him. He chose a shortcut, a little-used staircase for the last flight. At the bottom was a small stone door that gave access to the hospital. But Gregor never reached the door. About ten steps from the bottom, Horatio suddenly slammed him into the wall and before he could recover, Marcus had bound his hands behind his back. He started to holler and they tied a gag around his mouth. Then he was being lifted, carried back up the steps, along narrow passages, and then down deep under the city of Regalia. He fought like crazy, but they were too strong for him. Eventually they tossed him onto a stone floor and backed away with their

weapons drawn. Gregor was in a small room with a low ceiling. He had just gotten to his knees when Solovet stepped into the doorway.

"You and I must come to an understanding," she said.

The door swung shut, a key turned in a lock, and Gregor was left in complete darkness.

CHAPTER 7

Gregor gave a cry of fury that was muffled by his gag. He made it to his feet and ran blindly toward the door to his cell, slamming into it. This was no good. It was a thick slab of stone; the only thing damaged was his shoulder. For a while he continued to yell but eventually gave that up as well. There was no sound outside of his cell. If there were guards, they were silent and unresponsive. He slumped against the door and tried to control himself. But it wasn't easy. The rager sensation had begun to brew in him from the moment the door had swung shut. Without a way to focus the bizarre feeling — like, say, battling rats — he felt out of control. He could not keep himself from straining against the leather strap that held his wrists behind his back, from making growls of frustration. From wanting to kill someone.

"Calm down," he ordered himself. "Calm down!" He took deep breaths while he tried to assess his situation.

"What's your plan?" he imagined Ripred's voice again. Somehow it helped him to focus.

"The first thing I need to do is get my hands free!" he snapped back in his head. They had not taken his sword, so there had to be a way. Gregor scooted his foot along the wall until he came to a corner. He inched his sword belt around so that the weapon was behind him. He wedged the point of the sword into the corner of the floor and braced the hilt with his back. The blade was very sharp, and by rubbing the leather strap against it, he was able to saw through his bonds in a matter of minutes. Next he cut through the gag and flung it away. He could scream now for real. But he didn't bother. He knew no one was going to come to his rescue.

It was pitch-black. They hadn't left him with so much as a candle. The flashlight York had returned to him ... where was it? Lost somewhere in the confusion of the hospital. The door fit so tightly into the walls around it that not even the faintest shaft of light leaked around its edges.

Gregor felt his way around the cell. It was small, about ten feet by ten feet. If he stood up straight, the ceiling brushed his hair. There was nothing to be found in it. Not a bench to sit on. No food or water. No place to pee. No blanket to keep him warm, which was his most immediate concern, because it was cool in the cell and he was soaking wet from bathing the

mice. He slumped down in the corner and pulled his arms inside his shirt to conserve body heat.

Why had Solovet done this? Probably to punish him for running back to the Firelands. To show him that she was in charge and, if he disobeyed her, she could toss him in the dungeon anytime she wanted to. But that wasn't exactly the message Gregor was getting. If she had really been in charge she wouldn't have needed Horatio and Marcus to abduct him secretly and spirit him down to this cell. He had been arrested one other time, when he had placed the baby Bane in Ripred's care instead of killing him. But there had been an official, public arrest and a trial to follow. Gregor had an unsettling feeling that now no one but Solovet and a few of her soldiers knew where he was. Who else could know? Who would come to his aid or even notice he was gone? Dulcet had seen Horatio and Marcus take him away, but they could easily say they had escorted him to the hospital and then he'd slipped off again. If Dulcet even had time to think about it, because she definitely had her hands full in the nursery. Mareth usually kept an eye on him, but again, with the general confusion going on in the palace, it would be easy to think Gregor was in another place dealing with another problem. Even Boots would be too busy to miss him. His mother was sick, his dad back in New York City. Luxa and Howard were barely hanging on to life. Ares? No doubt Ares was expending every bit of energy he had helping to airlift the nibblers out of the Firelands and back to Regalia. A job like that could take days. That pretty much left Vikus. Would he realize Gregor had been imprisoned? With the war starting, he was probably working around the clock, too. And Gregor felt certain Solovet hadn't told him about this. They were married but they didn't always confide in each other. Take the development of the plague as a weapon. If Solovet had hidden that from Vikus, then concealing that she had locked up Gregor was nothing.

Hours passed. Gregor huddled in the corner trying to stay warm. His clothes barely seemed to be drying at all. He was hungry and exhausted. The lack of light weighed on him. His thoughts turned to "The Prophecy of Time," to his death, to how he was meant to kill the Bane. He didn't see how he was going to get a chance to do that in here. What would happen if he didn't? And what was going on with that Code of Claw thing? Boots had been in the nursery, but wasn't the princess supposed to be working on that? The prophecy had mostly been about how important it was to break the

Code of Claw. Gregor and the Bane's death had been rather minor points compared to that, at least to Sandwich.

Eventually Gregor fell into a kind of stupor, not fully asleep but not quite awake, either. And in this state, visions of the battle he had just fought began to replay in his mind. The elation he had felt from fighting had completely dissipated. Now when he saw his sword slicing through the rats' flesh, their claws coming at him, he felt scared and weak. It was as if some other person had taken over his body for the duration of the battle. But that person had deserted him in the dungeon, leaving a kid who suddenly wanted nothing so much as to wake up in his bed in New York City and find his mom telling him to hurry up, it was time for breakfast.

He finally went to sleep, curled up in a ball on the stone floor. Luxa wove in and out of his dreams, laughing on her bat, dancing in the arena, and then, as his dreams changed to nightmares, lying in a hospital bed where he couldn't reach her, breathing slower and slower until she stopped breathing entirely. He woke with a start, his brow beaded with sweat, in time to hear the door of his cell slam shut. Stiff and aching, Gregor crawled toward the sound. His right hand landed in a plate of something. Stew? He found a small loaf of bread. A mug of water. There were no utensils. Famished, he crouched in the dark, cramming the food into his mouth. At least Solovet didn't plan on starving him to death. No, he was her prize weapon. She wasn't trying to kill him, just punish him, humiliate him, and break him, probably. He lifted the plate and licked the remaining sauce from its surface. He could have eaten ten times as much, but it at least stopped the hunger pangs in his stomach. That was all that had come, the food on a tray. Gregor really needed to go now. He didn't want to pee in his cell, so he went in the mug. Then he went back to his corner and curled up on the floor again.

The darkness continued to press upon him, making him feel a little crazy. He shut his eyes tight and tried to imagine he was lying on the grass in Central Park on a warm day. Basking in the sun, feeling it soak into his skin. Maybe he would get up and buy a pretzel, heavily slathered in mustard. He would take Boots for a ride on the carousel. At the children's zoo, they would feed the pig that always made her laugh until she hiccuped.

But it was no good. No good. He could not wish himself out of this dank, lifeless hole in the ground. He didn't think he could stand it very much longer. He needed light, he needed people, he needed to know what

was going on! Was Luxa alive or wasn't she? That was the cruelest thing Solovet had done to him, cut him off from the world. How could she do it? How could no one notice he was gone? It had been hours now, maybe days. Didn't anyone even care where he was? Suddenly he was so upset he had to bite his lip so he didn't start screaming. And then something happened that changed his entire perception of the world. Gregor coughed. It was just a small cough. But the instant it left his mouth, it was as if lightning had struck the room. He could see! Okay, not see exactly, because it was still dark in his cell. But he could tell with absolute certainty the proximity of the wall across from him. It was almost as if a picture of it appeared in his head. Shocked out of his despair, Gregor sat up and coughed again. There was the tray, the plate, and the mug. Somewhere in his brain he could register their shapes on the floor, as if in silhouette. But there was more. The mug gave off a faint redness that suggested heat. Why? He scooted over to the mug and wrapped his fingers around it. It was still warm from his pee.

He had finally gotten it. The thing that Ripred had been so bent on teaching him, that Gregor had been so unable to learn. Echolocation. All those hours of clicking around in that dark cave, trying to locate the rat, miserably failing, had not been a waste of time. He had radar! Just like a bat! He set the few objects he had around the room and clicked and coughed at them. It wasn't just a fluke; he hadn't gone temporarily insane. He could "see" them all, even the photograph of Luxa he'd been carrying in his pocket. Well, he couldn't actually make out the picture, only the small, thin square. But maybe that would come in time.

His preoccupation with his newfound skill kept him from going nuts. Kept him from breaking down and begging the guards to let him out. And he knew he couldn't do that. Let Solovet win. He had to leave this cell as uninfluenced by her as he had entered it, or he would just become her pawn in this whole awful war. And he would really, truly rather be dead than do that. If he gave that woman control over him, there would be nothing left inside of him.

Instead of brooding, he devoted himself to combining his sword work with his echolocation. It was even better in rager gear! Just the mild sensations he got from practicing with his sword heightened his echolocation ability. The wall was there! The plate there! The door there! The tip of his blade tapped each in turn. He couldn't wait to tell Ripred!

After a decent workout, he rested against the wall. His clothes were finally dry. He was no longer cold. His mind was electrified by the echolocation. He began to consider a plan to break out of his prison. Someone was going to have to open that door again to feed him. And when they did he would be ready. He would overpower them and fight his way back to Vikus or Ripred or Ares or someone who would take his side. He would get out of here and he would let everyone know what Solovet had done to him. He would — what was that?

Gregor flattened himself against the wall a few feet from the place where the door opened. In this position, he figured he would have a couple of seconds to attack his guards and break out. But something was confusing him. He could hear voices outside. One was deep, probably Horatio's or Marcus's. But the second was light and high and female. The person to whom it belonged was arguing with the guard, although Gregor couldn't quite catch the words. Who could it be? Not Luxa or his mom. They wouldn't be well enough. Had Dulcet tracked him to the dungeon? Or Perdita come looking for him after they had fought side by side in the Firelands?

The lock turned in the key and the door swung open. Torchlight flooded in, hurting his eyes. From outside came a shaky voice. "Gregor, it is only I. Sheath your sword."

It was Nerissa. Luxa's cousin on the royal side. Gregor did not have to ask how she had discovered he was in the dungeon, how she knew he had been poised, sword drawn, ready to attack the guard. She could see things that no one else could. Visions of events past, present, and future. She had no doubt seen him here and realized he needed help.

He knew Nerissa was his friend, but he didn't think much of putting away his sword with the guards out there. "I'm okay in here," he said, not moving.

Nerissa stepped into the cell and steadied herself on the door frame. She was as thin and fragile as ever, bent under the weight of the heavy, mismatched garments she wore to keep warm. Her long tresses had been braided into a loose plait that, by Nerissa's standards, counted as a fancy hairdo. "We have need of you in the code room."

This was the first Gregor had heard of the code room. But it had to be a step up from the dungeon. "Solovet wants me there?" he asked.

"She will. Once I have spoken to her," said Nerissa. "But you must come with me to see her first. And you must let Horatio and Marcus bind your hands if they are to risk moving you. They only do so now because I have explained the crisis that faces us. Breaking the code is our priority and it does not go well. Please trust me on this, Gregor."

Even though he did trust her through and through, it took her a while to convince him to sheath his sword and let the guards tie his hands behind his back. He hated being so vulnerable again. But if he could get out of the cell without fighting his guards it would be better. That would make him an instant fugitive and make it even tougher to move around freely. Still, he remained undecided until Nerissa said, "Luxa has been asking for you."

"She has? She's alive, then? I mean, obviously she's alive if she's asking for me, but she's awake and everything?" he burst out. The news made him so giddy he wasn't thinking straight.

"Yes, she heals. And she wishes to see you," said Nerissa. "But I will be hard-pressed to arrange it with you in the dungeon."

That was when Gregor slid his sword into his belt and let Horatio tie the leather strap around his wrists. Then, with the guards flanking him, he followed Nerissa up through the palace. Luxa was alive! She had pulled through! He found himself grinning from ear to ear. As they ascended from under the palace, the atmosphere in the hallways quickly sobered him up. Anxiety showed on the faces of everyone he passed. They spoke in hushed, hurried voices. From time to time, he heard wailing. He remembered the Underlander bodies piling up around him at the mouth of the cave in the Firelands. Not everyone had been as lucky as Luxa. By the time he had reached the council room, his grin was long gone.

"That's just as well," thought Gregor. He didn't plan to let Solovet see him show any emotion at all. Not anger, not fear, and certainly not happiness. As he walked in to meet her, he made his face as impassive as the stone knight's.

The council room had been transformed into a kind of war center. About a dozen bleary-eyed Underlanders were buzzing around, making notes, delivering messages, drinking mugs of tea. There were a couple of bats there as well. Piles of scrolls were strewn across the table. Platters of food covered a long table off to one side, indicating people were working here around the clock. The giant map of the Underland that Gregor had seen once before, when they had planned his trip to the jungle, hung on the wall.

Groups of different colored pins were arranged here and there. It didn't take a military genius to guess those represented troops.

Ripred, who had been bathed and bandaged, had positioned himself by the buffet. By the array of empty dishes around him, he'd been having quite a feast. He was currently dipping his face into a pot of his favorite shrimp in cream sauce. Besides the rat, the only ones Gregor recognized were Solovet and Mareth, who were discussing a grouping of red-colored pins on the map.

When Nerissa, Gregor, and his guards entered, the room gradually fell silent. Solovet took one look at the newcomers and said calmly, "All excuse themselves but Mareth and Ripred." In a minute, the others had cleared out. "What is the meaning of this?" she asked.

Nerissa did not give the guards time to answer. "We have need of Gregor in the code room. I took it upon myself to have him released and now ask permission for his aid."

"And how did you know where to find him?" asked Solovet. "No, never mind. I suppose you saw him in a dream. What else does our little visionary see?"

"I saw nothing but Gregor locked in a dungeon," said Nerissa quietly. Gregor could see by the look of shock on Mareth's face that the soldier had had no idea of his situation. And Ripred even stopped eating for a moment.

"Oh, tell me you didn't," said the rat, as the cream sauce dripped off of his muzzle.

"Only for a couple of days," said Solovet with a slight shrug. "I would have had him arrested sooner but I thought it more prudent to wait until Vikus had gone to enlist the spinners. What urgent need can you have for him in the code room, Nerissa?" She rolled a red pin between her fingertips, seemingly impatient to get back to her map.

"It is Boots. We feel she would be of more use if Gregor were there to help manage her," said Nerissa.

Solovet glanced at Gregor's face and shook her head.

"Well, you will have to do without him. I cannot risk him disobeying orders yet again and running off to who knows where," she said. "Return him to the dungeon."

"He did not run off to who knows where. He came back to battle," said Ripred. "And lucky for us he did. Really, Solovet, I don't see how this is encouraging any sort of allegiance to you."

"He's had no light, no medical care, no bed, and little food," said Nerissa.

"Oh, excellent," said Ripred. "Let's alienate the warrior altogether."

"Fine, allow him a torch and a blanket," said Solovet.

"I will take responsibility for him," said Mareth. "He will not leave Regalia."

"No, I need you here. And if he outsmarted Horatio and Marcus, there is no guarantee you can hold him," said Solovet.

"What holds him is already in Regalia, Solovet," said Ripred.

"His family was not enough to keep him from going before," said Solovet.

"Not his family. Your granddaughter. Why do you think he was in such a rush to get back to the Firelands? Concern for me?" said Ripred.

"Luxa? What has she to do with it?" asked Solovet. For the first time she appeared interested in the conversation.

Gregor could not keep himself from speaking. "Shut up, Ripred."

"See how he protests? Oh, he's head over heels. I got my first smell of it when they were having some quarrel in the Firelands," Ripred said nonchalantly. Gregor remembered that argument. He had blown up at Luxa for abusing Ripred and bossing everybody around. It had ended with him feeling very confused. That's when Ripred had taken a deep, noticeable sniff. So rats could smell more than fear, they could smell love as well.

"He about got himself killed in the Firelands when I just mentioned she was unwell," continued the rat. "Oh, think back about half a century, Solovet. You remember what it's like."

"He is in love with Luxa?" Solovet asked with a look of amusement. "Is this so, Gregor? Is this the reason you disobeyed my order?"

Gregor made no reply. His face burned like fire.

"If it were so, I would be far more amenable to letting you free, as I do not believe Luxa will be planning any outings anytime soon," said Solovet. "But I should like to hear it from you."

Gregor stared at the ground, thinking of what he might do to Ripred if he ever were free.

"No? Then perhaps the dungeon is the safest place for you," said Solovet.

The guards had just laid hands on him to lead him away when Mareth burst out, "Check his pocket!" Gregor shot Mareth a look of disbelief. This

was far worse than Ripred's betrayal. With his hands tied behind his back, there was nothing Gregor could do but watch as Solovet crossed to him and plucked the photo from his shirt. She examined it closely for a moment, then laughed and held it up for Ripred to see.

"What did I tell you?" said the rat, and stuffed a clawful of shrimp into his stupid mouth.

Gregor knew then it was all there in that photo. All the proof anyone needed of his feelings for Luxa, captured in that one shot. He had been an idiot to carry it around. But how could he have anticipated this moment?

"This has simplified my job immensely." Solovet tucked the photo back in Gregor's shirt, gave it a little pat, and smiled at him. "Do not worry, your secret is safe with me." She nodded to the guards. "Unbind his hands, he is free to go."

CHAPTER 8

The second they cut through the strap at his wrists, Gregor spun on his heels and stalked out of the door. He was livid at Ripred and Mareth for revealing his feelings for Luxa to Solovet. First of all, it was a personal thing. No one's business but his own! Second, didn't they know Solovet would just use Luxa against him? Like she did everyone he cared about? Didn't they see how it would only give her more power to control him? And finally, what if Luxa found out? He had no idea how Luxa really felt about him. They had never talked about it or anything. Now someone would tell her and the idea was just so embarrassing. He was ready to find Ares and head home and —

A form brushed by him as he reached the end of the hallway, and suddenly Ripred was blocking his way. "Hold on, boy."

Gregor had his sword out of his belt so fast it was a blur. "Move. Now."

Ripred held up his paws in mock surprise. "Oh, dear. Is this where we fight to the death? I didn't expect it so soon."

"Move, Ripred!" said Gregor, and swung at the rat, who dodged his blow but still lost a few inches of whiskers on one side.

"Either I'm getting old or you're improving a good deal," said Ripred. "But I suggest you don't try that again."

Gregor lifted his sword to slice at the rat when a pair of strong arms caught his in some kind of headlock from behind. "Stop, Gregor! You do not understand what service he did you!" Mareth said.

"Get off me, man!" said Gregor, struggling to free himself. But Mareth was too strong and even though he was mad, Gregor could not have attacked him with his sword. He was actually far more hurt by Mareth turning on him than Ripred. Gregor had come to think of Mareth as a friend. Not now, though. So he kept fighting until Mareth flipped him over and pinned him to the ground. Then Ripred climbed on top of him — Ugh! The rat had to weigh about six hundred pounds! — and exhaled shrimp breath in his face. "Just let us know when you're ready to listen."

It didn't take long for Gregor to give up since he could barely get any air in his lungs. Plus Mareth and Nerissa were looking over Ripred's shoulder with such obvious concern that it was hard not to believe they were genuinely upset by his reaction. He forced his muscles to relax, which was

not easy because the rager thing seemed to be with him all the time now, bubbling to the surface at any provocation, and even though it came without effort, he could not turn it off at will. "What? What?" he growled at them.

"Gregor, we are sorry if we revealed anything of a private nature back there. But when Ripred opened that door, I followed him immediately," said Mareth. "We did not want you back in that dungeon."

"I was doing all right," said Gregor sullenly.

"After only two days. But Solovet once locked Hamnet up in that very cell for a full month because he crossed her at a war council," said Nerissa. "No light. No human contact. He was not the same when he came out."

"Vikus was fighting at the Fount. The council was completely under her control. There was no one of power to intercede for Hamnet. To suffer this at his own mother's hands ... many of us think it contributed to his insanity at the Garden of Hesperides," said Mareth.

"And if she'd do that to Hamnet, do you think she'd be more lenient on some insubordinate Overlander?" said Ripred. "He was the apple of her eye, and she doesn't even *like* you!"

"I would have said the same as Ripred and Mareth had I been clever enough to think of it," said Nerissa. "Please, Gregor. Know that we acted on your behalf."

Gregor thought of a month in that cell. Even with his new echolocation skills, it would be unbearable. Poor Hamnet. Gregor remembered how agitated he had been in the jungle when Luxa had suggested that his self-imposed exile from Regalia had been excessive, that he could have returned at least to visit her. Hamnet had said, "No, I could never have left twice. You know how. Solovet works. She would have had me leading an army again in no time." Was he thinking of that cell and how Solovet would have let him rot there until he was either completely insane or so desperate he'd do anything she said? It must have been awful for Hamnet to know in his dying moments that he had no choice but to send his son, Hazard, back to Regalia to live. Is that why he had extracted the promise from Luxa that she would never let Hazard be trained as a soldier? Gregor had always thought that Hamnet had made that request because he was so opposed to war in principle. Now he wondered if he had also said it to keep Hazard as far out of Solovet's reach as possible.

Gregor could feel the tension leaving his muscles for real now, as he began to understand his friends' motives. Still, what if Luxa found out what

had happened?

"No one will utter a word of what was said in that room, you may be sure of that," said Mareth. "We will not speak and Solovet would not want it to be common knowledge."

"Okay, okay. You did me a big favor. Now let me up," said Gregor. He still spoke gruffly but he was not really angry anymore.

"Just when I was getting comfortable," said Ripred, giving a luxurious stretch that nearly crushed Gregor's ribs before he got off. "Let's get down to the code room, before that sister of yours drives the finest minds of the Underland completely nuts."

Oh, yeah. The code. He knew it was important, but... "But I'm going to the hospital," protested Gregor.

"Please, Gregor. Luxa sleeps, so you would not be able to truly visit her. And we have real need of your help," said Nerissa. The exertion of the last hour had set her to trembling violently. He didn't want her fainting or something.

"All right, Nerissa. I'll go there first," said Gregor.

Mareth had to return to Solovet's side, but Nerissa and Ripred accompanied Gregor to the code room. They gave him ten minutes to run into a bathroom for a quick wash and change of clothes, and then hurried him up a few flights of stairs to a chamber off of a long, narrow corridor. They walked in on quite a scene.

Although he knew this was not its purpose, the room reminded Gregor of a zoo. It was shaped like an octagon. On one wall was the door through which Gregor had entered. The one directly across from this had a carving of some sort of strange tree. A long table covered with scrolls, books, and long strips of white fabric was set up beneath the tree. The remaining six walls had arched openings of various heights that led to private rooms. Above each arch was the name of the creature that was meant to inhabit the room: Spinner, Crawler, Human, Flier, Gnawer, Nibbler. Some of the rooms were already filled with their designated guests, and this was what had given Gregor the impression of a zoo. A light green spider rested on a web, a heavily bandaged white mouse with black markings lay on a nest of blankets, a bat with creamy white fur hung upside down from a perch, and a roach peered out of an archway that was only three feet off of the ground. Every arch was equipped with a curtain that could be easily closed, but at

the moment, all were open, because all of the creatures were staring fixedly at Boots.

She was standing on the back of her loyal cockroach friend, Temp, smack in the middle of the octagon, singing "The Itsy-Bitsy Spider" at the top of her lungs. The green spider, to whom the song was principally directed, seemed to be cringing. Boots was somewhat off-key, but Gregor was pretty sure it was the loudness that was making the arachnid hunch down and contract. Spiders disliked any loud noises. As she wound up the song, Boots turned to each door and gave a separate bow, saying, "Thank you! Thank you!" although no one had applauded. Gregor knew she didn't care. As long as she had an audience, Boots could go on like this for hours.

"She has been going on like this for hours," whispered Nerissa.

"Days, more like it," said Ripred in disgust. "You've got to get her to focus on the Code of Claw before the entire team bolts for home."

"Next, I will sing one for you!" announced Boots, pointing at the bat, who actually flinched.

"Boots! Hey, Boots, what's going on?" said Gregor, trying not to laugh as he crossed to her. He thought it was funny, but it probably wasn't if you'd been in the audience for days.

"Gre-go!" said Boots, and put up her arms for a hug.

"Come here, you," said Gregor, lifting her up on his hip. "How you doing, Temp?"

Temp bobbed his antennae. One was still bent from an earlier encounter with the rats. "Well, I be, well."

"I am singing to make them happy!" said Boots.

"You sure are," said Gregor. "You know what else would make them happy?"

"What?" asked Boots, her eyes widening in anticipation.

Gregor realized he didn't know. He looked back at Nerissa and Ripred. "What do you want her to do?"

"Well, no one knows, do they?" said Ripred. "She's supposed to be the key to breaking this whole code wide open, but all she's done so far is terrorize the rest of us into total submission."

"I been singing," said Boots proudly.

"You certainly have," said Ripred. "Show him the ropes, would you, Nerissa?"

"I am not even meant to be here," Nerissa confided to Gregor as she led them over to the long table. "But I volunteered to help with your sister."

"So this is your special code room?" asked Gregor.

"Yes, it was built long ago. We have broken many codes here in the past and now we must unravel what we believe to be the Code of Claw," said Nerissa. "It is an unknown code that the gnawers began to use the day we freed the nibblers. So its appearance coincides with other events in 'The Prophecy of Time.' This is a sample of it." She picked up one of the strips of white fabric and showed it to Gregor. It was covered with a series of lines. Some were straight up and down, others tilted to the right or left. "It took only a short time to rule out any usual encryption methods the rats might have used. This is a new and clever code that we must break."

Gregor looked at the lines. They meant absolutely nothing. "Well, if you're expecting Boots to start translating a bunch of chicken scratch into words ... I don't think that's going to happen, Nerissa. She's just learning to read."

"You do not need to worry about the lines. We have the messages written in letters as well," said the bat, flipping off of his perch.

"Oh, forgive me," said Nerissa. "This is Daedalus. The spinner is Reflex. The crawler is Min, and the nibbler is known as Heronian." Nerissa did not look at all well, but she kept going as she pressed the palm of her hand into her forehead. "Perhaps you met her in the Firelands?"

"No. Nice to meet you, everybody," said Gregor, and received a round of nods back.

"These are the finest code-breakers of each species," said Nerissa. "Boots is meant to represent the humans."

"And you represent the rats?" Gregor asked Ripred.

"Well, I wouldn't be anyone's first choice, but times being what they are, I'll have to do," said Ripred. "It's not really essential that a rat be here, but a rat may help. Unfortunately, I have other pressing demands as well."

"Ripred is wanted everywhere. In the war room, on the field, and in the code room. He gives much insight into how the gnawers compose their codes," said Nerissa. "But he will not break this code. That is Boots's role."

Daedalus snagged a white strip with his claw and gave it to Gregor. Above the lines on this one were a stream of regular letters. But they didn't form recognizable words. "She may ignore the lines and only concentrate on the letters."

Gregor shook his head. He hated to disappoint everybody, but he had to be honest. "Listen, as I'm sure you know, this makes no sense. And I don't know what you think my three-year-old sister can do with it, but I wouldn't set your hopes too high." Boots took the strip of code, suddenly excited. "Oh! I know! I know!" Gregor could feel the whole room tense in anticipation, hoping for some kind of break-through. But once she was on the ground, Boots simply tucked one end of the strip in the back of her pants and ran. The fabric floated out behind her. "Look! I have a tail! I have a tail!"

Gregor cracked up. He couldn't help it. The whole thing was so ridiculous.

Then Ripred's nose was in Gregor's face, his lips curled back in displeasure. "You may find this amusing, but if we don't crack this code, we lose the war. Period. Nothing you or I or anyone can do out on that field can compare with the power of knowing what is going on in our enemy's brains. So, if you'd like your little sister to have the chance to continue her singing career, I suggest you help her focus!"

Gregor called Boots over, took off her tail, and settled her on his lap. He didn't know what they were doing, but he had her read the letters on the strip of fabric. She could recognize them all; sometimes a few would actually form a little word like "dog" and she would announce it with delight. But after they had read three strips, Boots had tired of the game and so had Gregor. "This helping anything?" he asked the group.

"No. Perhaps when Vikus returns, he may have some ideas," said Nerissa.

"In the meantime, we'd better proceed as if it is any code, and do our best to break it," said Ripred. "I have to get back to the war room, but I'll keep checking in." With a flick of his tail, he was gone.

"Gregor, thank you, you need not stay. I imagine they will be waking Luxa soon for a meal," said Nerissa.

"Sorry I wasn't more help," said Gregor, and made for the door before anyone could think he was of value. He had no idea how to turn all of that gibberish into coherent words, though, and he had to see Luxa.

Gregor sprinted to the hospital but was not allowed to see her until he had taken another bath in some kind of antiseptic and dressed in sterile clothes and a mask.

"Five minutes," said a doctor who led him into a secluded room. The air was filled with a cool mist that puffed out of small tubes inserted in the walls. Luxa lay on the bed in a gown. Her face, neck, and arms — the areas that had been most exposed to the ash in the Firelands — were a hot, painful red. Her breathing was still labored and he could hear her wheeze each time that she inhaled. But her eyes found his at once.

Gregor crossed to her bedside. He didn't take her hand because he was afraid he'd hurt her. But her fingers lifted and rested on his. She gave him one of her half smiles and whispered, "You stayed."

He gave a shrug like it was no big deal. And at the moment, it wasn't. He was too happy that she was alive, that he was alone with her at last, to think about what his decision to stay was costing him. He would have been completely content to stand just like that for his five minutes, but in less than one, the doctor returned and waved him to the door.

Gregor stepped outside to object but the doctor didn't give him a chance.

"Overlander, you are being called back to the code room. They said there is some emergency with your sister."

CHAPTER 9

Gregor didn't even wait to change, he just took off at a run. Underlanders did not use the word "emergency" lightly. What had happened? Had Boots fallen and hurt herself? Choked on something? If so, why hadn't she been brought directly to the hospital? Or was it some other kind of emergency? It was clear that she had worn out the patience of all of the other code-breakers. Had one of them done something? Maybe Ripred had returned and threatened her in some way and she had lost it. It was unlikely the cockroach or bat had harmed her. And the mouse had been so weak it could hardly move. But that green spider! Maybe it had trapped her in its web. Gregor still had a hard time trusting spiders. His visit to their land, when he had thought they were going to have him for dinner, had been anything but reassuring.

As he sprinted down the narrow hallway his foot slid in something. Blood. Someone had bled, leaving a trail all the way to the door. "Boots!" he cried. If they had hurt her, if they had harmed one hair on her head —

Boots flew into the hall. "Gre-go! Gre-go!" she called in distress.

He picked her up, running his hand through her curls, looking for injuries. "What's the matter? Are you okay? Did somebody hurt you?"

"No, I am okay. In here! In here!" Boots tugged on his shirt to make him enter the room. Totally confused now, Gregor stepped inside. There, crouched in the center of the stone floor, was his other sister, Lizzie.

"Oh, no," said Gregor. He had no idea how she'd gotten here or why she'd come. But he knew this was no time to ask. While she did not seem to be bleeding, either, she was hurting, because Lizzie was in the middle of one of her panic attacks. She was panting for air, shaking like a leaf, and he could see the sheen of sweat on her palms. His dad had explained this to Gregor. Everybody had a fight-or-flight response hardwired into them. When you were in danger, it triggered, pumping adrenaline through your body. This helped you either to fight off an adversary or run like crazy. Gregor guessed he must have been having a panic attack of sorts in the museum when he finally admitted what "The Prophecy of Time" had in store for him. That was pretty major. But in people like Lizzie, it didn't take much to set off the response. Sometimes she would have an attack for no

apparent reason at all. She would be in a state of extreme terror, but there would be no one to fight and nothing to run from.

There was something real today. Even the thought of coming to the Underland had always been enough to give Lizzie an attack. Now she was actually here, facing off with a room full of giant scary creatures. They were doing nothing to threaten her. The mouse, bat, and spider were huddled in their rooms. The cockroach had disappeared into its alcove entirely and drawn the curtain shut. Temp had stayed, because he would never abandon Boots, but he had positioned himself under the table. Only Nerissa was near Lizzie, trying to soothe her and looking on the verge of some kind of attack herself. Gregor swung Boots down and crossed to Lizzie. "Whose blood is that?" he asked Nerissa.

"Hermes. He flew her from the Overland. They were ambushed by gnawers and he was clawed. She is not injured, but we cannot quiet her," said Nerissa.

"Yeah, I know. She gets like this sometimes," said Gregor. He sat behind Lizzie, pulled her back into his arms, and held her. "Hey, Liz. It's okay. It's okay. Nobody here is going to hurt you."

"Oh! Gregor! You have to — come home! Now!" Lizzie got the words out.

"Why? What happened?" asked Gregor, suddenly feeling scared, too. What had happened that was so dire that Lizzie had forced herself to come to the Underland?

"Grandma — in the hospital. Dad — very sick again. I can't take — care of him!" said Lizzie.

"What? But Dad's letters keep saying everything's okay." Had this stuff just happened or had his dad been concealing things to keep Gregor from worry? "What about Mrs. Cormaci?" asked Gregor. She had always been there for them before.

"Stays with — Grandma. Really tired. You have to — come home!" said Lizzie. And with that, she threw up all over the floor.

Gregor held her while she heaved, trying to make sense of what she had said. His problems had been so overwhelming down here, he had given little thought to what was going on back home. Grandma in the hospital? His dad sick again? It must really be bad.

When Lizzie finally stopped retching, he picked her up and carried her over to the side of the room. He just sat there with her on his lap, feeling her

shake. "It's okay. It's going to be okay, Liz. I'll take care of it," he said. He had no idea even where to begin.

"I brought — a bag. In my—backpack," Lizzie said.

Her backpack was sitting next to the pool of vomit. "Hey, Boots! Can you bring me Lizzie's backpack?" Gregor asked.

"I can do it," said Boots, running over to fetch him the backpack. "I can get the bag, too!" Her chubby little fingers struggled with the zipper, but she got the pack open and pulled out a folded paper lunch bag.

Gregor opened the bag up and put it to Lizzie's face. "Breathe. Nice and slow now. Nice and slow."

This helped, because people having panic attacks got too much oxygen into their systems, and breathing into a bag gave them more carbon dioxide. Gregor rubbed the tense muscles in Lizzie's back, and the combination of that and the bag seemed to calm her down a little.

"It's okay, Lizzie. You're okay," said Boots, patting her big sister's hand. Lizzie's attacks were one of the few things that upset Boots. "I am here."

Nerissa summoned a pair of Underlanders, who quickly came in, cleaned up the vomit, and left. Then all of the creatures sat still, as if they knew any movement on their part would only increase Lizzie's anxiety, while they waited to see what would happen.

And this was how Ripred found them as he swept into the room. "What's going on in here?" His nose was twitching, clearly registering the lingering throw-up smell. Then his eyes landed on Lizzie, and he became still, too, except for the tip of his tail, which twitched from side to side. An expression came over his face that Gregor had never seen before. If he had to put a name to it, Gregor would have called it tenderness. The rat's voice became positively gentle. "I didn't know we had company. But I bet I can guess who you are. You're Lizzie, aren't you?" Lizzie lifted her face from the bag to take in the giant, scarred rat. "You're Ripred," she whispered.

"That's right. I'm glad to finally get to meet you. I wanted to thank you for all of the lovely snacks you've sent me. They're always the high point of my day," said Ripred.

Gregor could not make sense of Ripred's behavior. Why was he being so nice to Lizzie? He had never been nice to Boots.

Ripred moved in slowly. "Sometimes it helps if you talk," he said. "Do something to distract yourself."

Gregor looked at the rat in surprise. What did he know about panic attacks? Surely he had never had one himself. "My dad does math problems with her," said Gregor.

"Math is good," said Ripred. "What's eight plus seven, Lizzie?"

"Fifteen," said Lizzie.

"You're going to have to do better than that. She's like a math whiz, right, Liz?" said Gregor. It was true. The teachers at school never knew what to do with her. She could solve problems way beyond the rest of the eight-year-olds.

"Really?" asked Ripred. "What's twelve times eleven?"

"One hundred and thirty-two," said Lizzie.

"Harder," said Gregor. "She likes to cube things."

"What's six cubed?" asked Ripred.

"Two hundred and sixteen," said Lizzie.

"How about thirteen?" asked Ripred.

"Two thousand, one hundred and ninety-seven,"

said Lizzie without missing a beat. She did seem to be calming down a bit.

"Try thirty-seven," said a hoarse voice from behind Ripred. It was Heronian. The mouse had managed to raise herself up onto her forelegs.

Lizzie panted a moment and then blurted out, "Fifty thousand, six hundred and fifty-three."

Ripred looked at Heronian for confirmation, and the mouse gave a small nod back. Even Gregor was pretty impressed with that one.

"That's right. Apparently that's right," said Ripred. He started to pace, which was always a sign that he was working something out. "Lizzie? Do you like puzzles?" She nodded. "They can be soothing, too. Oh, I know a fun one. We can do it right here. Would you like that?"

"Okay," said Lizzie. Gregor could feel her shaking start to subside. There was nothing like a puzzle to get Lizzie's attention. He thought of the puzzle book that he had bought her on the street that time. She had volunteered to stay with their sick dad while he'd taken Boots sledding in Central Park, and he had wanted to get her a present. That big, thick puzzle book. She had loved it.

Ripred settled down in a comfortable position a few feet in front of Lizzie. "All right. Let's see. Boots, you go stand by Temp."

"Oh, a game!" said Boots, and scurried excitedly over to Temp.

"Now, Lizzie, from where you're sitting, you can see seven creatures. Two humans, one of whom is an Overlander and one of whom is an Underlander, one bat, one mouse, one cockroach, one spider, and one rat. We've just had lunch and we've each eaten our favorite food. No two of us have the same favorite food. The things eaten were fish, cheese, cake, cookies, bread, mushrooms, and shrimp in cream sauce. Now ready for the clues?" asked Ripred.

"I'm ready," said Lizzie, and clasped her hands before her. She no longer even needed the bag. Ripred spoke quickly and distinctly. "The bat's favorite food is either mushrooms or cake. Cookies are not the cockroach's favorite food. The mouse will eat cheese, but she didn't today. The Underlander's favorite food is either cookies or shrimp in cream sauce. The mushrooms and cookies were not eaten by mammals. The Overlander's favorite food is either cake or bread. So the question is, who ate the cheese?"

"Well, that's totally unfair," thought Gregor. No one could figure that bunch of gibberish out. But it really had settled Lizzie down.

She was staring at the floor, squeezing her hands so tightly her knuckles were white. About thirty seconds passed, then she met Ripred's eyes and gave a small triumphant grin. "You did," she said.

"Wrong," thought Gregor. Ripred's favorite food was shrimp and cream sauce.

"Hmm," said Ripred, and his tail flicked so hard it made a snapping sound. But his voice was casual. "Temp, suppose you take Boots down to the nursery and let her feed the baby mice. Would you like that, Boots?"

"Ye-es!" said Boots. Temp pattered out from under the table and she hopped upon his back. Ripred followed them out the door calling, "And no need to come back until I send for you!"

Gregor could hear the other creatures murmuring around the room. They seemed more relaxed and even a little excited. Min, the cockroach, poked her head out of her arch, and Daedalus kept fluttering his wings. Could it be they were just relieved to have Boots out of their hair? No, it seemed like something more had happened. But what exactly?

Just then Ripred strode back into the room. The rat was actually smiling at Lizzie. "So," he said. "So, so, so." He sat up on his haunches and then tipped his head forward in an elaborate bow. "Welcome to the Underland, Princess."

PART 2

The Ticking

CHAPTER 10

Ripred's implication hit Gregor like a ton of bricks. Princess! That could only mean one thing: The rat thought Lizzie was the princess in the prophecy, not Boots, and now he would want to keep her here. "No! No way, Ripred! You can't have her!" He stood up, putting Lizzie on her feet, and then pulled her by the hand toward the door. "Come on, Liz, we've got to get you home."

Ripred planted his big, ratty self in front of the door. "Well, I can't let you go now. It wouldn't be safe."

"This is true," put in Daedalus. "Hermes and your sister were ambushed at the bottom of the shaft that leads to your home. The rats surely have soldiers guarding it now."

"Then she'll go back up through Central Park," said Gregor.

"Even if we had a spare flier at the moment, that wouldn't be advisable. There's probably a patrol posted there as well. And do you really want to drop off poor Lizzie under Central Park alone? How will she move the stone? How will she get home in the dark?" asked Ripred.

Gregor had no idea what time it was, either in the Overland or the Underland. But he couldn't just send Lizzie up to Central Park by herself no matter what time of day it was. He would have to arrange for his dad to meet her. Wait, that wouldn't work. His dad was sick again and, if they couldn't send a bat with a message up the laundry room shaft, how would they even get word to him? There was only one way to get her home. "I'm taking her myself," said Gregor.

"Just try to set one toe outside Regalia and you'll be back in that dungeon so fast you won't know what hit you," said Ripred. "And your bat, as well."

Gregor felt desperation growing inside of him. There was no way Lizzie could manage down here! He had to get her home. But everything Ripred was saying was true. "Why do you even want her? What's this 'princess' stuff? She didn't even get the puzzle right! I know you had shrimp for lunch!"

Ripred rolled his eyes at Lizzie. "You see? This is the sort of thing I've been dealing with for the past year. Enlighten him, won't you?"

"It was just a puzzle, Gregor, not what really happened," said Lizzie. "In the puzzle the rat ate the cheese."

"How did you know that? Did you just guess?" asked Gregor.

"No, it was just the only answer left. He said the mouse didn't eat the cheese. And the two animals who ate mushrooms and cookies weren't mammals, so that means the spider and the cockroach didn't eat the cheese. And cheese wasn't one of the favorite foods of the Overlander, the Underlander, or the bat. So, that only leaves the rat. See?" said Lizzie.

Even her explanation made his head spin. "No, I don't see, Liz," said Gregor. "All I see is I've got to get you home."

"Maybe she doesn't want to go," said Ripred.

"Of course she does!" said Gregor.

"Let's ask her," said Ripred. "Lizzie, if you knew that all the humans in the Underland might die if you didn't help us solve a puzzle, would you stay or go?"

"What?" asked Lizzie, immediately distressed. "Would that happen?"

"Don't tell her that!" said Gregor. "She's not even the princess! Boots is the princess!"

"And if a princess has a sister, you call them a ... ?" asked Ripred.

"Okay! A princess!" said Gregor. "But that's just some junk the cockroaches made up. Nobody's going around calling me a prince."

"Well, if that's what's bothering you, you'll be Prince Gregor from now on," said Ripred.

"My mom and my sister and my brother, too?" broke in Lizzie, who had not yet answered Ripred's question. "Would they die, too?"

"They may even if you stay. You may, too. Then again, they may live. But if you are the princess in the prophecy and you leave us, none of us stands a chance," said Ripred. "I think everyone in this room would back me up on that."

"IN THE NAMING IS THE CATCHING," said Nerissa suddenly. "That is what the line from 'The Prophecy of Time' must mean. We had a princess, but not the one with the right name. That was the catch. The true princess must be you, Lizzie. You are the one who will help us break the Code of Claw."

"Then I have to stay, Gregor," said Lizzie. "I can't leave and let everybody die."

"What about Dad?" asked Gregor.

"I don't know," said Lizzie. Her breathing began to get short again. "I don't know."

"I'll send money up there. And instructions. Your nice Mrs. Cormaci can hire a nurse, can't she? There are people who do that, right?" said Ripred.

"If you can get a note up there, just have Mrs. Cormaci meet Lizzie in Central Park," said Gregor.

"But I'm not going, Gregor," Lizzie said unhappily. "I have to stay." She turned to Ripred. "How will you get it to Mrs. Cormaci? The rats? The small ones who live up there?"

"Exactly. Such a relief not to have to explain myself all the time," said Ripred.

"I will write the note and have the money collected," said Nerissa. "Then, Ripred, have you need of me?"

Nerissa had turned so white her veins looked purplish-black against her skin. The strain of Lizzie's arrival must have been too much for her. Surely she would pass out at any moment.

"No," said Ripred. "Go, see to the nurse, and then rest."

"Yes," Nerissa said, making her way to the door by supporting herself against the wall. "Yes."

"Nerissa, you have been invaluable today," added Ripred, and she acknowledged this with a nod.

Boy, the rat really was in good spirits if he was complimenting Nerissa! If Ripred was happy, Gregor was not. But he knew that arguing with Lizzie at this point was no good. And Ripred had made up his mind to keep her.

A couple of Underlanders came in wheeling carts of steaming food, and Gregor realized how hungry he was. He made a gigantic roast beef sandwich smothered in mushrooms and sat back against the wall to try to figure out another plan while he washed it down with a quart of milk.

Lizzie, whose stomach was also empty, took a slice of buttered bread at Ripred's insistence. "Now come and meet the rest of the code team," said the rat, wrapping his tail around her and guiding her around the room. "I know they all must look very strange to you, but believe me, you've got more in common with them than you do with Prince Gregor over there."

"Why?" asked Lizzie, shooting a nervous look back at Gregor.

"Because you think alike," said Ripred. "Oh, by the way, you don't sing, do you?"

"Not much. I don't like music with words," said Lizzie.

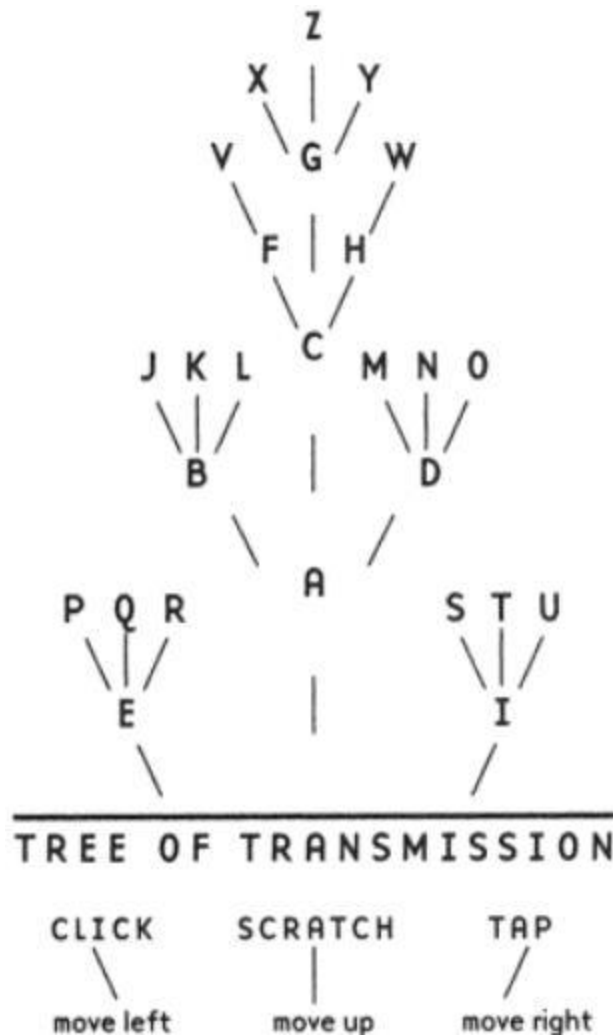
An audible sigh of relief came from around the room.

"Good. Good," said Ripred. Then he leaned and whispered in Lizzie's ear so Gregor could barely hear it. "You'll have to be patient with some of them. They're very shy."

It was the perfect thing to say to Lizzie, who could be almost crippled by shyness herself. She'd always had great difficulty making friends. To be honest, she'd only ever had one friend, a weird kid named Jedidiah. He was in her grade at school and, like Lizzie, way beyond the other kids academically. He was just eight, but he could tell you how anything worked. A car, a telephone, a computer. Once, when he'd come over for a play date, he'd spent, like, an hour talking about their oven. Gregor had finally taken the pair of them out to the playground and tried to get a game of kick-ball going. Lizzie got cold and Jedidiah became fascinated with a traffic light. It was hopeless. Also, Jedidiah always insisted on calling Lizzie by her full name, Elizabeth, and got very upset if you called him Jed or something. Listening to the two of them having a conversation made Gregor feel like he was hanging out with a couple of Pilgrims. "What do you think, Jedidiah?" "I do not know, Elizabeth." Still, the whole family was grateful for Jedidiah. If it weren't for him, Lizzie would have no friends at all.

The fact that the other code-breakers were also shy seemed to give Lizzie courage. She gave them each a polite "hello" as they were introduced. They must have liked her, because they began to come out of their rooms. Daedalus fluttered out almost at once, but bats and humans were most comfortable with one another. Min emerged slowly. She was an old cockroach, so old in fact that she made creaking noises when she walked, and her shell had a funny grayish tint to it. Heronian struggled to her feet, dragged herself up to Lizzie, and gave her a little bow, to which Lizzie gingerly bowed back. And finally, Reflex delicately stepped out, greeted her, and scurried back to his web. Then Ripred took her over to the tree carved on the wall. "This is the Tree of Transmission. It was created years ago to make communication easier over long distances. Humans, rats, mice, spiders, cockroaches, and bats developed it together, which was, in itself, an extraordinary achievement. It was in one of our rare times of peace, you see. We can all still use it today, though. Look at it a moment and tell me your impressions," he said.

Gregor gave the tree a hard look and this is what he saw:



"It looks like a Christmas tree decorated with the alphabet," was Gregor's first thought. But even he could see it must be related to the code.

"I think ..." began Lizzie hesitantly.

"Go on, don't worry about being wrong," said Ripred.

"Well, maybe you use these sounds ... click, scratch, tap ... to make letters," said Lizzie. "One click is an *E*, one scratch is an *A*, and one tap is an *I*. Right?"

"Exactly right," said Ripred. "So what if you heard one scratch and then two taps?"

Lizzie followed the tree branches with her finger as she spoke. "One scratch takes you up to *A*, the first tap takes you to the right to *D*, and the second tap takes you to the right to the letter *O*." Her eyes lit up. "It's sort of like Morse code. The way we use sounds to send messages on a telegraph. With dots and dashes."

"Yes, except Morse code only uses two sounds and we use three sounds. How do you know about Morse code?" asked Ripred.

"My dad showed me," said Lizzie. "Only he didn't have a tree; he had a chart with dashes and dots next to each letter."

"More like this?" asked Ripred, nodding to the floor.

For the first time Gregor noticed the chart carved into the floor. He stood up to get a better view of it.

A		H	/	O	/	V	\ \
B	\	I	/	P	\ \	W	//
C		J	\ \	Q	\	X	\
D	/	K	\	R	\ \ /	Y	/
E	\	L	\ /	S	/ \	Z	
F	\	M	/ \	T	/		
G		N	/	U	//		

"Yes, this is like the Morse code chart," said Lizzie. "So, it's just another way of showing the Tree of Transmission."

"Right again," said Ripred. "Some find it to be a helpful learning tool. Of course, the best way to learn it is by hearing it. Scratch-scratch-click. Tap-tap-scratch. Because that's how it's transmitted."

Gregor had been there during the Morse code lesson with his dad, too. It had been somewhat interesting but hadn't stuck much in his brain. Lizzie had been fascinated by it, though, and wanted him to learn it as well so that they could send each other messages. The only thing he could ever decipher was the SOS distress signal that they used on ships and stuff to call for help. Dot-dot-dot-dash-dash-dash-dot-dot-dot. SOS. It was sent as one string with no gaps to even indicate there were three separate letters. SOS. She'd really drilled that one into him. She had played it on the bedroom wall, tapped it out with her fork at dinner, and even used a flashlight to send it with quick

flashes for the dots and longer ones for the dashes. Finally Gregor had to cut her off. Lizzie would have had them practicing five hours a day. Like Gregor didn't have enough homework without her assigning him more.

"Well, if you already know how this code thing works, what's the problem?" said Gregor.

"This isn't a code, Gregor. This is just a way to send any message. Like if you picked up a phone and talked into it," said Lizzie. "And anyone could understand what you were saying."

"You've heard it before. Rat claws scratching, tapping, and clicking," said Ripred.

Gregor remembered waking up one night in a cave in the Firelands to such sounds. Ripred had told him to go back to sleep. "Like in the cave," he said.

"Like in the cave. Those messages weren't in code. The rats didn't believe there was any danger in sending them in plain English," said Ripred. "But now, with the war in full swing, everything is in code." The rat pulled one of the strips of white fabric covered in chicken scratch off the table and waved it about. "This code! The Code of Claw! The one in 'The Prophecy of Time'! And this is what we need Lizzie to help us break!"

Gregor finally understood. The clicks, scratches, and taps were not the code. They were as simple as knowing your ABC's. But the messages the rats were sending now made no sense, because they were written in code. An A might be a B or a Q or a V, depending on how the Code of Claw worked.

Lizzie took the strip of fabric and sat down on the ground with it, studying the letters. "Is it like a cryptogram? One letter stands for another letter?"

"Not exactly," said Heronian, settling down by Lizzie. "We would have broken a regular cryptogram in minutes. But there's something else involved."

"There is some trick to make it more complicated. Some sort of substitution," said Daedalus.

"Found it not, have we, found it not," said Min, creaking her way over.

"But the thing is, we haven't much time. Tick, tock, tick, tock," said Ripred, shaking his head in frustration. "Oh, now I'm hungry again." He went over and stuck a whole roast chicken in his mouth.

"Did you get the cookies I helped make?" asked Lizzie, without looking up from the code.

"No, I did not get the cookies you helped make," said Ripred, scowling at Gregor. "Where are my cookies?"

"In my backpack in the hospital probably. I brought them to the battle. Sorry, I just couldn't find the right moment to serve them," said Gregor. "You want me to get them now?"

"I do. I'd better come with you to make sure there are no more mishaps. And I'll make sure the note has gone to your father," said Ripred. He touched Lizzie lightly on the head with the tip of his tail. "Will you be all right here now?"

"What?" said Lizzie, pulling her attention from the letters. "Oh, I think so."

"Good. I'll be back soon," said Ripred.

Gregor stopped at the doorway to double-check that Lizzie wasn't going to become hysterical when they left, but she was discussing some letter sequence with the others. Even Reflex had ventured out to join them. It made a cozy picture, all of them together on the floor. Freakish, but cozy.

Ripred waited until they were out of earshot before he began. His voice — in fact, the whole conversation that followed — was strangely subdued. "Listen, don't fight me on this. Let her stay. We need her to break the code to save people you have come to love."

"I love her, too. She's my sister. And she's real smart but she's not strong," said Gregor. "Not like you have to be to survive down here."

"I know," sighed Ripred. "I know. But Solovet will know she's here by now and have already given orders to prevent her from leaving while the war is on. And after the war, what then?"

"Then it's not a problem. I can take her home myself and —" Gregor came to a standstill as he remembered "The Prophecy of Time."

When the warrior has been killed

He would not be around to take anyone anywhere. "I've got to get Lizzie home now, somehow. And Boots and my mom, too. While I still can," Gregor muttered more to himself than to Ripred.

"You can't. No one can. But if you let her stay now, without a fight, I swear I'll get all three of them home safely after the war," said Ripred.

"No," said Gregor angrily. "What kind of deal is that? If the war's over, there's no reason to keep them here, anyway!"

"Think about it, boy. If we win the war, Solovet will call the shots. Do you really believe she plans to let any of them return?" His voice had dropped to a whisper. "She has told me otherwise. If Solovet has Boots, she has the cockroaches on her side, and if Lizzie is who I think she is ... well, she'll be worth her weight in gold as well. No, your father will come to find them and your family will essentially be prisoners down here for the rest of their lives. Unless I help you."

This was a frightening dimension Gregor had never even considered: his whole family condemned to life down here. Once Ripred had said it, Gregor knew it was not only possible, it was likely. "How do I know I can trust you?" asked Gregor.

"I give you my word," said Ripred.

"As a rat?" asked Gregor bitterly.

"As a rager," said Ripred. "As one rager to another. I will get them home."

As Gregor was trying to decide what a rager's word was worth, if anything, the horns began to blow. Ripred cocked his head and listened to the pattern. "The rats have reached the walls to the north. The ones that surround the farmlands."

Gregor could be ordered out there at any moment. He might not come back. Then what?

"What do you say, Gregor the Overlander? Do we have a deal?" asked Ripred.

There was no choice but to trust him. "Yes," said Gregor.

"Good. Now go find yourself some body armor," said Ripred. "I'll see you on the field."

CHAPTER 11

Gregor's body felt weighed down by the conversation. Although he had admitted to himself while he was in the museum that he would die, he had been waging a psychological campaign against the idea ever since. Denying it, dodging it, immersing himself in the present to avoid thinking about the future or, more specifically, how he wasn't going to have much of one. There was no other way to keep functioning. But sometimes, like now, reality came right up and slapped him in the face. There was nothing to do but keep moving forward and make the moments count.

As he walked through the halls, Gregor could see his resolve reflected on many other faces. There was a war. He guessed the Regalians didn't need a prophecy to know there was a good chance they'd be dead at the end of it. And they had family and friends to worry about, too. Gregor felt a little less alone knowing that others were experiencing the same emotions he was. Less alone, but no better.

He was unsure of where he should get the body armor Ripred had mentioned, but there was a big supply room filled with nothing but weapons and stuff, so he thought that would be a good place to start. When he arrived, the armory was buzzing with people suiting up for battle. Even though it was crowded, an old Underlander woman with a tape measure was at his side in a moment.

"You have come for protection?" she asked. Gregor nodded. "I am called Miravet. I can assist you." And then she was whipping that tape measure around him so fast it was practically a blur. "You fight how? With only the sword? In the right hand?"

"That's right," said Gregor, wondering how many other options there were.

"What does your left hand do?" she asked.

"Nothing. Sometimes I tape a light here to help me see," said Gregor, indicating his forearm.

"That is all?" Miravet gave his forearm a slightly disapproving look, as if it wasn't holding up its end of the bargain somehow. Then she led him to a wall covered in breastplates hanging from hooks. "For the chest," she said, and took down a highly polished number made of silver metal and mother-of-pearl.

As Miravet was holding the breastplate up to him, a voice came from behind him. "No, Miravet, I want him entirely in black."

Gregor didn't have to turn to know Solovet was coming up behind him. He gritted his teeth at the prospect of seeing her again.

"Why is that?" asked Miravet with a frown. Gregor found himself liking her for not immediately jumping to do whatever Solovet suggested.

"To blend with his flier and give an overall impression of darkness," said Solovet.

"The gnawers will not be impressed by an impression of darkness," Miravet said, still stubbornly holding the breastplate she had chosen.

"No, but the humans will. It implies deadliness and strength and will give them confidence to follow him," said Solovet.

"As you wish," said Miravet. She returned her breastplate to the wall and chose another of black metal and some kind of shiny ebonylike shell. "This?"

"It should do nicely," said Solovet. She stood by silently as Miravet made Gregor change to a black shirt and pants. Then she dressed him in the breastplate and other bits and pieces of armor. None of it was particularly heavy, which was good because he didn't need anything slowing him down.

As he was being fitted for a helmet, Gregor caught sight of himself in a mirror, dressed from head to toe in black. "Great. I couldn't look more like the bad guy if I tried," he thought. And here he was going in to fight the Bane, whose coat was so white it almost hurt your eyes. If he were in a movie, Gregor would definitely be the one the audience was rooting against. On the other hand ... on the other hand ... there was something powerful about the blackness, and part of Gregor couldn't help thinking he looked pretty cool.

But Miravet shook her head as she examined him. "You only emphasize his youth by dressing him so. He has not the hardness of countenance to wear this."

Gregor was not sure what she meant. He thought countenance had something to do with your face.

"He will," said Solovet. "Come with me, Gregor." When they had left the armory she added, "My sister is an expert in armor but not in character." Her sister? Solovet. Miravet. The names sounded kind of the same, and it explained why Miravet was not afraid to stand up to Solovet.

"Speaking of sisters, I hear another of yours has joined us," said Solovet. "Remind me of her name?"

It was just the two of them, walking down a quiet empty hall. Gregor felt he could no longer refuse to answer her without making a really big deal of it. He didn't want to wind up back in the dungeon, especially now that he had to keep an eye on Lizzie, as well as Boots and his mother.

"Lizzie," he said.

"And you have no issues with her staying?" asked Solovet.

Sure he did. Plenty of issues. But he had made the deal with Ripred. "Not if she's the code-breaker," said Gregor gruffly.

"That remains to be seen. I myself am not convinced that it is not Boots who will be the key." They walked along in silence for a while. Then Solovet spoke up again. "Perhaps it was too harsh of me to put you in the dungeon. But you are part of our army now and, in essence, you disobeyed a direct order. In an army, one head must give direction to the rest of the body. If not, there is chaos. That is why discipline is so important. If we lose it, we lose everything."

Gregor considered this. He guessed you probably did need someone making a plan and other people who could be counted on to carry it out.

"Do you think yourself capable of following orders?" she asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not," thought Gregor. "It would depend on the circumstances." For instance, if Solovet had ordered him to secretly develop the plague as a weapon, he would never have done it. But he only said, "Seems like I'm always following Ripred's."

"Well, let us see if you can follow mine today," said Solovet.

When they reached the High Hall, Solovet's bond, Ajax, was waiting for them. Gregor knew him mostly by sight. He was a massive brute of a bat with fur the color of dried blood. Once Gregor had asked Ares what he thought of Ajax. "I do not care for him. Almost no one does. Of course, very few care for me, either." So Gregor tried to keep an open mind about Ajax.

Gregor and Solovet flew out of the palace, over the high wall that signaled the end of the city, and headed north over the farmlands. Half the people of Regalia seemed to be in the fields, working at a frantic pace. "It is our policy, when the gnawers are so close, to harvest or destroy all we can. We do not wish to leave them any food sources," said Solovet.

The farmlands ended at another wall. This one was not quite so high as the one that bordered the back of the city, but it was at least twelve feet thick, providing a sturdy base from which to launch the army. It was packed now with heavily armed humans mounted on bats. An area in the middle of the wall was relatively empty, apparently having been reserved for the commanders.

When Ajax landed in the command center, Gregor got a clear view of the cavern beyond the wall. He had flown over it several times before, but it had always been shrouded in darkness. However, the humans had been at work here, as they had in the Firelands, peppering the cavern walls with burning torches in preparation for the battle.

In the flickering light, Gregor could see that the fighting had not yet begun. Hundreds of rats had assembled on the ground outside of the wall. They weren't milling around in their usual fashion but lined up in rows. Except for the occasional twitch of a tail or ear, they were perfectly still. Overhead, humans on bats flew in a crisscrossing pattern. Solovet's arrival brought several in to report on the number of rats, their condition, and the generals who were leading them.

Ares soon arrived carrying Ripred on his back. The rat burst out laughing when he saw Gregor. "Oh, no. Who are you supposed to be?"

"I ordered his armor myself," said Solovet with a slight smile. "Do you not approve of it?"

"He looks like he fell off of a chessboard!" said Ripred, and Gregor could see some of the nearby soldiers trying not to laugh. "Do you like that getup?" he asked, circling Gregor.

The truth was, Gregor had kind of liked it until Ripred started making fun of it. "What do I care? I don't have to look at it," he said.

"No, but the rest of us do," said Ripred. Then the rat seemed to forget all about him and got caught up in some war council with Solovet.

"How's the airlift going?" Gregor asked Ares.

"Well enough. There are still many nibblers to bring in from the Firelands," said Ares. "But the ones left behind are stronger at least."

"You doing okay?" asked Gregor.

"A bit tired. And yourself?" said Ares.

"Oh, I'm great. Solovet slapped me in the dungeon for a few days. Then my sister Lizzie showed up and Ripred decided she's the code-breaker. And apparently I look like an idiot," said Gregor.

"You look well. The black suits you," said Ares.

"Whatever," said Gregor. "Luxa's better. I got to see her for about thirty seconds."

"I was not allowed to see Aurora and Nike. But the doctors in the hospital say they mend as well," said Ares.

"Man, I didn't even get a chance to check on Howard," said Gregor, suddenly feeling guilty that his concern for Luxa had blinded him to his other friends' conditions.

"He is much improved," said Ares.

They stared for a while at the ranks of rats. "So, why aren't we fighting?" asked Gregor. He was a little impatient to get started.

"Solovet is still assessing the rats to see how we should engage. There are two main types of battles in the Underland. The first is a surprise attack, in which case we counterattack immediately in self-defense. The second is a challenge. Both armies assemble and we meet on the field at an appointed time. This is a challenge," said Ares.

It reminded Gregor of those movies set hundreds of years ago, where two groups of soldiers would line up across a field from one another and then one side would charge. Today's arrangement did not really seem to be to either side's advantage. The humans had more than ample time to decide how to battle the rats, but they would have to leave the security of the walls to do so. The rats could arrange a battle and possibly weaken the humans' army without having to attack the walls, but they would make themselves vulnerable to do it. There was a plus and a minus for both sides. Maybe that was why they both agreed to this kind of warfare.

Still, it seemed as if the humans had a slight edge. "I don't know. Seems like it might be smarter just to sit here," said Gregor.

"We could. But then we must live with the knowledge that an army of rats, which is likely to build, sits on the edge of Regalia," said Ares.

Yeah, that wasn't a particularly calming thought.

Gregor noticed Solovet and Ripred were looking at him and consulting in low voices. Then Solovet crossed to him. "Gregor, Ares, we are going to position you in the second wave at the right fifth point. Ripred suggests this and, as I have never seen you fight, I must follow his recommendation."

Gregor realized this was true. Solovet never had seen him fight, with or without Ares. On his first trip to the Underland, he hadn't even had a sword. When he came back to supposedly assassinate the Bane, she had not gone

on the sea voyage. Although Solovet had been planning to join in the jungle expedition to find the cure for the plague, Hamnet had refused to act as their guide if she came. When Gregor had returned from the jungle, Solovet had been confined to quarters because of her role in starting the plague. No, she had never been around when he was in battle or even in training. Well, he could show her a thing or two now. Maybe if she realized what a good fighter he was she would back off a little.

He had no idea where she had placed him in the ranks, but "second wave at the right fifth point" seemed to mean something to Ares. When the command was given to assume their places, Ares flew directly to their assigned spot on the wall. They were in the second of three rows of soldiers mounted on their bats. Gregor was annoyed to find Marcus and Horatio positioned on either side of him. "Great," he thought. "She's sending me in with bodyguards." But even the annoyance couldn't override another emotion that was building up inside of him ... excitement. He was looking forward to the battle. Right now, his life was a depressing, confusing mess. At least when he fought he knew what he was doing and, for a while, he could forget about the rest of it.

A tense silence fell over the cavern. The air seemed to be quivering with anticipation. Then he heard Solovet quietly say, "Now."

The first wave of bats took off and the rats rose up to meet them. They had barely engaged in combat when Gregor felt Ares lifting off. There was no circling around and choosing targets this time. The bats flew in a tight formation and dove as one into the fray.

Fighting was now becoming second nature to Gregor. His rager side kicked in and he fought wherever Ares positioned him. They had less room to maneuver than they'd had in the Firelands. The ceiling was not as high and the rats were positioned in close, even ranks. This was not as big an issue for Gregor as it was for Ares. The bat's wings were so long that when he would dive, any number of rats might be in striking range. Even with his sword fully extended, Gregor did not have the reach to protect his entire wingspan. And at the moment, the rats seemed more determined to take out Ares than Gregor. In no time, Gregor had run through two rats that had been specifically targeting the bat's wings. But a third had managed to get a claw into the delicate skin near the tip and sliced a six-inch tear into it.

"You okay?" Gregor shouted to Ares.

"Yes, it can be stitched later," said Ares. "It does not much affect my flight."

"Good, let's go get the rat who did it," said Gregor.

Just as they were about to dive, an Underlander flew up and ordered them back to the wall. Gregor wanted to argue but Ares followed the command at once. He guessed this was probably a good thing, though, since he was supposed to be proving he could follow orders. Still, when they landed before Solovet, Ajax, and Ripred, Gregor couldn't help saying, "He's okay. It's just a cut."

"Dismount," said Solovet. "Signal Perdita and Mareth," she told a guard. Gregor slid off of Ares's back, somewhat confused. If she thought Ares was hurt, then the thing to do would be to send him directly to the hospital. She didn't need Mareth and Perdita to do that.

Perdita flew in from the battle, and Mareth appeared from somewhere down the wall. He was not actually fighting, now that his leg was gone, but Gregor assumed he was acting as some kind of general or something, since he'd been working so closely with Solovet in the war room.

Although Gregor did not expect a lot of praise from Solovet, her next words were a shock. "He is woefully unprepared for battle. This is not meant as criticism; I know your time with him has been very limited. But his left side is noticeably weak. Can we not double-arm him?"

"We can," said Mareth. "I do not believe two swords are the answer. He so favors his right hand."

"A dagger, then," said Solovet. "He must at least have it to block attacks. Perdita, you will attend to that."

"Yes, Solovet," said Perdita.

"Now, I dare not risk testing him alone on the ground. Has he a rager spin attack?" asked Solovet.

"Haven't seen it if he has," said Ripred. "He runs mainly on nerves and is still easily distracted —"

"I can spin!" objected Gregor. "When I fought the snakes in the jungle, that's how we got out of there!"

"Hmm," said Ripred. "And you were able to control it?"

"Yes. At least... well, at the end I was sort of dizzy," admitted Gregor. That had to be the understatement of the year. He had completely lost control, reeled into the jungle vines, and vomited. He had barely been able to climb onto Ares and it had taken quite a while for the dizziness to pass.

"Ripred?" said Solovet. "This sounds like your area."

"As if I don't have enough to do," said the rat.

"Your opinion of Ares," Solovet said to Ajax.

"Far too reckless with his wing space. Acts as if he is half his size.

Lucky that tear is his only injury," said Ajax sourly.

"That's not true!" said Gregor, jumping to his bat's defense. "You should have seen him in the Firelands."

"Plenty of space in the Firelands, but that isn't usually the case," said Ripred. "And don't be so touchy. We're just trying to keep the pair of you alive."

"What style of dagger shall I give him?" asked Perdita.

Solovet stared hard at Gregor for a moment. Then she pulled the dagger from her own belt and offered him the hilt. "Take this."

It was a thing of beauty, that dagger. Not just because the hand guard seemed to be almost entirely composed of polished red jewels but because of the strong, sleek blade. He could tell by the expressions on the others' faces that something unprecedented was happening.

"I can't take that. It's yours," said Gregor. But he wanted it. If he had to have a dagger, he wanted the one right in front of him.

"I rarely battle now. I would not have it grow rusty from disuse," said Solovet.

"Take it. Add a little color to your ensemble," said Ripred.

"Thanks." Gregor's fingers closed around the hilt and he could not help hitting the dagger blade into the blade of his sword. There was a satisfying ring of metal on metal. When he examined the blades he saw neither had been nicked. It was a first-class dagger, maybe even as strong as his sword. He couldn't help liking Solovet just a little for giving him this weapon. The feeling was short-lived.

"So, should we go back in now?" Gregor asked, tucking the dagger in his belt on his right hip to have easy access to it. He was dying to try it out.

"You two? No," said Solovet, as if the very idea was preposterous. "I am sending you both back to training."

CHAPTER 12

At first Gregor thought Solovet was joking. But she was not the sort of person who kidded him. If she said training, she meant training. He tried to control his temper, but he had left the battle only minutes ago. His rager side was still hot. And Solovet's order, obviously meant to humiliate him, stung. "That's crazy! You need me out there!" he burst out.

Solovet raised her eyebrows. "We have been fighting the gnawers for centuries. I think we will muddle through without a barely trained boy."

"Well, that's news to me," said Gregor. "You've been sending me on your most dangerous missions since I landed in this place."

"But not because I expected you to astonish us with your fighting," said Solovet.

"I can fight! Ask Ripred! He put me on the front line in the Firelands!" retorted Gregor.

"Well, someone had to keep an eye on you. I thought sandwiched between Perdita and me you might actually come out of the whole thing alive." Ripred shrugged. "But don't think it was an easy job."

"What? That is such a lie!" said Gregor. To suggest he had been on the front line for his own protection was outrageous. He yanked the helmet off his head and was about to throw it in Ripred's face when, out of the corner of his eye, he saw Perdita give an almost imperceptible shake to her head. Gregor didn't know why — maybe it was because he respected Perdita so much — but he managed to redirect the helmet so it ended up wedged under his arm. He noticed how closely everyone was watching him and knew he had to get himself under control. He took a deep breath and crammed the anger back down inside of him. "All right. When's the training session?"

"You will be sent for," said Solovet. Gregor gave a short nod and climbed on Ares's back. As the bat took off for the city, he heard her give a laugh and say, "Now who is alienating him?" To which Ripred chuckled, "He rises to the bait so easily."

Gregor knew then that at least part of pulling him from the battle and criticizing him had been a test. To see if he could keep his head and take orders. And he had all but failed.

"I should have just shut up," said Gregor. But they had been tearing down the one thing he thought he was any good at.

"It is hard, when they provoke you so," said Ares glumly. "It took me quite a while to learn to, as you say, just shut up."

They reported back to the hospital so that Ares could get his wing sewn up. While Gregor hadn't received any new wounds, he'd popped the stitches on the cut on his calf and the area was slightly inflamed. He was sent to soak in some bitter-smelling medicinal bath and stitched up again. They gave him fresh clothes and he put on his sword belt but left off the armor. Then he and Ares were both free to go.

"I must sleep," said Ares. "The many trips to the Firelands have worn me down."

So Gregor was left to himself. He knew he probably should check in on his sisters. Luxa might be awake, and he was still due at least four of his five-minute visit. But suddenly he felt overwhelmed by everything, and the only person he wanted to see was his mom.

The doctors gave him permission to enter her room but warned him not to upset her. His mom was lying down, slightly propped up by pillows, but her eyes were open. Gregor could tell just by looking at her that the fever had passed but that she was still very tired. He pulled a chair up next to her bed and took her hand.

"Hey, Mom," he said.

"Hey. I was wondering when I was going to see you again," she said.

"Sorry. Lot of stuff going on," said Gregor. He couldn't begin to tell her about it. Wouldn't know where to start. Besides, he was not supposed to upset her. So he just rested his head on the edge of her bed and didn't even try to explain. Her hand stroked his hair and the knot of bad feelings — anger, fear, humiliation, desperation — began to unravel. He wanted to stay there forever, letting her soothe him, pretending he was just a kid and his mom could make everything okay.

"I only hear bits and pieces. I know a war started. I see them carrying the wounded past my room sometimes. You going to tell me about it?" she asked.

Gregor shook his head without lifting it,

"And I can't make you anymore. I know that," said his mom. She gave the back of his neck a squeeze. "Just tell me this. The family doing okay?"

Grandma in the hospital. His dad in relapse. Mom right here, too weak to sit up. Lizzie in the code room. Boots caring for sick and orphaned mouse pups. Gregor marked for death. All of them trapped in one way or another.

He lifted his head. "Everybody's hanging in there, Mom," he said.

"Okay. Okay. I just have to trust you now, Gregor. To do what's right for us," she said. "I love you, baby."

"I love you, too," said Gregor. "Now you should get some sleep." He kissed her on the forehead and left before he broke down and told her everything.

And then he needed to talk to someone badly, someone he didn't have to pretend with. He went straight to Luxa's room and badgered the nearby doctors until they agreed to let him in for another short visit. They made him wash his hands in disinfectant, but he did not have to wear the mask this time. Luxa looked remarkably better, given that only about six hours had passed since he'd seen her last. She was still wheezing slightly as she breathed the misty air, but she was sitting up, leaning against a stack of pillows. There was a tray on her lap with broth, pudding, and what looked like mashed sweet potatoes. She was rearranging the potatoes into a tower with her fork, just like his sisters did at home. Her face brightened when she saw him and he could feel some of the heaviness of the day fall away.

"Mmm, what's for lunch? That looks really good," he said.

Luxa frowned at her tray. "It makes good buildings. My throat is still too sore to eat anything I actually like."

"Everybody likes pudding," said Gregor. He scooped up a spoonful and held it up to her mouth. She ate it, swallowing painfully.

"Ouch," she said. Her eyes widened as they lit on the dagger at his belt. "What did you do to get that? Kill Solovet?"

"No, she gave it to me," said Gregor.

"Oh, I hate you. She never even allows me to hold it," said Luxa. Gregor pulled the dagger from his belt and handed it to her. "Knock yourself out."

Luxa turned the dagger over in her hands, admiring it. "What are you, her favorite now?"

"Oh, yeah. She dressed me up in this totally stupid black armor and then threw me out of battle until I learn to fight," said Gregor.

"You are back in training? I would not take that too personally. She does it all the time," said Luxa.

"Really?" said Gregor.

"Of course. No one is ever good enough for her. She would give Ripred pointers if she thought he would not eat her," said Luxa.

That made Gregor feel a lot better. Maybe going back into training was no big deal. Besides, if he were fighting, he wouldn't be here with Luxa now. "How long do you have to stay in the hospital?"

"I should be out now," said Luxa grouchy. "They let Howard out. He is even treating people."

"You were sicker," said Gregor.

"I do not suppose it matters. They will not let me do anything, in or out. Now that I am back, Solovet will have me watched around the clock," said Luxa. "I am surprised you do not have bodyguards."

"I did. For a while," said Gregor.

"How did you get rid of them?" asked Luxa.

Gregor felt, himself blush. That wasn't a question he was ready to answer. He could hardly just blurt out, "Oh, because Solovet knows I'm in love with you now." So he did his best to come up with something else. "Uh ... I guess with my sisters and mom down here and all... You really should eat some more."

Luxa choked down a couple more spoonfuls of pudding. "Mareth says your sister Lizzie plans to stay, too."

"Yeah. Ripred thinks she's the code-breaker. They've got her in some room with a tree on the wall," said Gregor.

"The Tree of Transmission. Henry and I had to learn that. It was awful. Our teacher was a nibbler who was about a thousand years old. He'd make us send messages for hours." Luxa began to laugh. "Then one day Henry wrote, 'Help me, I am dying of boredom,' and the nibbler refused to teach us anymore."

Gregor laughed, too, but behind it was the discomfort he always felt whenever Henry was mentioned. Henry's closeness to Luxa and Ares. Henry's betrayal. Henry's body smashing apart on the rocks.

"That seems like a whole other lifetime," said Luxa quietly.

"Things change fast down here," said Gregor.

"Yes," said Luxa, twirling her fork in her potatoes. "Look at you and me."

That was it. That was his opening to tell her how he felt. Make it official. He might not get another chance. Who knew how much longer he'd even be alive? Another day? Another week? But Gregor couldn't seem to speak. In the silence that followed he could hear the precious seconds running out.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick. ...

Then someone was at the door. "Overlander, you are summoned to the arena for training," said a voice.

"Okay," said Gregor.

"Do not forget your dagger," said Luxa, handing him the weapon.

He could hear the disappointment in her voice as he stuck the dagger in his belt. She knew they only had a matter of hours, too. How could he face an army of rats and not have the courage to say something so simple and obvious?

Suddenly he felt his hand reaching into his pocket and pulling out the photo of them dancing. The one that had convinced Solovet he was crazy about Luxa. He placed it on her tray. "This is the reason I don't have bodyguards," he said, and promptly headed for the door, too afraid to see her reaction.

But as he rounded the corner, he caught her smile.

CHAPTER 13

An Underlander met Gregor at the end of the hallway with his armor. While he dressed, someone roused Ares and the two of them went to the arena.

"Have a good nap?" asked Gregor.

"All twenty minutes of it," said Ares tiredly.

"Maybe we'll get some time after training," said Gregor. He knew he should probably try to get some sleep, too. It was so hard to keep track of night and day down here, without the help of the sun.

When they flew into the arena, they found it was jam-packed with mice. It had become a kind of refugee camp for those who had survived the ordeal of being driven from their homes and sentenced to death by the Bane in the Firelands. A thick layer of straw had been strewn on the moss-covered ground. Stations for food, washing, and medical treatment were along the walls. There was an area set aside for the mice to relieve themselves. The place reeked of disinfectant but it was not enough to overcome the smells of waste and sickness and too many bodies in too small of a space.

While they were circling around, a bat flew in carrying a half dozen mouse pups and a small boy with a head of curly black hair. "Hey, there's Hazard. Let's go say hello," said Gregor.

The bat with Hazard landed in an area by the wall. Gregor had barely touched down in front of him when they were swarmed by a group of frantic, squeaking mice. Ares stretched out his wings, forming a protective barrier between the crowd and the bat carrying the mouse babies.

"What is it? What's going on?" Gregor shouted to Hazard.

"The babies. We are trying to reunite them with their parents," said Hazard. "But it is a difficult task."

Gregor bet it was. There were hundreds and hundreds of mouse pups in the nursery. Their parents could be anywhere — lying dead in Hades Hall, in the Regalian hospital, still waiting to be airlifted from the Firelands — but they might be here in this mob, desperate to know if their babies had survived.

"Hey, quiet! Quiet!" shouted Gregor, standing on Ares's back and holding his arms in the air. The mice settled down a little. "No, you've got to be really quiet. And back up before someone gets hurt!" By this time, a

few people had run over to help them. They made the mice move back to give the bats some breathing space. "How did you plan to do this, Hazard?"

"We are starting a list. I am to bring the babies, six at a time, and call out their names to see if their parents are here to take them," said Hazard.

"They're sending you to do this?" Gregor asked. They must've really been shorthanded if they had given the job to a seven-year-old.

"I am the best one. Because I can speak to the babies," said Hazard. But his lime-green eyes were full of doubt. "They can tell me their names. But you are louder than I, Gregor. Will you call them out?"

"Of course. Who's that?" Gregor asked, pointing to a small gray-and-white-speckled pup.

"This is Scalene," said Hazard, handing him the pup. "She is all alone." Gregor lifted the shivering pup up over his head. "Okay, this pup is named Scalene," he called. "Anybody know who she belongs to?"

There was an immediate cry. "To me! To me!" The crowd opened up as a mouse ran forward. "She is my baby!" At her mother's voice, Scalene began to wriggle to get out of Gregor's hands, whimpering and squeaking.

Ares dipped his nose to the ground and the pup ran straight down his neck and bolted between its mother's forelegs. She nuzzled it quickly, but then looked pleadingly at Hazard. "There are two more. Euclidian and Root. Do you have them?"

"Not on this flier. But there are hundreds in the nursery. They may well be there," said Hazard.

The mouse nodded and led her lone baby away.

Gregor helped pass out the rest of the pups. Two pairs of siblings were instantly claimed. When the final pup's name was called, no one answered,

"His name's Newton." Gregor held the squirming black mouse high above his head and tried to raise his voice so it filled the whole arena.

"Newton!" But there was still no reply.

"I believe he is from the jungle colony," said a voice. Gregor had a bad feeling about that. Luxa had told him the mice they had seen gassed to death at the volcano had been from the jungle colony.

"Any of us will take him," said a mouse near the front.

"I can only give him to his parents now," said Hazard. "And they may still be in the Firelands."

The mice did not protest. No one wanted to further complicate the situation.

"I'll take him back to the nursery and start bringing the others," said Hazard.

"Okay, listen up! Hazard's going to be bringing in more pups. But you have to leave this space open and not rush up when he lands. All right?" said Gregor. There was a general murmur of agreement from the crowd.

Two of the Underlanders volunteered to take over Gregor's job and assist Hazard when he returned. "They await you, Overlander. At the south tunnel," someone told him.

When Ares lifted into the air, Gregor could see that none of the mice had moved. They would wait there in agonized silence as long as there was any chance their children might show up. He felt that awful helplessness that had consumed him as he'd watched the mice dying in the pit. This was just an extension of it. And at that moment, Gregor knew exactly why he was going to kill the Bane.

"Let's go train," he said, now anxious for any advantage the dagger might be able to give him.

"Yes," said Ares. "Ajax had a point. I must learn to use my wings better."

When Gregor slid off of Ares's back next to Perdita, she began to launch into a spiel about how they had all been called out of battle for further training, but Gregor cut her off.

"No, you guys are right. It would be better if I had a dagger. So how do I use it?" he asked.

Perdita clapped him on the shoulder in approval and went right into his training. They concentrated mainly on defense positions, although she did show him a couple of basic attacks. "You would have to be almost in physical contact with the gnawer to kill it," said Perdita. Gregor could see that because the dagger blade was so much shorter than his sword, this would be true. He was rarely in such close proximity to the rats.

The lesson went well. It was much easier to fight with two weapons. He remembered how having the torch in his left hand in the jungle during his spin attack had probably made the difference between life and death.

"Good, Gregor. Excellent. Now let us try you out on your flier," said Perdita.

Ares had been overhead, working with Ajax on minimizing his wingspan on different moves. He must have done well, too, because Ajax grudgingly told Perdita, "At least he is able to take instruction."

Gregor could feel the difference in Ares's flight maneuvers. They were sharper, more abrupt. Perdita and Ajax ran them through a series of drills and then Ripred showed up and they got some real practice. They dove down at him pretending they were in actual battle. At first, Gregor held back, but Ripred kept snarling at him to fight. And while Gregor knew Ripred wouldn't try to kill them, the rat had no trouble leaving a scratch or small puncture wound anytime he got through their defenses. By the end of the lesson, Gregor and Ares were pretty bloody, and even Ripred had a couple of cuts where Gregor had tagged him.

"Better," said the rat as he waved them in. "But you have a tendency to forget that dagger's in your hand and compensate with the sword."

"Yeah, I could feel myself doing it," said Gregor.

"And Ares, when you're down and decide to open those wings, do it! Bam! You can break necks with those things if you use them," said Ripred.

"So I have been telling him," said Ajax.

"I will keep working on this," said Ares.

A messenger bat arrived with an order for Ares to join the next airlift team.

"He's pretty tired," said Gregor.

"So are we all," said the bat.

"I can do it," said Ares.

"What about training?" asked Gregor.

"He's done for now. Let's see your spin," said Ripred.

After Ares took off, Gregor tried to show Ripred his spin attack. It was hard to do without the real threat of death before him. His feet felt awkward and he got dizzy almost immediately. "I was better in the jungle," he told Ripred.

"Well, you stink now," said the rat. "Let's start with the dizziness. You've got to learn how to spot."

Ripred showed him how to pick a spot somewhere and find it with his eyes each time he turned. "I do it with sound, by echolocation but, of course, that's out."

"Oh. Yeah. Maybe not," said Gregor.

"Can I assume by that smug look on your face that you've finally had a breakthrough?" asked Ripred.

"Kind of. In the dungeon," said Gregor. "I mean, something happened."

"I'll take him from here," Ripred told Perdita.

Before he knew it, Gregor was under the palace in their old practice space, fighting off Ripred's attacks in complete darkness. Except it wasn't darkness anymore, because he could do that thing, that echolocation thing, and somehow "see" things around him. If he clicked or coughed or even spoke in a certain direction, he could register detailed shapes and heat and movement.

"We should have thrown you into the dungeon months ago," said Ripred.

"It's weird. It's like having a whole new sense," said Gregor.

"Yes. Let's try that spin attack now. Pick a distinctive spot on the wall and keep coming back to it," the rat instructed. "Wait, use me to start." Gregor tried. He could find Ripred with echolocation on the first few spins but then he started to get confused and dizzy. It was too many new things — spinning and spotting and seeing with his ears — for his brain to compute all at once. Finally he tripped and his feet went out from under him.

"All right, all right. That's enough for today," said Ripred.

"No, it's not. I haven't got it," said Gregor.

"We'll get it next time," Ripred said.

"There might not be a next time!" said Gregor. "Or next time might be in a cave full of rats!"

"You're too tired. It's counterproductive," said Ripred. Gregor began to object but the rat cut him off. "Gregor! You've made excellent progress today. But it's time to stop!"

What a reversal this was from their old lessons, when it was Gregor who was always trying to cut out and Ripred driving him on. "Will you keep working with me?"

"After you've eaten and slept. Let's go check up on Lizzie. You can rest in her room there," said Ripred.

"Yeah, let's see if they've cracked that code yet," said Gregor. He was starting to get concerned about how long it was taking. "So, we'll really lose the war if they don't break it?"

"If Sandwich is to be believed," said Ripred, "And even if the prophecy were not a factor, I would say yes. We need that intelligence rather badly. Come on."

You could sense the frustration as soon as you entered the code room. The floor was ankle deep in those long white strips of fabric marked with

encrypted messages. The team was gathered around Lizzie as she hurriedly wrote down some letters on a strip with a bright pink marker that must have been in her backpack. "So then it would be *T ... H ... E ... Q ...*oh, no ... another *H*. That's not it."

The team gave a collective huff of disappointment.

"So, how are we doing? Any luck with the Prime Factorial Ciphers?" asked Ripred.

"No luck," said Daedalus. "Heronian thought to try a two-letter inversion, but that just failed as well."

"It is so maddening. There must be some key. Some simple key. Otherwise, the majority of gnawers could not keep it in their heads," said Heronian. "Something they could not forget."

"How's our new player doing?" asked Ripred, curling his tail around Lizzie's shoulders. For the first time, the mood lightened. "Only once, must you show her, only once," said Min approvingly.

"She thinks in unusual ways," said Daedalus, dipping his nose down to touch Lizzie on the head.

"And she does not sing," added Reflex, which made them all laugh.

But despite the praise, Lizzie did not look happy. "I haven't been much help really," said Lizzie. "I haven't broken the code or helped anyone else do it, like the prophecy I read says."

"You read the prophecy?" asked Gregor. He couldn't believe Lizzie was accepting the news of his death so calmly.

"I had Nerissa make her a copy," said Ripred.

Lizzie handed it to Gregor. "Doesn't she have pretty writing?" she said.

Gregor looked at the prophecy. The lines about his death had been rewritten to read:

When the monster's blood is spilled And the warrior's role fulfilled

"Very pretty," said Gregor, glad they knew enough to try to protect her. A fresh cart of food was being rolled into the room. "Okay, you'd better break before you're all useless. Let's clear this mess away. We'll eat. And for the next half hour no one is to utter the words, 'What if we tried ...?'" said Ripred.

Gregor and Lizzie gathered up the lengths of white fabric and piled them into the rat room according to Ripred's instructions so that he could make a more comfortable nest than the one the humans had provided. Food was spread out on the floor, both raw and cooked, and everyone sat down to

eat. Ripred, who seemed determined to keep the team's mind off of the code for a while, told funny stories and even had Min laughing, Gregor, who had never seen Ripred try to be likable and charming, was surprised to see he could be both. If you didn't know better, you would think Ripred had a genuine fondness for this oddball crew. But Gregor knew his main objective was getting the code broken. And if the rat thought a few laughs would move him closer to that end, he'd be funny. He'd tell jokes. He'd slip on a banana peel if one were handy.

Gregor ate a huge grilled fish, seven slices of buttered bread, some greens, and most of a cake. Then five minutes later he felt hungry again and finished the cake with a big mug of milk. It had been weeks since he'd had regular meals and he needed to catch up. He looked over at Lizzie, who was picking at some stew. "Eat up, Liz, it's good."

"I know. It is. I am," she said, and took a small spoonful.

"Now I told you everything's arranged with your father, right? He's got round-the-clock nurses. He'll be fine," said Ripred.

"I know. I was just... I was thinking about my mom. I know it would upset her to know I was here, but I haven't seen her in months," said Lizzie. Her eyes were bright with tears. "Maybe I could just look at her when she's sleeping."

"That would do no harm," said Heronian.

"And it would ease the child's mind," said Daedalus.

Gregor wasn't so sure about that. His mom's condition might only worry Lizzie more. And if his mom woke up and saw her third kid down here, she'd probably become hysterical, wear herself out, and get even sicker. Still, Lizzie hadn't seen her in ages.

"Just for a minute," said Lizzie.

"Your call," Ripred said to Gregor.

"Thanks," said Gregor. The rat spent ninety-nine point nine percent of the time bossing him around. But here, when he actually could use a little advice, hey, it was suddenly all up to Gregor. "Okay, Liz, I'll walk you down, and if she's asleep, you can go in. If you eat your stew."

Lizzie wolfed down the stew while Gregor prepared himself for what lay ahead. His mom had been healthy and strong when she'd left the Underland. Now she was bedridden, way too thin, and had scars from the plague. He was pretty sure he could count on another panic attack from his sister.

The palace was a new and, therefore, potentially frightening place to Lizzie. She held tightly to Gregor's hand as he guided her down the many flights of stairs to the hospital level. It didn't help that things were so grim now, the people so stressed and sad, the air so heavy with medicines and disinfectants and the smoke from the extra torches that burned everywhere these days.

Gregor had Lizzie wait at the end of the hospital corridor that led to his mom's room. He was half hoping she was awake and he could just say a quick hello and take Lizzie back upstairs. Maybe he could even try and wake her, although that didn't seem quite fair. But when he reached his mom's room, he encountered an entirely different problem. Eight badly wounded mice lay on mats on the floor and his mom was nowhere to be seen.

"They must have moved her to a smaller room," was his first thought, and then it hit him. "Oh, no," he said. "I want to see a doctor!" he shouted, running into the hall. "I need a doctor here!"

He shot down the corridor past Lizzie, ignoring her questions, and grabbed the first doctor he met by the shoulders. She was a small woman with dark rings of fatigue under her eyes. "Where is she? Where's my mother?"

"Oh, the Overlander!" said the woman.

Gregor could see alarm in her eyes. Then he realized he had pinned her up against the wall. But he didn't let go. "*Where is she?*"

"Gregor! Gregor, release her! She had no hand in it!" Howard appeared from somewhere and pulled him off of the doctor.

"In what?" demanded Gregor.

"Solovet sent a team of guards in without warning. They had orders to take your mother to the Fount," said Howard. "There was nothing we could do."

"But why? Why? I'm staying. She knows I'm staying!" said Gregor.

"It can only be further insurance," said Howard. "You are but a short flight from your home."

A short flight? A million miles was more like it. Across the universe to the end of time and back again. Gregor didn't feel he could possibly be any farther from his home.

"I'm going after her," said Gregor. "I'm getting Ares and I'm — man!" He just remembered Ares had been sent on the airlift. "Where can I get

another bat?"

"You cannot. You must know that," said Howard. "Gregor, the Fount may be safer for her at any rate. It is not under attack, the hospital not so crowded." Lizzie was tugging at his hand. "What did they do with her? Where is she?"

Gregor pulled her in for a hug. "It's okay. It's okay," he said, forcing himself to be calm for her sake. "They just moved her to another hospital."

"Up to the Fount. That is my home.... Is this Lizzie?" asked Howard.

"I was — going to — see her," said Lizzie.

"Here comes that panic attack," thought Gregor.

"My mother lives at the Fount. She works in the hospital, as I do. I am sure she will take very good care of her," said Howard.

"I'm going to go talk to Solovet," said Gregor. "Where is she?"

"I believe she is overseeing the battlefield," said Howard.

"You go back to the code room, okay, Liz?" said Gregor.

"I don't — know the way!" said Lizzie.

"I could take you," said Howard gently. He was the oldest of five kids. Gregor remembered how great he was with Boots and Hazard.

"Please. Take her back. And I'll go see about Mom," said Gregor.

Getting to the battlefield was no easy matter. Even finding a way out of the palace took some doing. Usually he came and went on a bat. The lowest doors and windows were two hundred feet in the air. The guards at the platform that lowered to the ground flatly refused to give him a ride. Finally he found an unsuspecting young bat in High Hall who agreed to carry him to the arena for "training." Going to the arena would at least get Gregor outside of the palace, but it was in the opposite direction he needed to go. So, once the bat had flown off, he ran back across the city. The streets were congested with wagons pulling food and supplies to the palace. He dodged people and questions and kept moving past the palace until he reached the northernmost part of the wall that surrounded the city.

He was in luck. A door had been opened to allow the farmers to bring in the harvested crops. At least he did not have to find some way over the wall. But he knew the guards would recognize him — as an Overlander and, therefore, as the warrior — and they'd have strict orders to keep him in the city. Rather than risk being turned back and reported, he stowed away behind some baskets in a wagon heading back out to the fields. This would at least get him partway to the battlefield.

As the wagon rolled away from the city, he worked out what he would say to Solovet. He would tell her, in no uncertain terms, that either she would bring his mother back or he would not fight for her. Period. He knew he could end up in the dungeon. But eventually she would need him to fight the Bane. And she'd want him better trained and willing to follow orders. Wouldn't she? Or would she just see the whole thing as another challenge to her authority and make an example of him? Maybe he'd get better results if he approached it from another angle and told her Lizzie couldn't work without her mom nearby.

The wagon came to a stop several miles from the city. The fields were well lit with a system of gaslights, so he still had to take care not to be seen. Gregor slipped out the back and found himself waist deep in some kind of wheatlike plants. He ducked down and continued to move through the field until it simply ran out. The Underlanders were harvesting their way toward the city. He had reached the end of the crops and nothing but stubble lay between him and the wall from which the war was being waged. He decided to run for it. Who was going to stop him out here, anyway? A couple of farmers?

Gregor did hear some shouts as he sprinted across the barren fields, but no one was actively pursuing him. He guessed they figured he'd be stopped by the wall and, since he didn't have a flier, pretty much stuck there. That was okay. If he made it to the wall he'd make it to Solovet. He did see a bat fly over him, probably to report his presence, and for a moment he was distracted watching it, wondering if guards would be sent to carry him back.

That's when he tripped. He thought he had just caught his foot on some stubble, but when his hands hit the ground he could see the thin layer of earth cracking beneath him and the rock floor giving way under that. "It's another earthquake!" he thought.

But as the three-foot claw broke through the field and slammed within inches of his arm, he knew this was no earthquake.

CHAPTER 14

Gregor jerked his arm back and instinctively rolled away from the claw. He was on his back, about to spring up, when the earth at his feet burst open and a massive paw shot into the air. He yanked his legs in and scuttled backward like a crab, as the paw, with its five ivory-white claws, descended, leaving a deep furrow in the ground.

For a second, it crossed Gregor's mind that the thing was attached to the Bane. That the white rat had grown so disproportionately large that it now had these deadly, shovel-like paws. But this was no rat paw. Even the Bane couldn't grow claws a yard long. So what was it?

As Gregor twisted over onto his feet, hoping to make a run for it, the area before him erupted in a fountain of dirt. He caught just a glimpse of a bizarre, pink flower about the size of a manhole cover before it was on his face. "It's one of those killer plants! Like in the jungle!" he thought. The fleshy tentacles brushing over his lips and eyes made his skin crawl. "Eugh!" he cried as he jumped up and stumbled back. His hands gripped the hilts of his weapons, but he stopped just before he drew them. He was not under attack.

For the first time he got a good look at the creatures coming out of the ground. They definitely weren't plants. Or rats, either, although he was pretty sure they came from the rodent family. They had large bodies covered with dark, bristly fur and long, powerful tails. Each had four paws equipped with five killer claws. The back paws were noticeably smaller and weaker looking than the front ones, though. Coming out of the place where one would expect a nose was a large rose-colored blossom rimmed with waving tentacles.

Strange as they were, the animals seemed somehow familiar. But why? And then Gregor remembered.

It had been a warm summer day when he was about seven. His family was down at the family farm in Virginia. Gregor's dad had been teaching him how to play Ping-Pong in the basement. He'd been chasing down a ball that had landed under an old armchair, and when he'd stood up, there it was. Trapped in the window well where it must have fallen. Unhappily crawling along the gravel. A star-nosed mole. Of course you could measure its weight in ounces instead of hundreds of pounds, but otherwise it was

remarkably like the creatures surrounding Gregor now. He had loved the mole, so they had watched it for a while. His dad had explained how it usually stayed underground, how those front feet were amazing at digging and, even though it couldn't see well, that bizarre nose was so sensitive to touch it could basically feel what something was. They had finally gotten a shovel from the shed, gently scooped it out, and set it free. But Gregor had been left with a warm feeling about the funny little creature.

"Wow, check it out," said Gregor, and gave a laugh. "I think I met a friend of yours back home."

But what were moles doing in the Underland? No one had ever mentioned them to him before. Surely he would have heard of them when the plague was running rampant because they were mammals — they would have been affected along with the rest of the warmbloods. Could it be that no one knew they existed down here? That they'd been living far deeper in the earth than the rest of the Underlanders and had only just surfaced? He wanted to communicate with them, but they just seemed to make a quiet wheezing sound. Did they know English?

Four moles had tunneled out into the field by this point. They were sort of snuffling around him, touching his sneakers and his body with their tentacles. They seemed to be trying to figure him out. Had they ever even met a human? Certainly not an Overlander. That was a big distinction down here. Everybody he met knew he was not from Regalia. There was his skin for one thing, and his smell for another.

Gregor opened his hands and held them out to the moles. As their noses gently caressed him he felt a stab of concern. It didn't matter if they were harmless or if they had dug into this field by accident. They were tunneling in behind the humans' line of defense. If Solovet knew they were here, she'd probably treat them harshly. Gregor didn't like to think how harshly. He knew he had to do something fast.

"Hey!" he said. "Hey, you moles! You've got to get out of here!" He began to gesture to the tunnel openings. "Go on now! Shoo! Go on back to wherever you came from!"

Gregor had the moles' attention now. They had stopped nosing around him and had their heads directed toward him. But none of them were leaving. Gregor spoke more urgently. "Listen, man, you got to go. You understand what I'm saying? There's a war on. They won't want you here."

He attempted to push the nearest one toward a hole. It was like trying to move a bus.

While they didn't leave, the moles were beginning to stir in an agitated fashion. Gregor had the feeling that they did understand at least part of what he was saying.

A scout on a bat flew overhead close enough for Gregor to see the look of shock on her face. The bat made a beeline for the wall where Solovet was overseeing the battle. Gregor knew it was just a matter of minutes before soldiers would be diving down at these poor animals.

"Get out!" he shouted at the moles. "Get out before you get hurt! They don't want you here! This land belongs to the humans! The humans!"

Those last words were barely out of his mouth when the moles went nuts. The wheezing sounds they were making became loud and angry and they began to snarl at him.

"What? What did I say?" said Gregor, whipping out his blades. He did not want to fight with the moles — he had been trying to protect them! — but it didn't look like he was going to have any choice.

Vikus's words from the prophecy room ran through his head. "Remember that even in war there is a time for restraint. A time to hold back your sword." This seemed to be one of those times. Gregor didn't know what had caused the moles to attack, but he was sure there was some kind of misunderstanding. He didn't want to kill them. He just wanted them to leave. He made every effort to keep them at bay without wounding them.

The moles had transformed from mild and confused creatures into rabid beasts. They could move a lot faster than Gregor would have guessed. Immediately he was encircled and had to fend off swipes from those fearsome claws from four sides. There was nothing to do but start spinning. He tried to remember about using the echolocation to spot, but it was still too new to depend on. He would have to count on his eyes. So he chose a wagon in the distance, burned its image into his brain, and tried to lock on it for a second each time he rotated around. It was hard, though, because his eyes had plenty of other stuff to pay attention to.

Four moles times ten front claws equaled the equivalent of forty blades coming at him. "These things need their nails trimmed," he thought. But he quickly learned that wasn't going to happen. Whenever he hit one of the claws with the full power of his sword, he met with solid resistance. There was a clang, almost of metal on metal. He could block their attacks, but he

could not cut through the claws. "What are those made of?" he actually said aloud. Then he remembered that to reach the field the moles had had to dig through solid rock. Maybe a lot of it. Their claws must be made of very hard material. After that he just concentrated on blocking and hoped that his sword would hold up.

He spun for another minute before he realized this would not be enough. He couldn't just stay on the defensive; they would wear him out fast and then one of them would slice him in half. On the next round, he managed to clip a few tentacles off one of those pink noses. The mole gave such a wail of pain that Gregor almost stopped to make sure it was all right. That's when a claw caught his left side, ripping open his shirt and cutting through his sword belt. It dropped around his feet and he lost a step kicking it free. Another claw made contact, leaving a deep gash on his left hip. Boy, Solovet had been right about his left side being vulnerable! And the moles had sensed it right away. The pain gave him an extra rush of adrenaline and he forgot about spotting, forgot about the moves Perdita had taught him with the dagger, forgot that he had actually liked the moles, forgot about everything except staying alive.

The pink flowers! The waving tentacles! Those were his targets now. Then the occasional small shiny black eye or soft underside of a lifted paw as he whirled around. For a guy who couldn't dance much, he was pretty amazing. His feet were moving in some intricate pattern of steps that he was sure he could never replicate in a calmer moment. He could smell the blood, the moles', his own, before he saw it. But then it began to fill the air, splattering his face, and somewhere in his brain he knew he wasn't fighting alone anymore. Soldiers on bats had descended, driving their blades into the moles' backs and faces, killing them. Gregor slowed to a shaky standstill in time to see the last one beheaded with a single blow from Solovet's sword. Then she was shouting orders in a voice so furious he could not make sense of what she was saying. He caught words like Overlander...hospital...breach...diggers.

Diggers. Diggers!

Gregor was dizzy. Sick. Someone hiked him up onto a bat and he cried out. The wound on his left hip was excruciating. In minutes he was back in the hospital, stretched out on an operating table. A bitter taste filled his mouth. Then nothing.

The pain in his hip woke him later. It was not so sharp now, more of a hot throbbing. He opened his eyes groggily. Before they had operated, they must have drugged him with that fast-acting stuff Howard said they reserved for emergency surgery. Vikus's face floated into focus beside his bed. Gregor felt better just knowing the old man was back in Regalia. He was the only one who might be able to shield him from Solovet. Keep him out of the dungeon, anyway.

"Who?" was all Gregor could get out. But Vikus understood him.

"They are known as diggers. We had thought them all to be long dead," said Vikus. "But some must have remained in the Underland, living in secrecy. Those four in the field cannot be the entire population. Others are out there. And they have allied themselves with the Bane."

"Why?" asked Gregor.

"This land, the land upon which Regalia is built, belonged to them many years ago," said Vikus wearily. "When Sandwich arrived, he wanted it. The diggers would not leave. So he began a war."

"He won," said Gregor. Even in his foggy state, he could feel the injustice of it all. It was a nice chunk of real estate, Regalia. Rivers. Springs. Relatively easy to defend. How long had it been the diggers' home before Sandwich had descended from the Overland and laid claim to it?

"He won. First there was battle, and when that threatened to fail, he poisoned the diggers' water supply. This was not a tactic they had any knowledge of. Only a few were thought to have escaped, none to have survived," said Vikus.

"Killers. You," said Gregor. That was the name Hazard had said the other creatures in the Underland used for the humans, but not to their faces. "That's why."

"Yes, that is why we are known as killers," Vikus said. "Why so many still hate and fear us. Why the diggers still want us dead."

"Didn't attack me," Gregor said. "Not at first." Not until he'd said they were on the humans' land.

"They must have realized you are not one of us," said Vikus. "At least, they gave you the benefit of the doubt."

Gregor closed his eyes and let the information swim around inside him. So Sandwich, the founder of Regalia, the eerily accurate visionary who had created this new world far below the surface of the earth, was first and foremost a butcher. And yet, they all still struggled to understand those

fancy words he had carved in the prophecy room. How they lived and died by them. The prophecies were held in such reverence that Gregor had never even thought to question whether their author had been a good or bad person. But now he knew. He'd been risking everything under the direction of a man who had set out to slaughter an entire species to get his hands on a good piece of property. And Gregor carried his sword.

"Not good," Gregor said.

"It is horrendous. It is a shame that we have never lived down," said Vikus.

"What now?" asked Gregor.

"Now we pay for it," said Vikus. "For it is only a matter of time before the remaining diggers will tunnel into the palace. And then the Bane will follow."

CHAPTER 15

Gregor knew he should rally at the words. Despite his wound, he should struggle to pull himself together, prepare to fight. At this very moment, the moles could be tunneling into the arena where the mouse refugees were recovering, or the nursery, or the very hospital room in which he lay. Behind them would come an army of rats to kill everyone inside the palace. He must be ready. So why wasn't he even trying to move?

He could blame the drug or the wound or sheer exhaustion, but an entirely new obstacle immobilized Gregor. Ever since he had been in the Underland, he had fought with the knowledge that he had been in the right. To keep the ants from destroying the plague cure, to stop the snakes in the jungle from killing himself and his friends, to free the mice from the rats. But he didn't feel right about what had just happened with the moles. Okay, a few hours ago he hadn't known who they were or what had happened to them. When he'd begun his spin attack, it was in self-defense. But now they were all dead. And if Vikus's story was accurate, the moles were the ones who had been in the right. Regalia was their land. The humans were invaders who had not even won in a fair fight. To make matters worse, the moles hadn't attacked Gregor at first. They had given him a chance to at least say where he stood. And he had stood with the humans. It was a terrible feeling, to be on the wrong side of what was right. Not with the rats — he still felt that after what he had witnessed in the Firelands he was right to try to protect the mice — but with the moles.... Of course, who knew what stories the rats might be able to produce to justify their own vicious behavior? The rats and the humans had been fighting so long; the list of atrocities on both sides was appalling. Gregor had felt above that somehow, until he had killed the moles.

When a nurse came in with pain medicine, Gregor couldn't swallow it fast enough. It was the ache in his heart that he most wanted to block out. But the oblivion provided by the drugs could last only so long. The next time he awoke, the floor of his room was covered with bandaged humans and bats on pallets. Even with his unique status as the warrior, Gregor was encouraged to move elsewhere in the palace if he could manage it. He was glad to get out of the hospital, where the moaning and blood were more than he could presently handle. Besides, he wanted to get back to the code

room to see if they'd made any progress. He could tell by the number of wounded that things had been heating up. If they didn't break that code soon, they were all going to end up dead.

Using the walls for support, Gregor made his way down the halls toward the code room. Lizzie would certainly be there and, hopefully, Boots as well. He was grateful now that his mother had been moved to the Fount. She was just one less family member he needed to get out of Regalia.

His progress was slow. Every niche of the palace seemed packed with people. Not all of them were wounded soldiers. Whole families were camped out wherever they could find a spot. By bits of conversation he heard as he limped along, he found out that the rats had fought their way into the fields through the tunnels the diggers made. They were at the very walls of the city now. The people who lived in Regalia had all been ordered into the palace for their own protection. The Bane was even closer than Gregor had thought.

When he entered the code room, he found a small crowd eating a meal on the floor. Lizzie and Boots ran up and threw their arms around him.

"Hi, you! Hi, you, you, you!" said Boots. There was an apprehensive quality he had never heard before in her voice.

"You're staying, right? You're staying here now?" asked Lizzie, gripping his wrist tightly as if she was afraid he'd vanish on the spot.

"Sure, if you guys have got room for one more," said Gregor.

Then Luxa appeared in the arch to the rat room. She looked much better. Her skin had lost that hot red tone, and while she coughed occasionally, she seemed to breathe normally. Her violet eyes were tired but clear.

It was the first time he had seen her since he'd given her the picture. He'd thought he would feel uncomfortable, but all he felt was glad to be near her.

"You living here, too?" Gregor asked.

"I gave over my quarters to the injured. Ripred has been so kind as to offer Hazard and me the use of the rat room," Luxa said with a wry smile.

Aurora and Nike had moved into the code room as well and were sharing the bat quarters with Daedalus. And Temp was there, ever watchful of Boots.

"We are all here with the understanding that we must stay silently in our rooms or leave when the code team is working," said Luxa. "Ripred has made that very clear. But now we dine. Are you hungry?"

Gregor was. He sat down on the floor with the others and ate about a gallon of beef stew. Lately, he'd felt like some kind of predator, like a lion or something, that gorged itself and then didn't eat for a few days. The war had not been conducive to the three-meals-a-day schedule he'd been raised on.

Ares straggled in at some point. Gregor's hand locked on his bat's claw in their bond gesture, but they exchanged only a few words. Ares bolted down a couple of fish and went directly to sleep in the bat room.

Then Ripred came in and ordered everyone to bed for six hours of rest. The rat paid little attention to Gregor except to say, "We may need you on the field soon."

Luxa rose and reached down to help him to his feet. But once he was up, he didn't release her hands. In fact, he held on tighter.

"To bed!" said Ripred, bumping him in his sore hip with his nose.

"We will talk tomorrow," Luxa said.

The human room was spacious enough for two decent-sized beds. It also had a closet with a toilet and a basin with a faucet that provided cool water. Gregor found himself trying to approximate the bedtime routine they had at home. He and his sisters brushed their teeth, although they had to use their fingers. He made sure Boots peed one more time so she wouldn't wet the bed. Then he tucked his sisters in together.

"Tell a story about me," said Boots. She loved to hear about herself. He had a pretty big repertoire of Boots stories worked up. But he couldn't bring himself to tell some happy tale about Boots on the carousel, Boots at Halloween, Boots and the birthday cake. Everything was so awful. Reliving good memories required an emotional strength he lacked right now. What if he started crying or something? He'd scare her to death.

"Not tonight, Boots," said Gregor. "Tonight everyone has to go straight to sleep." He kissed them both on the foreheads.

"I'm glad you're here," Lizzie whispered.

"Me, too," said Gregor. He climbed into the second bed and shifted around to find the least uncomfortable position for his hip. It hurt, though. And he had eaten too much. And he was more worried than sleepy. He lay there for more than an hour before the sound of his sisters' breathing lulled him into a sort of doze.

"Gregor. Gregor," he heard his mom's voice calling his name, and sat straight up before he remembered his hip. His hand pressed on the wound,

as if that would stop the throbbing, and he looked around. No, of course his mom wasn't here. And even if she were, her voice wouldn't sound like it had in his dream. Calm, and in control, and like a mother. Oh, how wonderful it would be to have a parent who was in charge again, who could protect him, who could tell him what to do. He knew his parents loved him and were doing their best. But the closest thing his family had to a parent at the moment was Gregor. He glanced over to check on his sisters and saw that Lizzie's half of the bed was empty. Now where could she be at this hour? Probably working on that code. Gregor was just about to go find her and make her get some sleep when he heard a voice.

"Better now?" It was Ripred.

Gregor had shut the curtains to the human room at bedtime but left about an inch open so the torchlight from the main room could shine in. He didn't want his sisters waking up in total darkness. Now he shifted around on his bed until he was able to see Ripred through the crack. The rat was curled up on his side on the floor. Huddled in the curve of his body was Lizzie.

"Yes. I feel better next to you. You're so warm," said his sister.

"Slow, deep breaths," said Ripred, and Gregor knew Lizzie must have been having another panic attack. But why hadn't she come to him? Why had she gone to Ripred? "Want to try a few more math problems?" the rat asked.

"No," said Lizzie. "Just want to sit here." . Gregor didn't know what was stranger: to see Lizzie, who jumped at her own shadow, snuggled up against a giant rat, or to see the untouchable Ripred, who seemed to loathe almost everyone, who always slept alone even when other rats were available, comforting his little sister.

"How did she die? The one who was like me?" Lizzie asked. What was she talking about now? How did who die? When had Ripred known someone like Lizzie before?

"Silksharp. At the Garden of Hesperides," said Ripred.

"I know about that. Gregor told me. The dike broke and there was a big flood. So she drowned?" asked Lizzie.

"I tried to get there." Ripred shook his head. "Too late."

"And your wife? And the other pups?" asked Lizzie.

"Lost them all. All gone. No chance to even say good-bye." There was a long pause, then the rat continued. "I went off alone for months. I wanted to

die. I tried to. But it takes a lot to kill me."

Gregor's fingers dug into his blanket as he tried to incorporate what he had just heard into his idea of Ripred. Wife? Ripred had had a mate. Pups? He had been someone's dad. One of his pups, Silksharp, had been like Lizzie. And he had lost all of them when Hamnet had broken that dike. But Hamnet had been one of the few people who Ripred didn't loathe. When he had shown up in the jungle, why hadn't Ripred ripped his throat out? Because he knew Hamnet had not intended to break the dike? Because he had seen him trying to save the victims from the flood? Or did he simply think Hamnet had suffered enough?

"So you came back," said Lizzie.

"I couldn't stand it. The thought that they had died and nothing was to come of it," said Ripred.

Through the curtain, Gregor could see that Ripred's head had sunk down onto his front paws. His eyes were closed. Lizzie's hand reached up and she stroked his ears. "And that's when?" she said softly.

"Yes. That's when I decided it all had to change," Ripred whispered.

Lizzie wrapped her arms around Ripred's neck and pressed her head against his. In a few minutes, they had both fallen asleep.

CHAPTER 16

Too much. Too much to deal with. Too many things to make sense of. When Gregor arose the next morning, his mind was in such a fog he couldn't even decide what to have for breakfast. Boots just piled things onto his plate and he ate them, not even tasting the food.

Ripred ordered the room cleared except for the code team. Temp took Boots to the nursery, where they seemed to have a regular job. Aurora and Nike went to assist Hazard with reuniting the nibbler families. Ares headed off to check if he was still needed for the airlift. Gregor and Luxa were lingering in the hall when Ripred brushed by. "You two. Meet me at the city wall in a half hour. You may as well see what we're up against." When he was gone, Luxa looked at Gregor. "Why do you suppose he gave us a half hour?"

"I don't know," said Gregor. Then he thought about the conversation he had overheard the night before. About how Ripred had lost everyone he loved with "No chance to even say good-bye." Was the half hour a gift so that Gregor and Luxa would have that chance? If it was, Gregor didn't want to waste it. He wanted to be alone with her, to really talk to her. But where could they go? The whole palace was overflowing with people. Then he had an inspiration. The museum! Maybe, just maybe, it had been put off-limits. "Come on, I want to show you something."

She looked at him quizzically but didn't object when he took her hand and led her through the halls. They had to go single file for most of it—the place was so packed—but they never lost hold of each other. He was right. Not only was the museum restricted but the entire hallway to it had been cordoned off. They stepped over the rope and slipped into the room.

Once inside, Gregor wasn't sure what to do.

"What did you wish to show me?" asked Luxa.

He hadn't really had anything in mind to show her. He had just wanted to go somewhere where they could have some privacy. Where they could talk without everyone hearing every word they said. But now that they were in the museum, that seemed like an embarrassing thing to say. "Uh, it was just..." Gregor's eyes landed on the stack of photos from Hazard's birthday party. "These pictures," he said. "I thought you might like to see them."

He piled some coats and an old piece of canvas on the floor and they sat, leaning back against the shelves, looking through the pictures. That is, Luxa looked at the pictures. Gregor mostly looked at her. Watching the different emotions slide over her face. Pleasure at how festive the arena looked, all decorated for the party. Laughter at a photo of Boots in her princess costume feeding Temp a bite of cake. Sorrow at the shot of Hazard with his arms wrapped tightly around Thalia, the little bat who had died when the volcano erupted in the Fir elands.

"I think this will help Hazard," said Luxa. "He fears that he will forget the faces of those he loved. His mother's image is already hard for him to recall. He thinks he can remember Hamnet, because he looked so much like me, and Frill is still clear."

"Yeah, it'd be hard to forget Frill," said Gregor, as the image of the striking giant lizard came clearly to his mind.

"But he worries he will lose Thalia," said Luxa. "May I give this to him?"

"Of course," said Gregor. "Take some for both of you."

Luxa went through the photos, selecting a stack, but then she frowned. "There are no others of us together. We should each have one."

She was right. He had given her the photo of them dancing and now wished he had another copy. Something to carry in his pocket until...well, until it was beyond mattering. "Maybe there's still some film in the camera," he said. There was. And since it was an instant camera, they could have the pictures right away. So he held the camera in front of them and they burned through the rest of the roll. For a few minutes, the world outside the museum seemed to go away, and they were just two twelve-year-olds goofing around like they were in a photo booth, making faces, laughing. But when Gregor said, "Okay, last picture," something happened. They moved closer together, her temple resting against his cheek, and their expressions lost their silliness. "Last picture," thought Gregor, as the image slowly developed. "Last picture ever." They had both managed to smile, but their expressions were tinged with sadness as well. This is who they really were. Not two carefree kids whose next big decision would be whether to get ice cream or see a movie, but two people who knew a war lay outside the door, waiting to tear them apart. "I'll take this one," said Gregor. "You keep the one of us dancing." When the war ended, that's what he wanted her to remember, that one time they had been that happy.

"I think our half hour must be nearly run out," said Luxa in a low voice.

"Yeah," said Gregor. Ripred would be waiting for them on the wall.

"Luxa, if I don't get a chance to see you again like this ... it's just you should know ... that I..." It wasn't just a matter of being afraid to say the words anymore, it was a matter of how painful they were. Knowing there was no future in them. He couldn't continue.

"I know," said Luxa. "So do I."

What happened next would probably have taken months, even years to work up to if time hadn't been so short, if the war had not sped things up and given them a sense that whatever living they were to do must be done now or not at all.

Their faces were so close together that he barely had to turn his head when they kissed. Something not unlike the rager sensation, but warmer, more tingly, traveled through his body. Their lips parted and he could see her face registering the feeling as well.

There was a scuffling in the hall and Miravet came in with her arms full of his armor. "There you are. I have been hunting for you all over the palace. I have orders to prepare you for battle," said the old woman. She waved Gregor to his feet and began to dress him at once. "Luxa, it would do you no harm to be fitted as well."

"Solovet doesn't want her to fight," said Gregor.

"It will matter very little what Solovet wants if those diggers claw their way into the palace. Every man, woman, and child of us will be fighting," said Miravet. "Better she be suited up beforehand."

"Yes. I must go to the wall first," said Luxa.

"Then you come see me, my dear," Miravet said firmly, but she reached out and patted Luxa's cheek. How different from Solovet, who never seemed to show Luxa any real affection. When he was dressed in his black armor, Gregor and Luxa made their way to the High Hall. Ares was waiting for them, and it was only a brief flight to the wall of the city. Gregor suspected they were a little late, but Ripred didn't make an issue of it. He was too busy surveying the action below him with Solovet.

"Do you want us to go in now?" Gregor asked.

"Not yet, Gregor. But stay close at hand," said Solovet. She caught sight of Luxa. "You are not to be here now. I need you in the war room."

"Ripred ordered me out," said Luxa.

"Ripred was wrong and he sees that now," the rat said.

"I would prefer to stay," insisted Luxa.

"No. Vikus is about to begin negotiations for an alliance with the spinners and the crawlers. We both think your presence would be valuable. Ajax will take you," said Solovet.

"All right, then," said Luxa. She gave Gregor one last look as the bat flew off, and he seemed unable to tear his eyes from her retreating form.

Ripred's tail jabbed him in the side, bringing him back to attention. "Solovet pointed out that she is rather a distraction to a certain member of our army," he said. "And who needs that?"

Gregor didn't say anything. Secretly, he was glad that they'd sent her back. She *was* a distraction. Even now he was wondering what she was doing. He struggled to focus on the scene before him.

The battle was in progress. It was similar to the one a few days ago, in that the rats seemed to be positioned in some sort of formation on the field below. But in that earlier encounter, they had never come within twenty yards of the command center. Now they were fighting right up to the base of the city wall. It was about thirty feet tall, too high for a rat to leap onto. But some were attempting to climb it. The surface was covered in big slabs of polished stone, but between the slabs was a network of thin seams. Using these, the more agile rats were able to get a foothold.

Ripred's head hung over the side of the wall as he watched one particularly game rat make it about half-way up before a human on a bat swept up and ran it through with a sword. The rat fell to the ground, having climbed its last wall, but this didn't satisfy Ripred. "Now that she has discovered that route, they will all know it can be used." As if to prove his point, a second rat scurried directly up the wall using the same path as the first. It got a few yards higher before a soldier took it out.

"Yes, it is time, then," said Solovet as she gave a signal.

"Time for what?" Gregor asked Ares.

"Time to pour," said Ares grimly.

Then Gregor remembered the children's song that had really been a gruesome prophecy. They had discovered its true nature only a few weeks ago in the Firelands. It had foretold the rats' attempt to completely wipe out the mice. And then it had this stanza:

*now the guests are at our door
Greet them as we have before.
Some will slice and some will pour.*

*Father, mother, sister, brother,
Off they go, I do not know
If we will see another.*

For centuries the Underlanders had thought the words were just harmless nonsense and somehow referred to a tea party where cake was sliced and tea was poured. Now everyone knew better. The rats were the "guests" at the door. They were already being sliced open with swords. And so, as Ares said, it was time to pour.

The cauldrons must have been ready to go at a moment's notice. They were made of thick, black iron and had arched metal handles like baskets. Bats flew them up onto the wall, and teams of humans, wearing protective gloves and goggles, tipped them forward, releasing gallons of boiling oil onto the rats below. Horrible shrieks filled the air and the entire enemy line fell back, leaving a half-dozen scalded rats writhing at the base of the wall.

"Shall we torch them?" a soldier asked Solovet.

"Just two, I think," she replied. "I do not want the smoke to interfere with our sight lines."

Burning torches were immediately dropped on the two least fortunate rats, and they became fireballs. They ran in frantic circles then and rolled to put the flames out, but it was useless. Their coats were already soaked in oil. The smell of burnt fur, then burnt flesh, filled the air. Then the rats fell unconscious, probably from shock. But their bodies still lay burning at the foot of the wall.

It was one of the worst things Gregor had witnessed in the Underland. Not as bad as the mice being suffocated in the pit, or maybe that terrifying moment when mites had eaten Howard's bat, Pandora, down to a skeleton in seconds. But this was right up there. He swallowed hard to keep his breakfast down and looked around at the others.

Ripred's face was expressionless. All he said was, "That should discourage them for a while."

Solovet made a sound of agreement but her attention was back on the battle. There was no sense of either triumph or revulsion along the wall in general. The Regalians had seen it a hundred times. Gregor had the feeling they all viewed the act as unpleasant but necessary. The rats had fallen back from the wall. It had had the desired effect.

Gregor clenched his hands on his weapons' hilts to steady their shaking. Maybe he was just green. Maybe after a while this was everyday stuff.

Maybe all was fair in love and war. He thought back to the diggers and how Sandwich had poisoned them and stolen their land. That wasn't fair. Even in war there should be lines you didn't cross. And for Gregor, pouring boiling oil on your enemy and setting them on fire fell into that category. He knew they had burned up rats in the Firelands, but it had felt like a desperate act to save themselves and the mice, not a cold and calculated strategy. Could it be that he was the only one who found what they had just done to those rats repellent?

It turned out he wasn't. There was someone else present on whom the event had had a significant effect. Someone else who was not hardened yet. Someone else who still found war new. Gregor didn't know where he had been lurking, perhaps in a nearby tunnel, but the torching of the rats brought him bounding into the thick of the battle. He reared back on his haunches and gave an earsplitting roar. The Bane.

"Ah, so there's my little charge at last," said Ripred.

There were audible gasps even from the veterans on the wall. The Bane had grown several feet since Gregor had last seen him up close a few months ago. He had to be eleven or twelve feet long by now and he dwarfed the largest rats on the field. His iridescent white coat gleamed in the torchlight, throwing off bits of pink and blue.

"Pearlpelt," thought Gregor. Less than a year ago he had been a sweet baby rat shivering in his arms. Of course, everyone had been a baby once. Not everyone grew up and tried to wipe out another species, no matter how difficult their lot had been. Looking at the monstrous creature, Gregor couldn't help thinking about how he had been supposed to kill the Bane when he had first discovered him. Back in the rat's maze as he nuzzled his mother's dead body. If Gregor had done it, would the mice still be alive? The rats kept down? The war avoided?

"It would still have been immoral," said Ares in a low voice, as if he had been reading Gregor's mind. "We would have committed the same crime the Bane did when he murdered the mouse pups in the pit."

"The prophecy said he would be evil," said Gregor.

"But did we not decide that sparing his life was the actual fulfillment of the prophecy? That you had made the right choice?" asked Ares.

It was true. Gregor placed himself back in the maze. Even knowing what he knew now, he could not have cut the baby's throat. The Bane had been completely innocent then.

And as for fulfilling the prophecies... now that Gregor knew what Sandwich had done to the diggers,-he had to wonder what sort of guidance the man had been giving him all along. He was increasingly conflicted about the prophecies as time went on.

"That's what we decided," Gregor said. There wasn't time to get into it now.

He could see a wide circle opening up around the Bane. Even the other rats scattered to avoid the erratic paws and tail.

"He is even larger than I was led to believe," said Solovet.

"I hear he's been gorging himself on dead nibblers in the Firelands. Feed him and he will grow," said Ripred.

"Can he fight?" Ares asked.

"They say he can. But we haven't seen much of him. The rats have been keeping him somewhat under wraps," Ripred said.

"He can't beat you," said Gregor. He had seen the Bane attack Ripred and come out on the bad end of it.

"Maybe, maybe not. That was a couple hundred pounds ago. Surely they've trained him since then. And there's his sheer mass to consider. And, of course, I couldn't get near him under the circumstances, unless I fought through every rat on the field," said Ripred. "So the question isn't if he can beat me, it's if he can beat you." They were all staring at Gregor now. "Is it time to find out?" he asked. It was.

As Gregor adjusted his armor, Ripred emitted a stream of advice on fighting a creature with a significant size advantage. The Bane would clearly best him in any strength move. Gregor must rely on speed and agility if he was to stand a chance. Remember, too, that the Bane would have a much longer reach than the rats he had previously fought, so they must allow for extra time to move toward and away from their target. And there were some other things, but Gregor stopped hearing them because he was so focused on the Bane.

A few particularly courageous teams were taking dives at him, but he was swatting them out of the air like flies. As Gregor mounted Ares's back, he saw the Bane's claws connect with a bat's wing and shred it like tissue paper. The bat and its rider plummeted straight down and were mobbed by a pack of smaller rats.

"Ares," Gregor began.

"I know. I will watch my wings," said Ares.

Most of the human army was airborne now, but almost no one was fighting. The Bane's arrival seemed to have thrown everyone into confusion. The rats were jubilant, their opponents daunted. And everyone was waiting for Gregor to fly out and take on the Bane.

Then the Bane spotted him. He leaped into a spot directly in the center of the field and waited, tail flicking, ears flattened back against his head, drool dripping off of his fangs. "Warrior. Warrior," he hissed. "Come and get me."

Gregor knew that in a matter of minutes he could be dead. "Ripred?" he asked. "My family?"

"I gave you my word," said the rat.

Gregor squeezed his eyes shut for a moment, calling up the image of the stone knight to give himself strength.

"Okay, then," said Gregor to Ares. "Ready when you are." He could feel Ares's chest rise and fall, as he took one last deep breath, and then they launched into the air. A hush fell over the field as Ares flew out and made a wide circle around the Bane, who crouched, never taking his eyes off of them. Gregor opened himself, inviting his rager side to take over. The Bane's points of weakness began to come to him in a series of quick flashes. Eyes, neck, liver, an artery pulsing beneath the foreleg, the key spot between two ribs that led right to the heart. They were on their second circle, almost directly behind the Bane, when Ares dove. The Bane, who had had his head tilted back to watch them, sprang into the air and twisted around to meet them. Ares veered off to one side but the Bane's front paw swiped after them. In a move they had only just practiced in their last training session, the bat snapped his wings closed and rolled. Gregor swung, sheering off three of the Bane's claws, and then flattened onto Ares's back as he whisked them out of range.

The humans shouted words of encouragement, but the hit had only needled the Bane. He began to track them now, turning to follow their path, making it harder to find an opening. They didn't need one, though, because suddenly the Bane attacked. He snagged the edge of Ares's wing and swung them in toward his teeth. But before he pulled them into his mouth, the Bane had to get them past his nose. Gregor's sword sliced through one nostril, causing the Bane to jerk his head back and roar. Ares took that opportunity to rip his wing free and the fight began in earnest. It was hard to break down the moments, they came so thick and fast. They stayed

almost entirely in the Bane's range, with Ares twisting and diving and flipping as Gregor took on the claws and fangs. Forget about power, the Bane was fast. Maybe not quite as fast as Gregor, but pretty close, so Gregor couldn't let down his guard for a second. What seemed to throw the rat the most were assaults on his face, so Ares began to direct them right into his eyes repeatedly. If they got in close enough, Gregor could use the dagger to attack as well as defend, and he had just ripped open a foot-long gash over the Bane's eye when it happened. The rat dropped onto his forelegs and whipped his tail over his head, catching Gregor on the left side of his back. The unexpected blow knocked him off of Ares and sent him headfirst toward the ground. The pain was initially paralyzing. Gregor was unable to inhale, let alone twist into some convenient position for Ares to retrieve him. Ares barely made it under him at all. He could literally hear his bat's claws scrape the ground as his chest slammed onto Ares's neck, forcing the last remaining air out of his lungs. Fortunately, the Bane was taking a moment to recover from his last wound. Blood was pouring down over his face, staining the pure-white fur crimson. With both his nose and eye damaged, the Bane was becoming disoriented.

Something bad had happened to Gregor's back. He could tell when he placed his hand where the last blow had landed. The area wasn't covered by metal armor but by a thick leather panel. When Gregor pressed on it, he had difficulty locating his two lower ribs. No, they were there, but wedged a couple of inches too far into his body. No wonder he couldn't get any oxygen. But he was just going to have to make do without it. "Tail," Gregor gasped in Ares's ear. It was all he could get out but Ares understood. The bat dove straight down over the Bane's head. As the tail came reflexively up in defense, Gregor mustered every ounce of strength he could and swung. His blow cut the tail cleanly in two, leaving just a two-foot stump behind. A fountain of blood spurted from the wound, soaking Gregor as he collapsed on Ares's neck.

The Bane could not immediately register his loss. He circled around to find his tail again and again and finally, when he saw the severed part lying on the ground, pawed at it for a full thirty seconds as if he could bring it back to life. Seeing he could not, the Bane tilted back his head and gave a wail unlike any sound Gregor had ever heard a rat make.

That's when Gregor realized what he had done. He had wanted to take out the tail because it was such a powerful weapon. But it was so much

more than that to the Bane. Gregor flashed back to the time he had watched the rat nearly have a nervous breakdown under Regalia. To calm himself, the Bane had first sucked, then gnawed on his tail until it was a bloody mess. It was his comfort, his security blanket, the thing he reached for when he could not cope. And, man, was he ever not coping well without it!

The Bane went completely insane, whirling around in a circle, snapping at anything in his path. Then he caught sight of Ares, who had turned and was heading for Regalia as fast as his damaged wing would allow. It made sense, since Gregor was clearly unable to continue fighting. But rather than retreat as well, the Bane bolted after them. The rat ran at a breakneck pace toward the wall and, with one astonishing leap, landed on the top. His huge body knocked a dozen or so humans to the ground as he came in. The others vaulted onto bats and fled, as the Bane ran back and forth along the wall, screaming unintelligible words.

Ares, who had cleared the wall only seconds before his pursuer, turned back to face the scene. As the Bane continued his rant, paws and noses began to poke up over the edge of the wall. In less than a minute, the front line of the army had joined the Bane, and more heads were appearing.

A beautiful silvery-coated rat climbed right up onto the Bane's back. Gregor knew her. Twirltongue. The rat that was so persuasive she had almost convinced him to betray Ripred. He'd always suspected she had great power over the Bane. Anyone could see he was a complete mess, that he could never organize something like the mass murder of the mice, or even this war, on his own. But seeing Twirltongue riding the Bane's back, talking in his ear, confirmed Gregor's worst fears. If the Bane couldn't think coherently, Twirltongue would do it for him.

"Take the city! Leave no one alive!" bellowed the Bane.

And on his command, the rats poured into Regalia.

CHAPTER 17

Gregor inched forward on his stomach so his head hung over Ares's shoulder. Screams filled the air as the rats swarmed through the streets of the city, killing any humans they could find. The majority of the population had already reached the safety of the palace. But there were still hundreds of people en route, on foot, and in carts, as the army of rats swept down upon them. Some drew swords, but they were not prepared to defend themselves against such a vicious assault, and Gregor watched several people literally ripped apart.

"My fault. I didn't finish him off," said Gregor. He struggled to raise himself.

"It was not possible," Ares said. "Lie still!"

The Regalian army's priority changed from fighting to rescuing, as they attempted to carry the victims to safety. Ares dove down and plucked a pair of children from a wagon just as their mother had her throat torn open. He brought them to the balcony of the High Hall and set them gently down. They huddled together shaking and weeping, until someone came and took them inside. The entire hall was filled with bats delivering people and then jetting off again.

"Gregor, I must leave you," said Ares. "There are others I can save."

"Yes. Go. I'm okay," Gregor said, sliding off of Ares and onto his hands and knees. His bat hesitated. "Go. I'll get help."

But as Ares flew off, Gregor knew help would be hard to come by. The High Hall was in turmoil. The air was full of beating wings and the floor was quickly filling with bleeding humans. Gregor was in too much pain to call out over the din or even signal his distress. And there were so many people in dire need of attention. The best he could do was drag himself over to the side of the balcony and prop himself up against a large stone urn. In this way, he could at least avoid being trampled.

That was it. That was all he had. Something was really wrong. The pain in his back was excruciating. Maybe the Bane had killed him with that tail move, damaged one of his vital organs or something, and he was just waiting to die. It was the lower ribs on the left half of his back. The side he was weak at defending. What was on your left side, anyway? The only

thing he could think of was his heart, but the injury seemed down too far for that.

Gregor tried to breathe as shallowly as possible. Any movement of his ribs made it worse. He wanted to moan, but even that seemed too difficult. There was plenty of moaning around him, anyway. Moaning and crying and screaming. He wished everybody would be quiet, just for a moment. Then maybe he wouldn't hurt so badly. If he could just have a moment of peace.

The longer he sat there the more convinced Gregor was that Sandwich's prophecy — at least the part about him and the Bane — was being fulfilled.

When the monster's blood is spilled

When the warrior has been killed

He was dying. And probably the Bane was, too. Gregor had seen the blood gushing out of his tail. Even a creature as big as the Bane had only so much blood. Did the rats have a way of stopping it? Or, like Gregor, was the big, white rat curled up somewhere, watching the final seconds of his life run out?

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick

. . . .

Gregor could just see over the edge of the low wall that rimmed the balcony. The rats were everywhere now. Climbing over the rooftops, shredding the contents of the homes, devouring the bodies of the dead. The human army had regrouped and was back on the attack, but it was nearly impossible to target the rats in Regalia. There were too many doors and windows for them to duck into to hide, to leap out of unexpectedly. With the ornate carvings on every building, there was no structure they couldn't scale, except the palace.

Far across the city somewhere was the arena filled with the nibbler refugees. Gregor vaguely wondered how they were making out. There were giant stone doors that could be closed between the city and the arena, but what about the tunnels that led into the arena from the other side? There was no way to know.

Things slowly quieted down. The light dimmed somewhat. "It's evening," thought Gregor through a haze of pain. "Soon it will be night." Then he remembered there was no day or night down here. Maybe he was losing his sight. Things did look kind of fuzzy. Yes, he was pretty sure he couldn't see right, and that was probably the first sign that he was about to

"Gregor!" He heard the alarm in Howard's voice. Then it took on a more soothing tone. "Gregor, it is Howard. Can you understand me?" Howard's face swam into focus. "You are injured? What is wrong?"

"Back." Gregor's lips moved to form the word, but no sound came out. Howard must have been used to reading lips, though, because his hands slid around Gregor's body. His fingers found the indentation at once. As they probed his ribs, electric flashes of light filled Gregor's eyes. "No!" This time he was audible.

"Gregor, I know this must hurt you very much, but I think I can help. You must sit up," Howard said.

The idea was almost comical. Gregor couldn't move, let alone sit up.

"Doctor! The Overlander has need of a doctor!" Howard called.

A woman hurried up, felt Gregor's injury, and then they were moving him out from the urn. Now he could moan all right, at least he was making some dreadful sound. He wanted to beg them to stop, to just go away and leave him alone, but that wasn't happening. The woman stood behind him, holding him so that he sat upright by supporting him under his arms. It forced his back to straighten out. She was giving some kind of instructions. Howard knelt in front of him, gripped his hands, and squeezed them hard. "Breathe, Gregor. Take very deep breaths."

"No way!" thought Gregor, whose strategy was breathing as little as possible. "No way!" And he ignored the suggestion.

"Breathe, Gregor! Do it!" shouted Howard. "Inhale!"

Clearly Howard was not going away. Clearly they were going to keep torturing him until he did what they wanted. So Gregor forced himself to take a deep breath and nearly blacked out. Something that smelled sharp and tangy was under his nose. Gregor could feel his eyes and nasal passages stinging.

"Breathe!" he heard Howard command. And so it went on. Again and again. Taking breaths, being brought back to consciousness, only to be forced to try again. Finally when he really thought he couldn't bear it for one more instant, he took a gigantic breath, and suddenly the ribs on his left side popped back into place. The air rushed out of his body in a cry of relief. He could fill his lungs; he could speak again. His back ached, but the blinding pain had lifted.

"Better?" Howard asked, leaning back on his heels.

"Yeah," said Gregor, giving a little laugh. "Yeah."

They eased him out of his armor and cut off his shirt, which was too bloody and torn to be saved anyway. Howard found the new photograph of Gregor and Luxa and slipped it in Gregor's back pants pocket without comment. The doctor swiftly examined the rest of him, prodding him here and there. Compared to what he'd just been through, it was like being tickled. "I can find no immediate sign of internal damage," said the doctor. "Give him pain medicine, wrap the ribs, and get him to a bed." Then she was gone before Gregor could thank her.

Howard gave him a dose of medicine that was designed to kill pain but not make him sleep. Then he began to wrap Gregor's ribs in strips of spider silk.

"Where's Ares?" Gregor asked as Howard wound the bandage around him.

"I believe he is still searching for those in need of rescue," said Howard. "Although I caught a glimpse of his wing. No one can believe he is flying on it."

"He's stubborn," said Gregor.

"Like you. I hear you severed the Bane's tail after you were hit," said Howard.

"Oh, yeah," said Gregor. It was true. He had made that last cut even after his ribs had been knocked out of whack. "I guess I had a lot of adrenaline pumping through me. What else is going on?"

"Well, we have found you now. Many stories of your fate have been circulating. The fliers have been evacuating the city. Most of the humans are thought to be retrieved or dead by now. The nibblers are barricaded in the arena, but don't be surprised if they decide to airlift them back to the palace. The arena is difficult to defend," said Howard. "The palace is our only remaining stronghold."

"What about the diggers?" asked Gregor.

"No sign of them," said Howard.

"But Vikus said there were more," Gregor said.

"It is likely. We do not know for sure. But tunneling into the palace will take far more effort than reaching our crops. Sandwich had it built on a particularly deep shelf of stone," said Howard.

"But they could still do it," Gregor said.

"If that is their aim, they will do it," said Howard, tying off his bandage. "There. Do you think you can walk now?"

Howard helped him to his feet. Gregor felt sore but it was his eyes that were bothering him. "I still can't see right."

"It is not your eyes. Look out at Regalia," said Howard.

Gregor stared out into the city and realized the problem. Of the thousands of torches that usually kept it aglow, only a handful remained. Once, shortly after he had arrived in the Underland, Gregor had asked Vikus why the humans didn't throw the city into darkness when there was to be an attack. The old man had said, "We need our eyes to fight, they do not." How would the humans fight now?

They watched in silence as, one by one, the remaining lights went out. The last torch arced like a shooting star from the top of a tall building before it was snuffed out on the ground.

Just as the city fell into total darkness, the scratching began.

CHAPTER 18

It started simply, with just one claw on one stone surface. Then another and another joined it until the scratching rang through Regalia, blocking out any other sound.

"I've heard that before." Gregor had to raise his voice for Howard to hear him. "Or something pretty near like it."

"In the Underland?" asked Howard.

"No, in my apartment back home. Ripred sent a bunch of small rats up to scratch on our walls and scare us into coming for the plague meeting," said Gregor.

"And did it scare you?" asked Howard.

Gregor remembered how they had all fled the apartment, trying to escape the claws that were threatening to break through the plaster. "You bet."

"Then I am less ashamed to admit it scares me as well," said Howard. "It is only to affect our minds. The rats cannot possibly scratch their way into the palace."

"Well, it works," said Gregor. He needed to get away from the creepy sound, before it really did a number on his nerves. "Can you get me back to the code room? I could lie down there."

Now that his ribs were back in place, Gregor could walk okay. "But do not try any strenuous movements for a while," Howard warned him. "The bones can shift out of place again. If they do and I am not there to help you, you know now how to remedy this. Here, carry these smelling salts with you." He pressed a small container about the size of a matchbox into Gregor's hand.

"Great," thought Gregor. "Not only do I have to breathe until I black out, I have to revive myself." But with all of the dead and severely wounded lying in the High Hall that seemed a little whiny. The floor was sticky with blood. Many of the injured had not been attended to yet. "You stay here, Howard. I can get to the code room on my own," he said.

"I will stop by later to check on your condition," said Howard.

"Whenever you get a chance. Really, I'm okay," said Gregor. He began to work his way slowly through the crowded halls toward the code room. "Excuse me. Excuse me. Can I get by, please?"

A path opened when people saw who was asking. Many of the Underlanders reached out to touch him or allowed themselves a smile. Some seemed amazed to see him at all. "You live!" cried out one old man. "We heard the Bane had killed you!" Gregor began to worry what rumors may have gotten back to his sisters and tried to move faster.

When he got back to the code room, he found Lizzie weeping on Ripred's shoulder while the rest of the code team hunched in their rooms. Boots was patting Lizzie's hair, but she looked on the verge of tears herself. It was like a dress rehearsal of what would happen when he really was killed. Gregor wished he could have avoided seeing it.

"There, what did I tell you? He left the battle alive," said Ripred, nudging Lizzie's chin so her head turned to see Gregor. "He's just fine."

"Gregor!" said Lizzie. "I thought you were dead!"

"No, just kind of bruised up," said Gregor, rubbing his hand over his bandage.

"Gre-go!" Boots ran over, stood on her tiptoes, and planted three kisses on the bottom edge of his wrappings. "All better?" she asked.

"All better. Thanks, Boots," said Gregor.

"You might have sent word of your whereabouts," said Ripred reproachfully. "We lost track of you after you retreated. That was hours ago."

Gregor had the feeling the rat would really like to bite his head off, but he didn't dare do anything else to upset Lizzie. "Oh, my ribs were messed up. Couldn't do much until Howard and a doctor found me and popped them back into place."

"Like Aurora's wing." Luxa had appeared in the arch of the rat room. Her face was very pale but she wasn't crying.

"Yeah, a lot like when Aurora dislocated her wing in the jungle," said Gregor. "Now she's as good as new, and so am I." Temp nudged Gregor in the leg. The cockroach had a clean shirt in his mouth. "Thanks, Temp." Gregor tried hard not to wince as he put it on. Clearly he had to downplay his injury as much as possible. "So what's been going on here? Any luck with the code?"

But apparently this was the wrong thing to say because it only set Lizzie off on a fresh round of sobs.

"No, we have not had any luck on the code, because your poor sister has been so worried about you," said Ripred. "It has cost us precious hours."

"It's not his fault. I'm no good at it. I'm no good at all. If the rats come I won't even be able to help fight. I'm worthless," Lizzie choked out.

"Don't be ridiculous. You can't throw a rock without hitting thirty warriors down here, but code-breakers are as rare as trees," said Ripred.

"I'm not the code-breaker. I want to be, but I'm not. Maybe it's Boots after all," said Lizzie.

"Well, stranger things have happened, but I'm still betting on you," said Ripred. "Now climb on and we'll work together."

"You're staying?" asked Lizzie.

"Yes, I'm staying until we crack this thing," Ripred said. "Solovet may wage her war without me."

Still sniffing, Lizzie scooted up onto Ripred's back. She lay on her stomach with her elbows on his head and peered down at a strip of cloth on the floor. "Maybe if we reversed the Copernicus Cipher," she said, wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"Let's give it a try," said Ripred. The rest of the code team gathered around and silence fell on the room. That is, except for the scratching. It was very faint here, so far from the outer walls of the palace, but Gregor could still hear it.

Luxa came to his side and whispered, "Should you be resting?" He nodded and let her lead him into the human room. He gratefully sank onto the bed, positioning himself on his right side to avoid any pressure on his bruised ribs and the wound on his hip. She sat next to him, holding his hand. "One or the other of us always seems to be recuperating."

"Only way we get to see each other," said Gregor.

"True enough," said Luxa. "They say you and Ares fought the Bane magnificently."

"Who says? Not Ripred?" asked Gregor.

"Well, not Ripred. But he did admit you did better than he had hoped. And then he took all of the credit for it," said Luxa.

They both laughed, and there was Ripred's nose poking over the end of the bed. "Some of us are trying to work, if you don't mind. I don't really have to explain how imperative breaking this code is, do I?"

"No, we are sorry," said Luxa.

"Why don't you two do something useful?" said Ripred.

"Like what?" Gregor asked.

"Like running some more of the code by Boots, just in case she happens to recognize it as something other than a tail. It will at least keep her out of everyone's hair," said Ripred. "Report anything of interest, just in case she is the princess."

"I know. 'WHAT SHE SAW, IT IS THE FLAW OF THE CODE OF CLAW,' " said Luxa.

"Whatever that means," Gregor mumbled to Luxa after Ripred had left.

Boots and Temp were sent in, along with about fifty yards of white strips covered in code. "Where do they get this stuff, anyway?" Gregor asked. "I mean, who writes it down?"

"The rats send the code through rock seams that carry sounds well," said Luxa. "This is a tap." She hit the stone wall once with her fingernail. "A click." She made two very quick, softer hits. "And a scratch." She scraped her nail briefly on the wall. "A short pause indicates the break between letters and a longer pause, the break between words. I cannot really replicate it at full speed. Can you, Temp?"

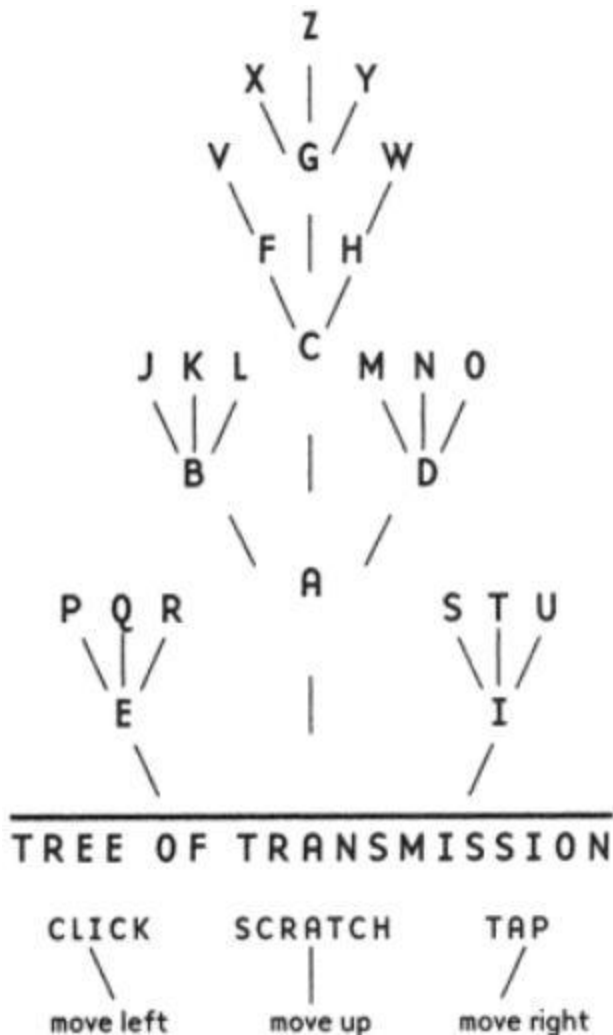
"Like this, it sounds, like this," said Temp. He placed his foot on the floor and began to drill out a series of taps, clicks, and scratches that were so rapid that Gregor's ears could never have sorted them out. Especially those taps and clicks. Of course, when his dad had played a Morse code message for them on the computer, even a really slow one, that had seemed unintelligible, too.

"We have many spies positioned at strategic points to record the messages. It is not difficult to intercept, as the rats make no effort to conceal it when it is encoded. Then the messages are written down by humans and flown to the code room," said Luxa.

No one had been bothering to translate the chicken-scratch code into regular alphabet letters — probably all of the code team could read it like that, anyway — so Luxa quickly drew up the Tree of Transmission as a guide. She may not have enjoyed learning this stuff in class, but she didn't even have to go out in the main room to copy the tree. She could remember the whole thing by heart.

"I guess that old mouse must have been a pretty good teacher," said Gregor.

"I suppose so," Luxa said. "The tree is not difficult for me to recall."



"It is constructed so that many of the letters most commonly used are represented with fewer beats. The letters *E*, *A*, and *I* for instance, require only one signal. *T* and *R* require only two," said Luxa. "Here, this is easiest to see on the chart." She drew a grid like the one carved into the code room floor.

A		H	/	O	/	V	\
B	\	I	/	P	\	W	/
C		J	\	Q	\	X	\
D	/	K	\	R	\	Y	/
E	\	L	\	S	/\	Z	
F	\	M	/\	T	/		
G		N	/	U	//		

"It is not perfect in this respect, of course. Because the letter *B* only requires two signals, although it is much less common than the letter *O*, which requires three. But the tree was the best balance they could find between speed and ease of remembrance," said Luxa. "Shall we begin?"

Boots seemed to enjoy finding what set of lines matched which alphabet letter a lot more than she had enjoyed their earlier code games.

"Okay, Boots, find straight-straight-straight-left," Gregor said, pointing to the sequence |||\.

Boots traced along the tree with her chubby finger.

"Straight...straight...straight...left...makes *X*. It makes *X*, Gre-go!"

"Good job!" said Gregor, and wrote an *X* above the corresponding lines with one of Lizzie's markers. And so they went on, transcribing the code in low voices, letter after letter, for about an hour. By that time, Gregor had pretty much learned the tree himself. At least learned it well enough to send Luxa this message:

|||\|\|.|\|.|||.||||/|||.|||\|.|\|/\|/||/\.

She laughed, wadded up the strip of fabric, and tossed it back at him. But as they went on with their task, Gregor wondered if it had been a mistake. She had thought it was funny at first, but now she looked kind of sad. For one thing, it was Henry's joke. So there was all that baggage. For another, any references to dying right now weren't exactly humorous.

People had thought the Bane had killed him until he'd walked in. He wished he hadn't sent it but it was too late now.

Boots lost interest in the tree so they made up some other games with the letters on the strips, trying to find words, reading them backward, using their own strategies to try and break the Code of Claw. Luxa and Temp took over the lesson more and more until Gregor was really just observing. Simple, direct thoughts were all his brain could muster. He wanted to go to sleep. He wanted more pain medicine. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go home. He wanted to go home. By the time Ripred called for everybody to take five, Gregor was practically in a trance. He didn't want to join the others for tea and cake, but he was afraid Lizzie would get upset if he didn't, so he dragged himself out of bed.

The code team was too discouraged for chitchat. They ate in silence, occasionally twitching or murmuring something indistinct.

Hazard came in unhappily and sat next to Luxa, leaning his head on her shoulder. "What is wrong?" she asked him.

"They will not let me continue matching the nibbler pups with their parents. They say it is too dangerous. That all of the nibblers must be brought to the palace now," said Hazard.

"They will be safer here," said Luxa.

"Yes, now that the diggers can be heard tunneling toward the arena," said Hazard.

Ripred jerked his head up from his cake. "Can they?" He bounded over to the door. "Am I to get all of my updates from seven-year-old boys?" he bellowed. "Tell Solovet I am not being kept informed!"

"It's not the rats scratching?" Gregor asked.

"Oh, no, Gregor. This sounds completely different," said Hazard.

Ripred turned back to the group, murmuring, "At least they are not digging for the palace. Although why not worries me."

"You think they have another plan to enter it?" asked Luxa.

"I think if they don't, they're working on one," said Ripred. "But as they have never succeeded before, it will have to be quite a plan. In the meantime, they know we'll wear ourselves out bringing in the nibblers."

"Dulcet says I will be needed later," Hazard said. "That I should rest. But I am not sleepy. Can I help in here?"

"Why not?" asked Ripred. "Perhaps some new blood will refresh our minds."

"What are you doing?" asked Hazard. No one seemed to have the energy to answer. Finally Lizzie, who hated it when people ignored her questions, spoke up. "I'll show you." She took the nearest strip of fabric and an aqua-blue marker from her back-pack and sat next to Hazard. "This is a message sent by one rat to another. Those little lines stand for these letters." She quickly wrote the correct alphabet letters above the lines.

"Like the chart on the floor?" asked Hazard.

"Uh-huh," said Lizzie. "Only even when we turn it into letters we still can't read the message because it's in code. A really hard code."

"Does each letter stand for another letter?" Hazard asked.

"Yes, but there's some extra trick on top of that. Like maybe you're supposed to throw out every third letter or something, and then it will make sense," said Lizzie.

"Can the letter A ever be a letter A?" asked Hazard.

"We don't think so. See, basically, this is like a cryptogram, and a letter is never itself. There's another kind of puzzle that's called an anagram, where you just take the letters and mix them around to form another word. Like the word 'nap' could be the word 'pan' and the 'a' doesn't have to move, or the word 'cat' could be the word 'act'—"

"Or the name 'Gregor' could be the name 'Gorger,'" said Gregor, giving Lizzie a poke in the side.

"That's what I said when Gregor told me about the Underland. That he and Gorger really had the same name," said Lizzie.

Man, that seemed forever ago! When he'd told his family the story of his first trip. "Yeah, Hazard, I'm talking about meeting giant spiders and throwing myself off a cliff, and all Lizzie can say is that this nasty old rat king named Gorger and I've got the same name. Because the letters matched. Oh, she saw that right off," said Gregor. He took a deep drink of his tea and was vaguely wondering if he should eat more cake when Heronian spoke up.

"She saw that right off?" the mouse asked slowly. "She saw that right off?"

"Sure did," said Gregor. "Well, you know how she can mess around with words." He didn't see what the big deal was. Noticing that "Gregor" had the same letters as "Gorger" couldn't hold a candle to doing that crazy who-ate-the-cheese-for-lunch puzzle. But this new information produced a strange reaction in the room. One by one, the members of the code team

raised their heads and stared at Lizzie, who was twisting the aqua marker around and around in her hands.

"I saw that right off. I did," Lizzie said to herself. "That's what I saw."

"What she saw, it is the flaw in the Code of Claw," said Daedalus.

"Think about exactly what it was that you saw, Lizzie."

Lizzie's eyes shifted to the code tree and began to dart around the letters. "An anagram. I saw an anagram. Where some letters can be themselves." Her mouth dropped open slightly and her breath came out in short pants.

Gregor had seen several panic attacks begin like this and was tempted to intervene. But everyone else was frozen, not daring to interrupt whatever was going on in her head. So he waited, too.

"An anagram — of Gregor's — name," said Lizzie.

"In the naming is the catching," Reflex said in a quivering voice.

"Maybe — that line — wasn't about my — name at all!" Lizzie suddenly dropped her marker and snatched up the piece of code she had been showing to Hazard. She read it, her lips moving silently over the letters. When she looked up, her next words were barely audible. "Gre—gor. Gor—ger. I think — I know — how to break — the code!"

PART 3

The Warrior

CHAPTER 19

Lizzie flipped over the strip of fabric and wrote the alphabet on the blank side as the words tumbled out of her mouth. "Okay, okay, what if it's like an anagram, and there are letters that don't change. Then all you would need is one key word and a really simple code and the rats could still keep it in their heads."

"And you think it's 'Gregor'?" asked Ripred.

"It's the word I saw," said Lizzie.

"It would be a good choice. You could remember it by 'Gregor' or 'Gorger,'" said Heronian.

"It is even easier," said Reflex. "The words only require four letters: *G-O-R-E*. 'Gore.' One needs only to remember the word *gore*."

"Yes," said Lizzie. "Yes. So the *G*, *O*, *R*, and *E* stay the same." She wrote these letters above themselves on the alphabet.

E G O R

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

"And now we use a cipher so simple that no one could forget it," said Daedalus.

"Single shift, be the simplest, single shift," said Min.

Lizzie nodded and began to fill in the letters.

"A is represented by *B*, *B* is *C*, *C* is *D*, *D* would be *F* because the *E* remains unchanged...." Heronian said, although Lizzie was way ahead of her. Her aqua marker speedily filled in the remaining letters.

BCDFEHGIJKLMNOPQRSRTUVWXYZA

ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOPQRSTUVWXYZ

"Try it! Go on, try it!" said Ripred, thrusting an unbroken strip of code before Lizzie.

Lizzie's hands were trembling as she lifted the strip and began to read. "Diggers — arrive — at — camp — near — Regalia. Tunnel — under way." For a moment, they all just sat there, stunned at their success.

"That's old. We need the latest transmissions." Ripred ran to the door. "Fresh code! Fresh code!" he called. He bounded back to Lizzie, scooped her up with his nose, and tossed her in the air. He spun half-way around and caught her so she landed on his back. "A letter can be itself!"

Lizzie was laughing as she flung her arms around his neck. "A letter can be itself! A letter can be itself!"

And suddenly the whole code team burst into some kind of brainiac celebration. Reflex began to shoot lines of silk around the room like they were streamers. Daedalus was scooping up heaps of code with his wings and flinging them in the air. Heronian leaped back and forth over Ripred and Lizzie. And even old Min had geared up into some creaky old cockroach dance.

Boots was in heaven, running here and there, spinning in the streamers of silk, and boogying on Temp's back. "A letter can be yourself! A letter can be yourself!" she crowed.

"Yes, a letter can be yourself, you clueless little thing," said Ripred. But he was happy. Joyful even. Hazard wrapped his arms tightly around Luxa. "So everything will be all right? Now that they've broken the code?"

"It will be better at least, Hazard," Luxa said, hugging him back. But when she looked at Gregor, he could tell she was thinking of the rest of the prophecy. Of his death.

"Everything's going to be just fine, Hazard," said Gregor. The last thing he wanted to do was crush this moment of victory with his own troubles. "Good job, Liz!" he said, high-fiving his sister.

"It was all of us," said Lizzie. "And Hazard, too. He's the one who made me think about the anagrams."

"Can I go tell the nibblers the code is broken? I am sure it will lighten their hearts," Hazard said.

"No!" said Ripred, suddenly serious. "No one outside of this room must know we have broken the code. I will personally inform Solovet. The rest of you must swear to secrecy."

All the code team nodded in agreement, so Gregor nodded, too, although he thought Hazard was right and that the news might give everybody a big psychological boost. A young woman brought in a basket filled with tightly rolled bundles of code. The code team gathered around it, eager to decipher the latest messages. Despite the general excitement, Gregor began to think about that nap again. But Ripred had other work for him. He enlisted Gregor, Luxa, Hazard, Boots, and Temp to decode the piles of accumulated messages, just in case there had been anything of value in them. Luxa suggested they work back in the bedroom, so Gregor was able to lie down again, anyway. They had to do two passes on each

strip of code, one to write it as the alphabet, the second to decrypt it with the Code of Claw. Most of the messages were old news — updates on the battle to free the nibblers, the alliance with the diggers, the Bane's location — but some yielded important information in terms of which species had sided or not sided with the Bane. The cockroaches had not, the spiders were trying to remain neutral (so Reflex's presence here must be a secret), and it was too dangerous to try to approach the ants. Gregor found it difficult to believe the ants would join either the humans or the rats. They had made it very clear they wanted both species dead. Probably nothing pleased them more than a big old war between the two.

Try as he might, Gregor could not keep his eyes open. At one point Luxa whispered, "Sleep, we will manage this."

So Gregor just let himself drift off. When he awoke, everything was quiet. Luxa, Hazard, and Boots were asleep on the bed across from him. Temp snored gently on the floor. Ripred must have sent everyone to bed. Gregor tried to go back to sleep, but his back and hip hurt. He was hungry again, too. He made his way to his feet in stages and went into the code room. Lizzie and Ripred were asleep on the floor, as they'd been the other night. Ripred opened one bleary eye, took him in, and then let the lid slowly slide shut. Gregor went over to the food cart and rooted around for a snack. He found a tureen half-filled with lukewarm beef stew and finished it off. His stomach felt better, anyway.

Gregor wished Howard would come by with some more medicine. But when he thought of the wounded, and his shoes sticking to the bloody floor of the High Hall, he knew Howard hadn't had a second to do it. He could send a message to the hospital, but again, they were so busy just keeping people alive he felt like a wimp bugging them. He wondered about his mom up at the Fount. Was she getting the care she needed? Or was the hospital there as overwhelmed as the one in Regalia? And what about his dad and grandma? Boy, he hoped his dad wasn't having any ideas about coming down here to rescue them all. Maybe his relapse was bad enough to keep him in bed. It was an awful thing to wish on his dad but it was better than having him drop straight down into the jaws of the rats.

He poured a mug of cold tea and gave up on the idea of returning to bed. He wasn't really tired now, anyway. Might as well make himself useful. The area on the stone grid was covered with the latest messages all neatly transcribed in Lizzie's aqua marker. But there were still bunches of

the old code spilling over baskets. Gregor grabbed a handful of strips and settled himself down to work. It was mostly the same-old same-old stuff about troop movements that had occurred weeks ago. And then out of nowhere came this message:

// ||| \ || \ // | // || \|. || \ \ || \. || \ \ . \ | || \ // . He wrote it as the alphabet:

UXJUDIUIJQ. FJEF. JP. QJU

And then applied the Code of Claw using Lizzie's system. The words stabbed him in the heart.

Twitchtip. Memories of the rat swam before his eyes. Her nose buried in the moss of the arena because the smell of humans made her ill. The desperate look on her face as she spun around in the whirlpool. Her claws digging into his life jacket, as she choked out, "Don't — let — go!" And he hadn't let go. He had risked his life to save an outcast rat when no one else would bother to try. And then they were friends, despite the rat/human thing. Twitchtip was the first one who knew he was a rager. She had given Boots food. She had dragged herself through the rats' maze to help Gregor find the Bane, then forced him and Ares to leave her to die. But she hadn't died. Not right away. The rats had kept her alive in a pit and probably tortured and starved her while they tried to extract information out of her about Gregor. And finally, only recently, she'd left the world. As alone as ever. The tears splashing down on the words surprised him because he hadn't cried in such a long time. Not for his mom or Ares or the mice or Thalia or Luxa, or even for himself when he knew about the prophecy. It was just that it had all been so awful, Twitchtip's life. Banished to the Dead Land because of her remarkable sense of smell, living alone in that harsh world before she finally, desperately, had teamed up with Ripred. Bleeding to death in the maze but not fast enough, not soon enough to escape falling into the hands of the rats who hated her for being a scent seer and then hated her even more for helping Gregor.

"All right. All right now." Ripred was looking over his shoulder at the message.

"It's not all right!" Gregor's voice was harsh, but low, because he didn't want to wake everyone to see him like this. "I should have gone back for her."

"We thought she was dead," said Ripred.

"But we didn't know. And they had her all this time. And we never even found out for sure," said Gregor. He thought of his dad, wasting away for

years in that rat pit. Had she died in the same one they'd found his father in?

"Even if we'd known, there's almost no chance we could have gotten her out," said Ripred. "It isn't likely they —"

"Just shut up, Ripred! I mean, what do you care? You never even liked her! You treated her like trash. You only made that deal with her to help yourself, so I' could kill the Bane for you. Don't act now like — like she mattered to you!" said Gregor. He hadn't kept his voice down. Practically everyone was awake now. Frightened by his outburst. Afraid the rats had broken into the palace. "Just shut up!"

Gregor stormed into the rat room and yanked the curtain closed behind him. He sank down on the bed and wept. He knew it wasn't just about Twitchtip, it was about all of the dreadful things that had happened and the ones that awaited him in the coming hours. A hand, Lizzie's he thought, tentatively edged around the curtain. "Leave me alone!" The weeping sent new shock waves of pain through his ribs, but it was a long time before he'd cried himself out. Then he just lay on the bed watching the soft flicker of light from an oil lamp on the wall. It was quiet outside again. Everyone must have gone back to sleep.

Footsteps entered the code room. "Where is Gregor?" asked Howard in an exhausted voice.

"In there," Luxa replied. She had not gone back to bed, then. She was waiting for him. "We had word of Twitchtip's death. They had her imprisoned in a pit until recently. He is greatly upset."

There was a moment of silence while Howard absorbed the news. "So should we all be. Only Gregor's grief should not be mixed with shame, as should ours," said Howard. He had not attempted to save Twitchtip from the whirlpool at first but had taken excellent care of her afterward. "She did us all a great service and what poor treatment we gave her in return."

Howard opened the curtain to the rat room and came in. "I am sorry," he said. Gregor didn't reply. "Come. Sit up. You must have need of this." Howard helped him to a sitting position, administered a dose of painkiller, and gave him the rest of the bottle for later. He painted a new coat of medicine on Gregor's hip and calf stitches, and applied fresh bandages. Finally he examined his back. "Quite a bruise, but the bones are holding in place," he said as he wrapped the ribs again. Then he sat on the bed, elbows on his knees, digging the palms of his hands into his forehead, trying to find

the right words. "Gregor, of all those Twitchtip knew in her life, I am sure she would wish you the least amount of grief," said Howard.

"You helped her, too. After the whirlpool. In the maze," said Gregor.

"Because you were right," said Howard. "You were the only one of us who looked past her fur and teeth and claws and saw who she really was. If we are ever to have peace, that will be the first step. The alternative is this." Howard waved a hand vaguely, somehow suggesting their current situation. "Slaughtering one another. Walling ourselves in with our dead. So pointless. All of it." He gingerly touched his eyes, bloodshot and swollen from fatigue. "You must rest your back if it is to heal."

"You need some rest, too, Howard," said Gregor.

"No. If you could see the hospital..." Howard looked down at his hands. They were shaking badly.

"Only I begin to fear I will do more harm than good."

"Just for a few hours. Lie down. I promise I'll wake you," said Gregor.

Howard looked at him as if he couldn't quite process the words. "A few hours?"

"You *are* going to hurt somebody. Lie down." He stood up and pushed Howard back on the bed.

"Two' hours. No more," said Howard.

In the time it took Gregor to pull the blanket up, Howard was asleep. Gregor came out into the code room. Everyone was up again, back at work. Boots came over and put her arms up. He couldn't lift her, with his back and all, so he sat down and pulled her onto his lap.

"Ow," said Boots. She pressed her hand to her nose. "Ow." This was the sign she had used for Twitchtip, to indicate the rat's hurt nose, when she was still too little to say her name. "She died."

"Yeah," said Gregor, thinking. it had been better before Boots had understood about dying.

"You put her here," Boots said, patting his chest over his heart. Well, not exactly — she got the wrong side. But he knew she meant his heart.

"I'll put her there," Gregor confirmed. He caught Luxa's sad gaze. She had had her own connection with Twitchtip. They had protected each other in the maze for as long as they could.

Gregor set Boots back on her feet and went over to help Luxa with the strips of code. "I truly believed her dead, Gregor," she whispered.

"I know," said Gregor. "I guess I must have, too. But I didn't deal with it. I had, like, this fantasy that she'd escaped. She was safe back in the Dead Land or something."

"She is safe now," Luxa said wanly.

"That's how it works down here," Gregor said. Nothing was really safe until it was dead. He looked at Ripred, thought about the rat's family, and wished he hadn't yelled at him. If anyone knew about being tortured in a pit it was Ripred, who had been left by the Bane to die in the Firelands, his teeth overgrowing until they'd locked in a grotesque fashion. Ripred had treated Twitchtip like he treated almost everybody else. Not great. But Ripred hadn't killed her and if she had lived, Gregor felt sure he would have made good on his promise to let her join his band of rats. Not that it mattered now. A basket of new code rolls came in and Ripred put everybody, even those who had been translating the old stuff, on them. They had been working only a few minutes when Min began to click in distress. "Bad news, here be, bad news!" The cockroach was too agitated to read the message outright, so Luxa hurried to help her. She could translate the chicken scratch into letters and then break the code on sight now.

"When — diggers — reach — arena — launch — attack —" she read.

"What? Where?" asked Ripred, jumping to her side.

Luxa held up the strip of fabric so they could both see it.

"By the river," he read aloud.

"By the river," Luxa repeated. "No one can attack by the river. They would be torn to shreds in the rapids."

"Not anymore. Have you seen it lately? Since the earthquake?" said Gregor.

"No," said Luxa. She had been too ill to notice anything on their flight back from the Firelands.

"It's very low. They would have to swim down several hundred yards from the north beach, but they could do it," said Ripred.

"You have been in the war room. What defense have we in place at the docks?" asked Luxa.

"Nothing," said Ripred. "Nothing at all."

CHAPTER 20

Ripred began to pace. "All right. First priority. We split up the code team. If the rats should enter the palace, we can't have you all sitting in one bunch. I want Min, Reflex, and Luxa in the war room. Lizzie, Daedalus, and Heronian stay here. Shred every bit of evidence that we've broken the code. Gregor, Hazard, Boots, and Temp go to the prophecy room. Nerissa is there with a key. Lock yourselves in and don't open it until you've been told to."

"Why? I should be getting on my armor," said Gregor.

"You think you're in any condition for battle? Attack me," Ripred ordered.

Gregor's back screamed as he reached for his weapons. He managed to pull them from the belt but ended up dropping his dagger on the floor.

"You can't fight like that. Even if you could, we'd never waste you in ordinary combat now. We need you to fight the Bane. But don't worry. I don't expect he'll be swimming down the river," said Ripred. "They've got him hidden in a cave more likely, with a team of spinners to keep his tail bandaged."

"I thought the spinners were neutral," Luxa said, eyeing Reflex.

"Neutral meaning they help both sides so when the war ends they've aided the victor," said Ripred. "They're helping you, aren't they? Now move out!"

Gregor retrieved his dagger and took a step toward the door. "No, wait. I want Lizzie with me."

"Really? You want Lizzie in the prophecy room with nothing to do but... read prophecies all day?" said Ripred pointedly.

Gregor knew what he meant. Ripred had taken great care to keep Lizzie from knowing about the real "Prophecy of Time" and what it predicted for Gregor. Everybody had. If she came to the prophecy room, she'd read the truth.

"I'll be okay in here, Gregor. Ripred's right. We have to split up," said Lizzie.

"If danger approaches, I will find a way to fly her to safety," Daedalus said. "I know of a window not far from here."

"All right," said Gregor. Maybe that was better, anyway. Maybe Daedalus could even find a way to fly her home. "How long will this take?"

"No telling. Better grab some blankets and one of those carts," said Ripred, nodding to a group of fresh food carts that had recently been wheeled in.

Lizzie piled a stack of blankets on Temp's back and Boots climbed on to ride. Gregor tried to push a cart, but he ended up having to let Hazard do it.

"I will come see you as soon as I can," said Luxa, giving Gregor's arm a farewell touch.

The group split up, according to Ripred's instructions, and Gregor led the way to the prophecy room. It was very slow going, especially with the cart. Gregor considered abandoning it, but he had no idea what they were in for.

Nerissa was waiting for them. She drew them into the prophecy room, closed the door, and locked it at once. The key disappeared in the pocket of her skirt. She'd made no provisions for eating or sleeping, but there was a stack of new torches by the wall.

"Why did Ripred want us in here?" Gregor asked her.

"It is one of the few rooms in the palace with a door. It will offer some protection," said Nerissa.

"Some," agreed Gregor. But not much. The door was made of thick wood. It would take time, but the rats could eventually claw through it. He estimated that diggers could take it out in less than a minute. At least there would be some warning. He wondered if that mattered much, though. If Gregor didn't heal up pretty quickly, who would defend them? Nerissa had probably never even held a sword. Hazard and Boots were little kids. Temp could fight and would fight if the going got rough. But he'd be no match for rat soldiers.

Gregor decided to put all of his energy into getting better. Howard said he needed to rest, so he would rest. They fashioned the blankets into beds along the walls, and Gregor lay down. If he didn't move, the painkiller Howard had given him made him comfortable enough. He willed himself to ignore what was happening outside the door, and dozed off. Hours passed and then became days. Temp amused Boots and Hazard. The three of them chattered away in Crawler while Gregor ate, took painkillers, and slept. No one came by to give them any word. Occasionally they would hear footsteps running down the hallway and voices shouting indistinct words.

But nothing else. As Gregor's back improved, he became more and more anxious about what was transpiring in the palace. Had the rats attacked? Were the humans prepared? Why had no one updated them? He suggested that they open the door and just call out for information, but Nerissa adamantly refused.

"This is not your battle, Gregor," she said. "This is your time to wait."

Waiting, it turned out, was a lot tougher on Gregor than fighting. Nerissa tried to distract him by showing him different prophecies, telling him their histories. He learned a lot about Regalia's past, but not much about its present. "Come on, Nerissa, what's one little peek going to hurt?" he begged.

"Look at this poem, Gregor," said Nerissa. "It is by far my favorite. When all seems lost, I comfort myself with its words."

Gregor sighed and turned his eyes to a short poem on the wall in the corner where Nerissa usually curled up.

On soft feet, by none detected,

Dealing death, by most rejected,

Killed by claw, since resurrected,

Marked by X, two lines connected.

Finally, they intersected, two lines met, one unexpected.

"That comforts you? Why?" asked Gregor. To him it was just more junk from Sandwich, whom he now had a very low opinion of.

"Read you the title?" asked Nerissa.

Gregor noticed the title for the first time. Above the poem were written the words:

The Peacemaker

"Perfect. The Peacemaker," thought Gregor. What did Sandwich, the digger killer, know about making peace? "So you think a peacemaker's coming? When?" asked Gregor.

"No one knows. Perhaps tomorrow. Perhaps in a thousand years. But the peacemaker will come. Just as the warrior did," said Nerissa.

Something tugged at the back of Gregor's brain. The peacemaker. He'd heard it before. When? It came to him. A long time ago, when he had just arrived in Regalia for the second time, he'd been walking around the palace at night and overheard Solovet and Vikus arguing over whether or not he was to be trained. Solovet had wanted him armed immediately of course.

"And the prophecy calls Gregor 'the warrior,' after all. Not the 'peacemaker,'" she had said.

"Well, it's not me, Nerissa. And I won't be around when whoever it is shows up. But I hope they do," said Gregor. "Now can we open that door?"

Nerissa shook her head. He couldn't wrestle the key away from her. Well, he probably could but he didn't want to. Maybe when Nerissa fell asleep he could slip the key from her pocket and just look out for a second. He had to find out what was going on. Besides, the room could really stand some fresh air. They'd been using an empty pot by the door for a toilet and the place smelled like a sewer. While Gregor waited for Nerissa to sleep, he tried using his swords again. He was still sore, and there wasn't much room, but he could swing his blades. He figured he might be able to fight at about seventy-five percent, if it came to it, and that only made him feel more secure about his plan. Even if a couple of big old rats were sitting right outside the door waiting to pounce, he could take them.

By the time Nerissa had finally drifted off, Boots, Hazard, and Temp were asleep, too. This was just as well, because Gregor didn't really feel great about stealing the key. "Borrowing the key," he corrected himself. "And then I'll put it back before anyone knows it was gone." He crossed to Nerissa and carefully pulled the key out of her pocket. As quietly as he could, Gregor walked to the door and slid it in the keyhole. He was just about to turn it when he heard shouting. There were footsteps, scuffling, and a human cry. Then a tremendous blow hit the door, causing it to reverberate. Scraping, and then another blow followed by a rat claw that punctured the wood directly in front of Gregor's face. He automatically stepped back and pulled his blades. More shouts and footsteps. A gruesome gurgling sound from the rat. Blood seeping under the door. Silence.

Gregor turned and saw the others awake and looking at him in fear. He reached down, withdrew the key, and returned it to Nerissa without a word. She was nice enough not to say, "I told you so."

The seconds ticked by. So rats were definitely in the palace. Possibly right outside the door. There was a small opening, about the size of a peephole, left by the rat claw, but as there was no light in the hall, Gregor could see nothing. His anxiety grew with every passing minute. Rats were in the palace. They had found him. Had they found Lizzie? Luxa? What was going on? When would someone contact them? He could fight now. He should be fighting. But what if he left and the prophecy room was attacked

again? That door wouldn't hold long. Who would protect Boots and Hazard and Temp and Nerissa?

Gregor's head jerked up as the claws scraped the door. He took careful aim and drove his sword right through the peephole.

"Well, at least you're useful again," he heard Ripred from behind the door. "Open up in there! The palace is secure!" Nerissa unlocked the door to reveal Ripred, who was bloodstained but not visibly wounded.

Questions began pouring out of Gregor's mouth but Ripred cut him off. "Many are dead, but everyone of significance to you still breathes. We were able to defend the city thanks to your sister's breaking the Code of Claw. The rats have been driven away, but they will regroup and rally around the Bane. We need you in the war room now, boy." He turned to Nerissa. "I will send instructions for the rest of you later. Until then, sit tight."

Gregor followed Ripred through the halls where kids his age were loading dead humans, rats, and mice on stretchers and removing them. Sometimes it took six of them to carry a body. "They're too young to be doing that," he thought. Then he remembered what he and Luxa had been doing lately, and it seemed like a pretty tame job. Of course, he was different. He'd left any vestiges of childhood behind months ago. Hadn't he?

The war room was crowded with people and creatures, but Gregor's attention immediately went to Luxa. She must have been in battle. Although her clothes were clean she wore a fresh bandage on her forehead. Her cough was back, too.

"You shouldn't have fought," said Gregor, tucking in a stray edge of her bandage.

"This is my home," said Luxa. "How fares your back?"

"Good to go," said Gregor.

"Excellent," said Solovet. "We shall be leaving to pursue the gnawers shortly."

"I will send for Aurora," said Luxa.

"No, Luxa. You are unfit. And we need you here," said Solovet.

"You cannot ask me to stay behind," said Luxa. "Not after what has been done to Regalia."

"But stay you must," say Solovet.

Luxa cocked her head slightly. "Must I?" Gregor could feel a battle of wills coming on and felt guilty because he was on Solovet's side. He didn't

want Luxa going after the rats for a number of reasons. She wasn't well; he wanted her somewhere safe; and, mostly, he didn't want her to see him die.

Ripred stepped between Luxa and Solovet. "Listen, Your Highness, it's Regalia we're thinking of. We're going out to finish this thing. But when it's over, your people will be desperate for guidance. Rats overran the council room and almost none survived save your grandparents, who are acknowledged to be powerful, but no longer trustworthy. It will be you the Regalians expect to lead them."

"He speaks the truth, Luxa," said Solovet. "With the demise of the council, power will shift to you."

"I am not yet of age," said Luxa. "You know I cannot officially lead."

"It doesn't matter. Not in times like these. Not after the courage and brains you've demonstrated recently. Trust me, it will be you. If they followed you into this war they will follow you out of it. Now can you see how you are too dear to risk in battle?" asked Ripred.

He didn't sound like he was flattering her, just laying it out on the table, equal to equal.

Luxa stared at Ripred, considering his question. Then she dropped her eyes to the ground. "Yes, I do see. I will remain here."

Ripred and Solovet exchanged a pleased look and were turning back to the business of war when Gregor saw the ghost of a smile playing on the corners of Luxa's mouth. "She's lying," he said. Disbelief, hurt, and then rage washed in rapid succession over Luxa's face at his words.

"Why do you say this?" asked Solovet.

"Because I know her. If you want her to stay ..." Gregor had to swallow hard before he could get the next words out. "Lock her in the dungeon."

CHAPTER 21

Solovet studied Luxa a moment and then gestured to a pair of guards. "Do so. Confine her flier, as well."

Gregor forced himself to watch as they seized her and carried her, screaming, down the hall. She was beating at the guards but her words were for Gregor, full of hatred at his disloyalty. The things she said cut right through him. That she should never have trusted him. That he was as bad as Henry had been. And while it was not included in her rant, Gregor felt sure that he had lost all of the affection she had ever felt for him. His feelings, on the other hand, had only intensified when he betrayed her. So he watched until the guards turned the corner at the end of the hall, taking her out of his life forever. Even the sight of Luxa despising him was precious to him now.

When she was gone, his hand fumbled in his back pocket to make sure he still had the photograph they'd taken in the museum. It was there. He didn't pull it out. But later, in some tunnel or cave, while the others slept, he would spend some time with it. Tell the picture of Luxa what he would never have the chance to explain to her in person.

"It was a wise move, Gregor. She will always hate you for it, but with time, she will understand its necessity," said Solovet briskly. She went back to study the map on the wall.

Somehow having Solovet's approval didn't make Gregor feel any better. He disliked her so much. And she thought things like turning the plague into a weapon and setting rats on fire were wise moves. He would much rather have had her condemn him.

Vikus came up and patted his arm. Gregor hadn't even known the old man was in the room. "She will not always hate you. If she still cares for Henry, who put her life in jeopardy, will she not care for you who tried to save it?"

"I doubt she sees it that way," said Gregor. "It's done. Let's not talk about it."

"We shall depart from the river in one hour. Gregor, you must go to the armory to prepare," Solovet said.

One hour? Was that all that was left? "I'll dress. on the trip. I want to be with my sisters," said Gregor.

"They will be accompanying us," said Solovet. "Lizzie still may have use as a code-breaker. Boots will rally the crawlers. Rest assured, I shall keep them at a good distance from the battle."

There was no arguing with Solovet. And her reasons for taking his sisters were valid. Still...

"They'll be safe," Ripred said. "Count on it. One rager to another."

When Gregor went to the armory, food had been brought for him. After he ate, Miravet sent him to a nearby bathroom to bathe. Everything had a feeling of finality to it. Last hot meal, last bath, last set of clothes. As he was dressing, Howard came in to treat his wounds. "You look a lot better," said Gregor.

"Because I slept for two straight days," said Howard.

"Oh, man! I was supposed to wake you. Sorry, Ripred sent me down to the prophecy room and I totally forgot," said Gregor.

"Do not trouble yourself. I am practically the only coherent person in the hospital. There should be at least one," said Howard. "Your wounds are much improved." He removed the stitches from Gregor's calf, although he left the ones on his hip, and put on fresh bandages. Then he refilled Gregor's bottle of painkiller. "Well, then," said Howard, rising. "I must get back."

"Last time I'll see Howard," Gregor thought. He stood up and hugged him good-bye. "You'll keep an eye on Luxa, right?"

"As if she were my own sister," Howard said. "Fly you high, Gregor."

"Fly you high," said Gregor. He wished he could have said more. About how grateful he was to Howard for all he'd done, about how if he'd had a big brother, he would have wanted him to be just like Howard. Someone who was kind and brave and not afraid to say he cared about things or to admit he'd been wrong. But now Luxa would have Howard for a brother, and that was more important. Gregor's armor had been retrieved from the balcony, cleaned, and repaired. Miravet had made some adjustments to make it fit more comfortably over his injuries. When he was suited up, a little girl hurried in with the pink backpack Gregor had taken on his last trip to the Firelands. He had tossed it somewhere in the hospital, forgetting about it in his worry for Luxa. It contained the flashlight York had returned to him, batteries, duct tape, water bottles, Lizzie's cookies, and the travel chessboard. "Howard bid me bring you this," said the little girl. "He thought you might need it."

"Tell him 'thanks.' It will be a big help," said Gregor. The girl gave him a shy smile and ran off.

When Gregor arrived at the dock on the river, he found a solemn ritual going on. The Underlanders were doing funeral rites for the dead. Each human, bat, or mouse body was placed on a small raft of some kind of woven plant fiber. A torch was inserted in a holder at their shoulder. A woman softly chanted some words Gregor couldn't catch. Then the raft was set in the river and released. Although it was not as fierce as it had been before the earthquake, the current was still strong enough to quickly carry the rafts away. As far as he could see down the river tunnel, torches reflected off of the water.

So this was how they buried their dead. Sent them on a lit raft down the river to the Waterway, the giant sea, where they would be swallowed up by the waves. It made sense. There was little earth to bury them in. Gregor had seen what he would call soil only in the jungle and in the farmlands. Stones might work, but it would have to be somewhere outside of the city. You could burn the corpses, if there were only a couple, but hundreds? The air would be thick with smoke. There were no strong winds here, like there were in the Firelands, to blow it away.

The six kids he had seen earlier hauled in a stretcher with a dead rat. It was dumped into the river with no ceremony.

Ares landed on the dock next to him. "Lot of dead," said Gregor.

"Yes," said Ares. "Hundreds have made this journey already."

"How did you fight the rats?" Gregor asked. He wanted to know what had happened while he was in the prophecy room.

"When word came of the invasion, the gnawers were just entering the water from the tunnel north of here. We waited until they were swimming and attacked from the air. It was very difficult for them to swim and defend themselves, but they had great numbers. Many were destroyed but some made it into the palace. A group raided the hospital, killing the patients. Others swarmed through the halls, fighting where they met resistance. Eventually they were driven back out to river, and those who could swam for safety," said Ares.

"No Bane?" asked Gregor.

"No Bane. He has retreated toward his own land. The others will find him and regroup their army," said Ares.

It took Gregor a moment to recognize the mouse they placed on the next raft. He looked smaller, more vulnerable, dead. "Is that Cartesian?"

"He died defending the nursery," said Ares. "But the pups are safe."

Gregor felt sadness well up in him. He hadn't known the mouse well, but they had traveled together. Witnessed the nibblers dying at the volcano. Played hide-and-seek with Boots and the mouse pups. He went over and patted the mouse's soft fur before they lowered his body into the water. Ripred had said, "Everyone of significance to you still breathes." By that he must have meant Gregor's family and Luxa. But there were many others who Gregor cared about. Who knew if they were alive or dead?

The rest of the traveling party arrived. Lizzie, Hazard, and Boots were blindfolded and being carried by guards. "No point in giving them nightmares," said Ripred. Gregor thought of the grisly halls and was glad of the precaution.

Ares was best suited to carrying Ripred, so Gregor, his sisters, and Temp joined Vikus on his big gray bat, Euripedes. Solovet was beside them on her bat, Ajax.

"Greetings, Piness," Gregor heard Boots say behind him. He turned around and saw her peeking at Nike from under her blindfold.

"Greetings, Piness," said Nike, lifting her black-and-white-striped wings.'

"We are both Pinesses," Boots said with a laugh.

Gregor pulled the blindfold down over her eyes. "Stay in there, you." He turned to Nike. "Good to see you. You coming with us?"

"I am carrying some of the code team," said Nike. Reflex and Heronian climbed on her back. "Daedalus and Min remain here."

"Isn't their job done now?" asked Gregor.

"There's still plenty of information to decipher," Ripred said. "And the code could unexpectedly change."

As they lifted off, Gregor realized there were so many friends he hadn't said good-bye to. Mareth, Dulcet, Nerissa, Aurora — well, forget Aurora, she was locked in the dungeon with Luxa, and probably cursing him, too. Maybe it was just as well. Even that one good-bye with Howard had drained him. And there were still more painful ones in the hours ahead. He thought his friends would understand.

They flew down the tunnel and out over the Waterway. It twinkled with the flames of the torches on the rafts of the dead. About fifty soldiers on

fliers joined them, and there were several mice traveling as well. "Are the mice coming to fight?" Gregor asked Vikus.

"Not these. They have a special purpose. The rats are still receiving information from their spies in the area. We have chosen four lines of communication to sabotage. We will disable a rat who transmits the code, replace it with a nibbler, and feed false information to the rats," said Vikus. Gregor saw a group of soldiers and a nibbler peel off and disappear into the dark.

"There goes the first team now."

"What sort of information will you give the rats?" Gregor asked.

"Lies. We will tell them that our losses are higher than expected, that no force can be assembled to follow them, that you have died due to injuries inflicted by the Bane," said Vikus. "Since the rats do not know we have broken the Code of Claw, they will take these things as truth."

"That's why Ripred wanted to keep it a secret," said Gregor.

"It is the most powerful weapon we have. The difference between losing and winning the war," said Vikus. "The rats will believe they are safe for the moment. But soon we will attack them on the Plain of Tartarus, where they now gather."

"A surprise attack," said Gregor.

"When they are asleep, with no plan for counterattack," said Vikus. "It is our best hope. Regalia still teeters on the brink of destruction. The diggers have created paths to our arena and possibly elsewhere. We destroyed the ones we could find but who knows how many exist? If the Bane lives and the rats attack again, I do not think we can hold the city."

By the time they broke for a rest at the mouth of a tunnel, their party was somewhat diminished. All of the nibbler code transmitters and their guards had left them. The soldiers had stopped at a landing a few miles back. Solovet had not been on the ground more than five minutes when she announced she was going off, too.

"Where?" asked Gregor.

"The spinners are still conflicted about whom they choose to side with. They require my personal guarantee of their safety when the war ends," said Solovet.

"I will rejoin you in two days' time on the Plain of Tartarus. If you battle before then, do not forget that your weakness is your left side."

And then she took off on Ajax with Gregor's old bodyguards, Horatio and Marcus, flanking her on their bats. It was just like her to up and go with nothing more than a combat tip.

It turned out they were making camp for a while. Ripred and Vikus had their heads together, poring over maps. Lizzie, Reflex, and Heronian were busy decoding messages that came in on bats. Nike, Ares, and the two remaining guards and their bats took turns patrolling the area. Boots, Temp, and Hazard were playing one of their games in Crawler.

Gregor was left to his own devices. He went deeper into the tunnel and practiced with his sword and dagger. His back was still sore, but he didn't think he would even notice it in battle. It felt good to use his muscles. When he was warmed up, he added in his echolocation, running through the tunnel in darkness and then striking points on the walls and ceiling. It was very freeing not to be constantly worried about his batteries running out.

After about a half hour he was good and loose. He decided to try to get Ripred to spar with him for a while. Maybe he could use a break from those maps. But when Gregor reached the mouth of the tunnel, no one was doing anything. All of the activity had stopped.

"What's going on?" asked Gregor.

"We just intercepted a message. The rats know of Solo vet's trip to the spinners. They mean to ambush and kill her," said Ripred.

"How do they know?" Gregor asked. "Did they spot us?"

"No. One of the spinners must have leaked the information. Perhaps a lowly soldier, perhaps the queen herself. Their loyalties are very divided," said Vikus. He looked calm, but his skin had a strange gray cast.

"We'll go after her. Ares and me. We can overtake them. We've got, like, fifty soldiers with us and—" Gregor began.

"No, boy. We can't," said Ripred.

"But she's got next to zero backup. You're just letting her fly to her death?" said Gregor.

"Yes. We are. We must," said Vikus, as if trying to convince himself.

"Okay, I don't know what's going on. I mean, I don't even like Solovet, but I'm not going to just sit here and let her die!" said Gregor.

"You have to, Gregor!" Lizzie said. "Don't you see? If we rescue her they'll know we've broken the code."

"What?" asked Gregor.

"The only way we could have read the message is if we had broken the code. If they find that out, there will be no surprise attack, because they will instantly change their rendezvous point. All of the lies we are planting will be suspect. And they will issue a new code immediately that may take weeks to break," said Ripred.

"But you found out about the rats attacking from the river and you acted on that," said Gregor.

"That was simple to explain. They were so close; we had only to send some scouts up the river and pretend to discover them. This is entirely different," said Ripred.

"She would not want us to try to save her," Vikus said hoarsely. "Not at this price."

"But... maybe we could ... maybe we could make it look like we were just going after her, anyway," Gregor suggested. "That wouldn't be suspicious."

"Wouldn't it? If she had wanted to travel with an army she would have traveled with an army. One showing up at the eleventh hour will point directly to the breaking of the Code of Claw," said Ripred.

Gregor was still not quite ready to accept this. "There must be something we can do."

"There is," Ripred said. "We can sit here and wait."

CHAPTER 22

So Gregor sat and waited as the seconds went by. Not with the urgent ticks he had heard so often since the war began, but with slow deliberate ones that had long silences between them.

The code team continued decrypting messages. They couldn't afford to be idle no matter what the circumstances. Boots, who didn't really know what was going on, fell asleep on a pile of blankets. Temp and Hazard resumed their discussion in whispers. But Gregor, Ripred, and Vikus seemed suspended in time as they waited for word of the ambush.

"Maybe they missed them," thought Gregor. "Or there was a fight and Solovet, Marcus, and Horatio were able to hold their own and escape." Why not? They were on bats and were excellent soldiers. But whenever Gregor sneaked a glance at Vikus's ashen face, he felt that this would not be the case. He wished he hadn't said that thing about not liking Solovet. He didn't, though. How could he after her involvement with the plague and her throwing him in the dungeon, and Ripred's warning that she would never let his family go? In a way if she died it would probably be easier for Ripred to get his family home. Of course, if what -they had said about Luxa being in power after the war was true, Gregor was sure she would send his family home, no matter what her grandmother said. Wouldn't she? He was glad he still had Ripred's promise as a backup.

Solovet. No, he could not pretend he liked her. Still, there had been moments along the way when she had treated him decently enough. When he'd landed in Regalia she'd been the first person to reach out and touch him, taking his hands in a gesture of welcome that had felt genuine. She had protected him by insisting he be trained, and now he knew that if she hadn't he would be dead. And she'd given him her own dagger. He fingered the hilt guiltily, thinking of how she was under attack without it. At least he had tried to go after her, despite his feelings for her. He hoped whoever broke the news to Luxa would mention that. Maybe she wouldn't hate him quite so much.

After a couple of hours, Heronian said quietly, "We have received word. All three humans and their fliers were killed in the ambush."

Ripred ran a paw over the diagonal scar on his face. "Well, I have this to remember her by."

So Solovet had given Ripred that scar. When? During a war between the humans and the rats? During a sparring match they'd had for fun? Gregor thought about how Solovet had left all kinds of scars, on rats, on her family, on the Underlanders' frail attempts at peace.

Ripred turned to Vikus. "That's the way she always said she wanted to go."

"Fighting." Vikus's lips formed the word but no sound came out.

"Yes, fighting. Not on some sickbed but with her sword in her hand," said Ripred.

Gregor tried to think of something consoling to say to Vikus, but he was never good at this stuff. Howard was, Luxa was, but all of the words he came up with seemed trite and empty. It was even more difficult because while he knew Vikus must have loved Solovet — they'd probably been married for, like, forty years or something — he also knew they had fought a lot. Their ideas on how to handle problems were totally different: Solovet calling for force, Vikus for working things out. When he discovered his wife's role in the plague, Vikus had been crushed. But he must have loved her, because he was utterly stricken now.

Hazard came over and kneeled next to Vikus, slipping his hand into his grandfather's. Vikus gave it a squeeze but didn't say anything.

"Sorry about your grandma, Hazard," Gregor said. He could manage that. "You okay?"

"Yes. In truth, I do not know how to feel. Solovet rarely spoke to me. I don't think she cared for me. Perhaps it was because she and my father hated each other so much," said Hazard with his usual frankness.

The words were simple and without malice, but their effect on Vikus was immediate and devastating. Solovet and Hamnet. All of the awful family history between his wife and his son — the tragedy at the Garden of Hesperides, Hamnet's mad flight from Regalia, the anger that passed between them in the jungle, losing Hamnet not once but twice.

Vikus made a strange sound in his throat. His hand went toward his cheek, then fell to his side. "Vikus? You all right there?" Ripred asked. Vikus tried to answer but the words that came out of his mouth were thick and garbled. "Doctor!" Ripred called at once. "Get a doctor in here!".

Ripred continued to talk to Vikus, pushing his nose right up into his face, urging him to stay calm. In less than a minute a doctor had flown in,

taken one look at Vikus, dumped something down his throat, and had him loaded onto a bat.

Hazard hung on the doctor's sleeve. "What's wrong with my grandfather?"

"He is having an attack. We must get him back to Regalia," said the doctor.

"Is he going to be okay?" asked Gregor. His voice sounded almost as young as Hazard's. Half of Vikus's face had gone slack and Gregor realized he couldn't move it. It was scary to see him like that. Gregor didn't want Vikus to leave him. He didn't want to lose the one Underlander whom he knew had always had his best interest at heart.

"We will do all we can," said the doctor, and the bat took off.

"A stroke," said Ripred. "I'm surprised it didn't happen sooner. This last year has been murder on him."

"Was it what I said? About my father?" Hazard asked worriedly.

"Goodness, no. It would have happened with or without your words. Now you go back and, I don't know, see if you can't help with the code, okay?" said Ripred. Hazard obeyed. When he was out of earshot, Ripred whispered to Gregor, "Probably not the best time to have brought up all that business with Hamnet. But he would have been thinking about it, anyway."

"People recover from strokes, though. Right?" Gregor asked.

"Some do. With time," said Ripred. He didn't seem to want to continue the conversation.

The cave seemed very vacant without Solovet and Vikus. "Now what?" said Gregor.

"Now I need a human who can command. Mareth's back in Regalia...." said Ripred. He sent for Perdita. When she arrived, he got right to the point. "Solovet's dead. Vikus is disabled. You just became the acting head of your army."

Perdita looked shocked and then conflicted. "There are others with more seniority."

"I don't want them. I want you," said Ripred. "I need someone we can all trust." Ripred began to go over the battle plan with Perdita, leaving Gregor to deal with the double tragedy on his own. First Solovet, then Vikus. Although Vikus might recover. If he didn't...Gregor's thoughts turned to Luxa again. He slipped the photo of them in the museum from his pocket and tried to think of happier times, but it was no good. He kept visualizing

her face at the moment he had told them to lock her in the dungeon. He couldn't stand that being the last thing between them. He got a strip of code and asked Lizzie for a marker. She was writing with a quill and ink. "The markers all dried out," she said. She dug a red one out of her backpack. "You might get a few more letters out of this one. If you get the tip wet."

Gregor spat in the cap of the marker, closed it, and let it sit a minute. He would have to make his note short. He thought about writing it in the Code of Claw, but if the rats intercepted it, they would know it was broken. He settled on using the marks from the Tree of Transmission. That would make it seem a little more private somehow. After a couple of minutes he opened the marker and tested it. The results were faint but legible. He wrote:

LUXA

/\|\\|/|||/.|\|.|/|/\|.|||\.///\|.|||\./|||//.|\|\\|\\|.

"Go ahead," he thought. "Write it. You'll be dead before she even reads it. And anyway, it's true."

/.|\|/|||\\|.|||/|.

GREGOR

The last few words were too hard to read. Gregor nicked his index finger on his sword and wrote over them with a thin, smearsy line of blood. There.

It wasn't much of a letter. He felt stingy using just thirteen words. But even if he'd had boxes of markers, what more would he have said? Maybe explained better why one of them had to live. So both of them could. So one of them would remember the other as they went through life. That it wasn't going to be him, so it had to be her. And he had to be able to think of her growing up and doing things and someday being happy if he was going to be brave enough for his last moments with the Bane. Luxa was smart. She'd figure out what he meant. He hoped.

Gregor rolled up the message and gave it to Lizzie to deliver to Luxa in Regalia.

"Why don't you give it to her yourself?" asked Lizzie.

"Because she's really mad at me right now," said Gregor. "She'll read it, though, if she thinks it's from you. Besides, you'll probably go back before I do." Lizzie agreed to take it. Gregor wondered if Lizzie would hate him, too, when she found out he'd been lying to her all along about the prophecy.

Gregor announced he was going to practice some more and went back into the tunnel. Then he just lay down on the stone floor with his head

propped against a rock. He didn't feel like sword fighting, so he turned off his flashlight and clicked. His echolocation ability was improving by leaps and bounds. He could see so much — the jagged edges of the ceiling, individual pebbles on the floor, even small details in the rough surface of the walls. He experimented using different sounds — coughing, humming, whistling. In a quiet moment, he realized that even the sound of his own breathing could send images back to him. He felt comforted, because that meant as long as he was alive he would be able to see.

His heart rate slowed and he dozed, slipping in and out of sleep, alternating between dreams and images of the tunnel. Fear crept into his dreams. He was lying helplessly on his back, when a rat appeared over him, then another, then he was surrounded by their faces. Gregor shook his head to awaken only to find he hadn't truly been asleep. The rats were still looming over him, and they were real.

Without even attempting to rise, Gregor yanked his sword from his belt and sliced the air over his body to protect it. The rats fell back, giving him a chance to spring to his feet. By this time his dagger was out and he was about to start killing, when the voice reached his brain: "Stop, Overlander!"

Gregor hesitated. He knew the rat's voice. It was higher-pitched than Ripred's rough growl. Female. But not Twirltongue's silver tones that had so easily led him astray. Twitchtip? No, she was dead. And this voice didn't belong on his voyage across the Waterway, or in the impossible twists and turns of the rat's maze. It came with memories of jungle heat and sweat and the smell of sweet deadly blossoms. He clicked and tried to focus in on the speaker. "Lapblood?"

"Yes, it's me. Put away your sword. We're not here to fight you," said Lapblood.

Gregor clicked again. The small pack of rats was hanging back, none of them in attack position. He slowly slid his blades back in his belt. Rat or no rat, he didn't think Lapblood would lie to him. Not after what they had been through together. Besides, if the rats had been after his blood, they'd have taken him on the ground. "What are you doing here?"

"We've come to join with Ripred against the Bane," said Lapblood. "I'm supposed to meet him now for our battle orders."

"For real? How many of you are there?" said Gregor. Echolocation was great, but he wanted to use his eyes again. He snapped on his flashlight,

causing the rats to squint in the sudden brightness. "Sorry." He pointed the beam to the floor.

"There are a dozen of us here in the tunnel. But hundreds wait in the caves below," said Lapblood.

"Hundreds?" Gregor said. He knew Ripred had a small band of rats loyal to him in the Dead Land, but where had hundreds come from?

"Did you think every rat wanted the Bane for their leader?" asked Lapblood. "That we would willingly live under his rule?"

"Pretty much," admitted Gregor. "I mean, except for Ripred, we haven't seen a whole lot of resistance from you guys."

"Well, you're wrong," retorted Lapblood. "Many of us have no use for that bloodthirsty, twisted creature or the connivance of those who guide him."

"That's good to hear," said Gregor. He noticed two smaller rats crouched at Lapblood's side. They were too big to be called pups, but they weren't fully grown, either. "Are they ...?" He didn't want to say the names in case he was wrong. "Who are they?"

"Flyfur and Sixclaw. My children," said Lapblood.

The children she had gone to the jungle to save by finding the cure to the plague. Mange's children, too, then, although he had never lived to see them again. He'd been ensnared and eaten by giant carnivorous plants. But his pups had lived. Gregor peered closely at them. They stared back, scared but tough. "You look a lot like your dad," he said, and was surprised by the emotion in his voice, by how moved and glad he was that they'd survived.

"And your mother?" asked Lapblood.

It seemed like an eternity since anyone had asked him that. People avoided the topic of his mother's health in general, as if bringing it up was just a painful reminder of her sickness. But Lapblood knew better. "She's okay, I think. I mean, she was real sick from the plague, but she got better. Only last time I saw her she had pneumonia and they evacuated her to the Fount. It turned out to be a good thing, because the hospital at Regalia was so packed, but I haven't had any news of her since. Ripred says he'll get her home for me. After the war. Since I can't. Ripred says he will." Gregor realized he was babbling and pulled himself together. "Thanks for asking."

Gregor had a sudden impulse to touch Lapblood, to place his hand on her head and feel that silky fur again. But he knew that would seem weird,

if not downright threatening, to the other rats. So he just headed up the tunnel. "Come on. Ripred's up here."

Lapblood followed him while the rest of the rats remained deep in the tunnel. This was just as well. Gregor was afraid the arrival of even one rat might start a panic attack in Lizzie. But she took her cue from Ripred, and he was pleased to see Lapblood.

"Good. You made it. How many do we have?" he asked her right off.

"At least seven hundred. Perhaps as many as a thousand," said Lapblood.

Ripred raised his eyebrows, a bit impressed. "That many? You've been busy."

"Where do you want us?" asked Lapblood. Ripred quickly gave her a time, position, and instructions. She nodded, turned to Gregor, and said, "Thank you for what you did in the jungle."

Gregor had saved her life, but Lapblood had saved Boots. "You, too."

Lapblood touched her muzzle to his wrist, then she was gone.

"Just another good-bye," thought Gregor. Another last time. But it was nothing compared to the ones he would have to face in the next couple of days.

Ripred ordered them all to bed. Gregor's slumber was deep and dreamless. He was awakened by Ripred's nose nudging his shoulder. Gregor rubbed his eyes and looked around. No one else was up. "Over here," the rat whispered, and Gregor followed him to the far end of the cave. "This is the day," Ripred said.

"The day I die," Gregor thought. But he only said, "So soon?"

"Yes. We have to move fast. But there's something I want to say to you in private," said Ripred. "It's regarding a certain line in 'The Prophecy of Time.'"

The warrior's death. "Here it comes," thought Gregor. He braced himself for the good-bye, but the rat's next words were something entirely unexpected.

"The thing is ..." said Ripred. He glanced around to make sure everyone else was still sleeping. "The thing is, I don't believe in Sandwich's prophecies."

CHAPTER 23

Gregor was floored. "What? But you ... always do what they say."

"No, I don't. If I really believed in them, would I have run after the Bane and tried to kill him myself? It would have been pointless. I pretend like I believe in them, even try to convince myself I do for short periods, because everybody else down here does. So if you want to make them do something, it has to fit the prophecies, you see?" said the rat.

"Not really," said Gregor. What was Ripred saying?

"Look, there are hundreds of prophecies predicting all kinds of things. If you wait around long enough, numerous events that resemble each and every one of them are bound to come up. Take that plague. We've had loads of plagues down here. Might have been interpreted to fit any of them," said Ripred.

"But you're always trying to interpret them," Gregor said.

"I have to. If I don't come up with some reasonable interpretation of them first, someone else comes up with a foolish one," said Ripred. "And then it's a whole lot of extra work changing everyone's minds."

"What about in the jungle? After the ants destroyed the starshade and we had all given up," Gregor protested.

"I really thought Neveeve might have been right about the starshade being the cure. When it was gone, you were all ready to start digging your graves. The idea that we might have misinterpreted the prophecy was the only way to get you moving. I jumped on it. And we kept thinking. And we found the cure. The alternative was to let everyone sit there boo-hooing until they died," said Ripred.

Gregor frowned. "What about the warrior stuff? And me leaping?"

"Maybe you only leaped because that prophecy suggested that was the thing to do," said Ripred. "Maybe that children's song about killing the mice really only was a children's song. Maybe Sandwich was a madman who locked himself up and wrote crazy poems on the wall. And maybe — you're not going to die."

Not going to die? The words hit Gregor like a truck. Could it be possible? No, everyone knew he was going to die. He would prove it to Ripred. Gregor tried hard to think of one incident that could not be

contested. "But... how about Nerissa? When she was a little girl, she told Hamnet he would be in the jungle with a hisser and a kid ten years later."

"I admit that one's hard to explain. Unless Hamnet sought out a hisser because of her suggestion and then didn't say no when Hazard's mother appeared in his life. Or it could be a strange coincidence. They do happen. Anyway, Nerissa is not Sandwich, and it's him we're talking about," said Ripred. "'The Prophecy of Time.' Look how easily we bent it to replace Boots with Lizzie. What does it really call for? A war? We have those all the time. A code? Every new war has a new code. The death of a warrior? Well, if we can swap princesses so easily, why not warriors? Thousands will be dead at the end of this mess. But I'm not convinced you will be. One rager to another, I think you can beat the Bane. I think you're better than he is. And I don't think any mumbo jumbo of Sandwich's can change that. Unless you let it. So you fight, Gregor the Overlander. And don't you let your guard down for a second because you think anything's inevitable!"

Gregor's head was spinning with this new way of thinking. That they were really fulfilling Sandwich's prophecies on their own. Basing decisions on what his words said. He gave an incredulous laugh. "I thought you were going to tell me good-bye."

"No such luck," snorted Ripred. "But keep this under your hat. If everyone finds out what I really believe, I'll lose what little credibility I have. Come on, let's wake up the others. It's going to be a long day."

Gregor went over and blew raspberries on Boots's stomach, so she woke up giggling. "Stop! I need more sleeping!" she said, and pretended to go back to sleep three times to get more wake-up raspberries. As Gregor hauled her over to eat breakfast, Boots poked him in the chest. "You seem like you again," she said.

"I seem like me again?" Gregor asked. Then he knew what she meant. He hadn't really teased Boots in a while. Hardly ever smiled even. But Ripred's words had given him something he'd abandoned since he'd first read "The Prophecy of Time." Hope. That he might live. That Sandwich was wrong.

He wondered if the rat was lying to make him fight his best. But he didn't think so. Ripred's not believing in the prophecies explained certain things. Not just why he had tried to kill the Bane himself but how easily he had tossed out Boots for Lizzie, and how he had always been so sarcastic about Nerissa's ability to see the future. Probably didn't want her coming up

with a whole new room of prophecies to control people. Not that Ripred didn't use the prophecies to his advantage. He had manipulated Gregor repeatedly with them. Even used the warrior's death to get Gregor to let Lizzie stay. But the rat was always doing whatever it took to get his way.

Gregor realized something else, too. He didn't want to believe in the prophecies, either. Not just because they forecast his death but because he loathed Sandwich. Ever since he had learned about how he had murdered the diggers for the land that was now Regalia, Gregor had wanted to distance himself from the man. To discredit him. To reject his guidance. Now Ripred had given him a way. "It's just me and the Bane. And I'm fighting him because he killed all of those innocent mice and people, and I have to stop him. Not because Sandwich says so but because I say so. And Ripred's right. I'm better than the Bane. And I can do it," he thought.

So Gregor was able to get through the moment he had dreaded above all others: saying good-bye to his sisters. He fixed up the pink backpack, refilling the water bottles and putting fresh batteries in his one remaining flashlight, and gave it to them to keep.

"Won't you need the flashlight in battle?" Lizzie asked with concern.

"I cracked that echolocation thing," Gregor whispered in her ear, and her eyes widened in surprise.

"Wow. Will you teach me?" she asked.

"You bet," said Gregor. "And look here." He pulled out the travel chessboard.

"I found it in the museum. It's yours."

"For keeps?" asked Lizzie. "Jedidiah has a chessboard, but not a magnetic one."

"Yeah. He's going to be real jealous," said Gregor.

Boots tried to poke her nose in the backpack. "Where's my present?"

"Your present?" asked Gregor. He dug out the rest of Mrs. Cormaci's oatmeal raisin cookies, still wrapped in foil. "You get the cookies."

"Oh!" said Boots. "All for me?"

"Well, you'd better share at least one with Ripred," said Gregor.

Boots shared with everyone, even tucking two cookies in Gregor's pocket so that he and Ares could have a snack later. Then it was time to go. Gregor pulled both of his sisters into his arms and held them tight. "You guys be good, okay?"

"Okay," said Lizzie.

"I am good," said Boots.

"I know. I love you. See you soon," said Gregor.

"See you soon," they both echoed.

Ripred had already given Ares directions to their position at the Plain of Tartarus. "Remember, Gregor, they think you're dead. So don't let them see you until the Bane appears."

"Got it," Gregor said.

"All right. Fly you high, you two," said Ripred.

"Run like the river, Ripred," said Gregor. And then Ares took off. They flew through the darkness that was no longer darkness to Gregor. While clicks and coughs produced brighter results, he concentrated on using his breathing to see. The images were not quite as clear but they were continuous, since he was either inhaling or exhaling as a matter of course. And the longer he relied on the breathing, the more distinct his surroundings became. In about an hour they had reached their destination. Ares landed on the floor of a small tunnel just before a wall made of a pile of large rocks. Beyond it, Gregor sensed emptiness. He dismounted cautiously and made his way to the wall. Hanging his head over, he let out a deep breath. His mind registered a cavern so vast he could not find the other end of it. The walls sloped up at a steep angle. Far below him, the floor was occupied by the single largest gathering of rats Gregor had ever encountered. There must have been well over a thousand, sleeping, fidgeting, nursing their wounds. Ordinarily Gregor would have been more concerned with them catching his scent. But the air was heavy with the smell of rotten eggs, which he remembered from his first journey, when Ripred had dragged them all through dripping caves, soaking them in sulfurous liquid to conceal their natural odor. This time, the smell seemed to be coming from a mist that rose out of a foul river winding its way along the side of the cavern. Even at this distance, Gregor was pretty sure that there was nothing alive in that water.

"So this is the Plain of Tartarus?" Gregor whispered to Ares.

"Yes. You can see it?" the bat whispered back.

"Yeah. Ripred finally knocked echolocation into my head," said Gregor. "I have to admit, it's cool. You see the Bane anywhere?"

"No. He must be nearby, though. He is the reason they have come here," said Ares.

They settled themselves down to wait. Gregor passed Ares a cookie and ate the other. If he did end up dead, he was glad the last taste in his mouth came from Mrs. Cormaci's kitchen. But he was no longer so resigned to dying. Not after what Ripred had said. Then it occurred to him that he was not alone; he was only half of a team, and it might be important for Ares to know Ripred's thoughts as well.

"Hey, Ares, can you keep a secret?" said Gregor.

"I would say it is one of my few talents," said Ares.

"Ripred doesn't believe in the prophecies. He thinks Sandwich was a crazy fool, and that we're all running around trying to make what he said come true," said Gregor. Ares was silent for a while. "I would be a liar if I said similar thoughts had not crossed my own mind," said the bat.

"Why didn't you say so?" asked Gregor. Were there other Underlanders who had their doubts?

"Because everyone treats his words with such reverence. But who was he, really? Not a kind or wise man. His words are full of doom and only terrorize us into killing one another," said Ares.

"You know, when I first got down here, I didn't believe in his stuff at all. Then, as things happened, it seemed like it was coming true. But what if we did just make Sandwich's words fit? Take 'The Prophecy of Gray.' That whole thing about me leaping and then Henry dying. I could have died and the prophecy would have still made sense. So maybe the only really remarkable thing that happened that day ... was that you decided to save my life," said Gregor.

"I was not thinking of Sandwich's words. I was thinking of what was right," said Ares. He crunched down on his cookie. "Do you know, when a prophecy does not fulfill itself in a coherent manner, we always say it was not yet its time. And we blame ourselves for not realizing it."

"I'm beginning to think the main thing we ought to be blaming ourselves for is letting Sandwich boss us around instead of doing what we think is right," said Gregor. "Using him as an excuse to kill one another. At the end of the day, we're the ones holding the swords."

"There must be better words to follow," agreed Ares.

"Sure there are. You and me, we could make up better words in our sleep," said Gregor.

Suddenly Ares lifted his chin, his ears twitching.

"What? What is it?" asked Gregor.

"It has begun," Ares said.

They rose and looked out over the rock wall. At first, Gregor could detect nothing new, only the army of rats sleeping fitfully in the gaping cavern. Then a faint ripple of air hit his cheek, and the scene in front of him exploded.

It was a well-coordinated attack and unlike anything Gregor had ever seen. The ripple he'd felt came from the beating of a thousand wings as a wave of humans flew through the darkness toward the rats. The bats were carrying large unfamiliar packages of some sort in their claws. When they were over the rats, they released their cargo. The packages exploded into small bonfires when they hit the ground. They must have had plenty of fuel because they continued to burn brightly after they landed.

The rats' warning system was not working well. Ripred had probably sent in soldiers to kill their scouts ahead of time. Gregor had heard a few cries of alarm, but they had not been enough to rouse the Bane's army. So the rats were still sleeping when the firebombs were dropped, and the swords and claws began to assault them.

At the same time, other adversaries were attacking from all sides. Cockroaches and mice were pouring in from the left and right. Spiders — who had apparently decided to join with the humans — began to drop from the ceiling. And then Lapblood's rats appeared from the tunnels behind the rat army, essentially cutting off any possibility of retreat. They had dipped their tails in some kind of glow-in-the-dark coating, something phosphorous maybe, so that their allies could distinguish them from the enemy.

Awaking under these conditions, the Bane's army panicked. Some were on fire, others had already received mortal wounds. The human/bat teams and the rats carried the bulk of the fighting, but the smaller creatures were inflicting a lot of damage, too. The mice and cockroaches targeted wounded rats, swarming them and finishing them off. The spiders would drop suddenly on unsuspecting rats, sink their poisonous fangs into their bodies, and whiz back up their silk lines before their victims knew what had hit them. But the Bane's rats were hardened soldiers, and after the initial shock, they pulled themselves together and fought back.

Silently, from their perch high above, Gregor and Ares watched. By the time the ground fires died down, torchbearers had lit the area sufficiently so that Gregor didn't need to use echolocation to see the hell unfolding below him. The battle soon lost any sense of organization and deteriorated into a

killing frenzy. Everywhere, every second, creatures were dying. Human, rat, bat, mouse, cockroach, and spider bodies accumulated on the ground, until those who still survived were fighting on a carpet of corpses. Panic and confusion reigned. Fighters had to be wary even of their allies. A human ran a sword through a nibbler, a rat blinded a rat on the same side, a torchbearer set a spinner on fire. The clear purpose that had taken the soldiers into the battle was becoming muddied in the turmoil. Remote and safe for the moment, Gregor had a hard time making sense of the picture. It seemed unreal, as if he were watching a movie on television and he could make it stop by clicking to the next channel. This couldn't really be happening, this carnage, this waste of precious life. Who would do something like this? Why would they do it? What could they possibly accomplish? They were killing, killing, killing one another and then at the end they would have diminished one another's ranks but... what would have changed? The whole thing suddenly seemed like a ridiculous game that could easily have been replaced by another game, a hand of cards, a chess match, a roll of the dice. A game from which everyone could have gone home alive.

"Gregor! There! Above the river!" Ares said.

Gregor unglued his eyes from the battle and scanned the wall above the river. In the distance, they found Nike's black-and-white-striped wings fluttering in the mouth of a cave or tunnel — Gregor couldn't tell which — as she fended off a rat on the shelf of rock before her. About twenty yards above her, a digger's claws were widening a fresh hole in the steep wall. A stream of rats was emerging from the hole and half-climbing, half-sliding down toward Nike.

"What's she doing here?" asked Gregor. She was supposed to be with Boots and Lizzie, far from the battle as Solovet had promised. If Nike was here, where were his sisters? Stuck somewhere with only Temp, Hazard, Reflex, and Heronian for protection? And why didn't she just fly off? She wasn't big enough to be taking on that rat without a human teammate. What was she — ?

And then Gregor saw something that stopped his heart. A thin beam of light shining out of the opening behind Nike. It was flashing in a pattern that Gregor recognized. Played on the bedroom wall, tapped out with a fork on the kitchen table, the flashlight signaling... dot-dot-dot-dash-dash-dash-dot-dot-dot...dot-dot-dot-dash-dash-dash-dot-dot-dot... SOS. SOS. SOS.

"Lizzie," he whispered. Then he began to scream.

"My sisters! My sisters are in there!"

CHAPTER 24

Gregor vaulted onto Ares's back. "Go!" he shouted. "Go!"

Ares didn't object, but he did remind Gregor: "They will know now! That you still have life!"

Ripred had told Gregor to lie low until the Bane arrived, but that seemed of little importance now. He hardly noticed — or cared — that his appearance was a huge shocker for the rats, who began to howl his name the second he and Ares left the cover of the rocks.

Gregor ignored them. He would deal with the Bane later, if the white rat even showed up. Now he had a far more urgent mission. And he wasn't going to make it. He wasn't going to. He had flown on Ares enough now to gauge the amount of time it would take him to travel a certain distance, and they were too far. The rats would beat them. Nike could not fend them off. His sisters would be torn to pieces and —

Suddenly he saw a form streaking up the side of the cavern wall toward Nike. It didn't seem possible that any creature could scale such a steep incline with such speed. But one could. The one Gregor would have chosen. "It's Ripred!" he told Ares. "If he gets in, we can attack the rats from behind!"

Nike fell back out of sight as the rats from the digger's hole began to rain down onto the shelf of rock and lunge in after her. At least twenty had made it when Ripred reached them. Not stopping to fight, he raced over the backs of the enemy rats and was swallowed by the darkness beyond. Seconds later, Gregor and Ares dove in and threw themselves into the battle. It was like old times for Gregor, like when he had first become a rager and the adrenaline rush had obliterated his awareness of his actions. But he was so afraid, so deeply terrified for Boots and Lizzie that he could not contain himself. Every stroke of his blade was a death stroke, every movement designed to kill. He hacked and sliced and plunged his blade into rat after rat, oblivious to all else.

Ares had to arch back and crack Gregor in the face with his head to get his attention. "Gregor!"

"What?" Gregor snarled back. "Get in there, Ares!" His bat was drawing him away. "I have to kill those rats!"

"Try this one!" Ares said. The bat swung around and there was the Bane, right in his face.

To Gregor, who had been absorbed in the fight to save his sisters, it seemed as if the Bane had materialized out of nowhere, as if he had simply sprung out of the ground to exact his revenge. Ares veered sharply to the side just as one of the powerful clawed paws whistled by Gregor's ear and then scraped down the side of the cavern, unleashing a magnified sound like nails on a chalkboard.

"We must have more space!" said Ares. They couldn't fight the Bane trapped up against this wall. They needed room to maneuver.

"But my sisters —!" Gregor began. Then he knew he had to let them go. To trust Ripred and the humans and bats who had flown in to save them. Because wherever Gregor was now, so was the Bane. "All right!"

Ares swiftly flew back toward the heart of the battle, drawing the Bane after them. But Gregor had a few moments to assess his opponent. Boy, the Bane was a royal mess! He was scarred and hurting from their last encounter. The stump of his tail was capped with a huge ball of bloody spider silk. Losing the tail seemed to have done something to the Bane's sense of balance, because he moved unsteadily, almost as if he were intoxicated. But the real change was the look in the white rat's eyes. One glance told Gregor he had crossed over the line from damaged to demented.

The Bane came crashing across the plain toward them as the other creatures desperately fled to escape him. Bodies on the ground burst open under his feet. Anyone in reach of his claws was shredded.

"This isn't like before," thought Gregor. "I'm fighting a whole new opponent." For a moment, he felt a shudder of fear deep inside him. Then he pushed it down. "Where'd he come from?" he asked Ares.

"The tunnel to the right," Ares replied. "I know it. It leads farther into the rats' land."

"Is there much room?" asked Gregor.

"Yes. A large tunnel, then more caverns," said Ares.

"Take it," said Gregor. "Let's make him work for us." A chase would hopefully wear the Bane out a bit and keep him from killing anyone else. It would also give Gregor a less distracting place to fight. He wanted quiet. He wanted one-on-one.

Ares shot down the tunnel, and the Bane was right behind them, bouncing off the walls, roaring. The torchlight was gone, but Gregor's

breath was coming in pants and he had no trouble seeing. The tunnel led into a rocky cavern that soared high into the air. Ares flew up higher but the Bane followed, making seemingly impossible leaps up boulders and onto ledges as he followed behind. At first, Gregor could sense other rats in the area, but soon they fell away, either unable or unwilling to pursue them. And still Ares flew higher, finding a strange tunnel with dripping rock formations, and finally coming to rest on a plateau that seemed a million miles from anywhere. He was able to land for a minute and rest. They listened to the sound of the Bane, bellowing in rage and pain as he struggled toward them.

"Will this place do?" Ares asked.

"It's perfect," said Gregor.

As the Bane took one last giant leap onto the plateau, Ares took to his wings. The chase had been a good idea. The Bane was drained, gasping for air, thick foam hanging from his mouth. Several wounds had reopened on his face. The spider silk bandage had ripped off somewhere and blood ran from the stump of his tail.

"Alone at last," Gregor said. But they weren't.

"Take a minute," said the soothing voice. "Calm yourself before you destroy him."

"Twirltongue," Gregor said to Ares. "Where'd she come from?"

"I do not know," said Ares. "She was not with him on the Plain of Tartarus."

The Bane must have picked her up somewhere along the way. She leaped off of his back now, onto a pile of boulders. A nice safe place to observe the match. Gregor could see she was unmarred, not a wound on her anywhere. Her silver coat was flawless and unruffled.

It was all Gregor could do not to take her out right then and there. She was the one who had made the plans and groomed the Bane into this deranged creature. She'd probably ordered Twitchtip's death, too. Twirltongue and her silken voice. How he hated her. "You're looking good, Twirltongue," Gregor called. "A little too good. Seeing much action? Or you just sending the Bane in to lose his tail and such?"

"My tail? My tail?" said the Bane. He began to move in circles, trying to locate it. "My tail!"

"A king does not need a tail," said Twirltongue.

"He's not going to be king," said Gregor. "Are you, Pearlpet?"

The name distracted the Bane from his tail. "I am king. I am king now! The rats follow me!"

"Then how come they're out there attacking you? Plus the spinners, the crawlers, the humans, the fliers, the nibblers," said Gregor. "Hey, that whole nibbler thing kind of blew up in your face, didn't it?"

"Twirltongue says I'm the king!" said the Bane.

"Yeah? Is that how it looks to you?" said Gregor. "Because from up here, it looks like she's getting you killed so she can take over."

"What? What?" The Bane was so far gone that that was all it took. He turned to Twirltongue, his eyes narrowing into slits. "You will not take over. I'm the king! I'm the king!"

"Of course you're the king. Who would follow a nothing like me?" said Twirltongue with a light laugh. But she was backing away. "He's lying!"

"If he's lying, then why are you untouched and I am like this?!" hissed the Bane.

"Because kings are bold and brave fighters. Your scars are badges of your might. No one would follow someone as untried and feeble as myself," said Twirltongue, edging along a boulder.

"No. You're right. No one will follow you. No one will ever follow you again!" The Bane sprang and, in one bite, ripped Twirltongue's head from her body. It hung in his mouth, teeth bared in a final grotesque grimace, before the Bane flung it at Gregor and Ares, almost hitting them. It smashed into the ground with an awful, hollow sound. The Bane stroked his paws over his eyes a few times, then looked up in confusion. "Where's Twirltongue?" he said forlornly. "Where did she go?"

Neither Gregor nor Ares replied.

The Bane nosed along the ground until he found the head.

"Twirltongue? Twirltongue? She's dead..." he began to whimper. "She's dead..." And then his distress transformed back into rage. "You killed her!" he spat at Ares and Gregor.

"Man, he really believes it!" Gregor said in a hushed voice.

"Just like you killed my mother!" said the Bane.

Whether the Bane had just thought that one up on the spot or Twirltongue had planted it in his brain along the way, Gregor had no idea. He only knew that twelve feet of rat was coming at him and the long-anticipated fight had begun.

Ares dodged the rat's first attack. By the time the bat had spun back around, Gregor's rager state was at its peak. But he was not overcome by it. In fact, he could control his actions with a deadly accuracy that left him heady with power. This was a new feeling. This strength. This lethality. This must be what Ripred felt all the time.

"Go for his face!" Gregor said. This strategy had worked well before and now the Bane had no tail to retaliate with.

But if the Bane had been a challenge back in Regalia, there had been at least some sense to his movements. Now his motions were erratic and unpredictable. He wasn't concerned with his own state, only that Gregor end up dead. The Bane swiped at them again and again, not bothering to block Gregor's attacks, ignoring his own wounds as his claws found Ares's wing, Gregor's arm, Ares's ear.

"Pull back!" Gregor shouted and Ares whipped out of the Bane's reach.

"We need a new plan," said Gregor, trying to twist the sleeve of his shirt into a sort of bandage over a gash on his left arm.

"He has lost his balance," said Ares.

"Use it," said Gregor.

Ares began to dive in wild circles around the Bane. The rat soon became disoriented, lurching from side to side, but was still fighting bitterly. Gregor did some damage to his paws, but that was all that his sword could make contact with.

"I've got to get in closer if I'm going to take him out!" said Gregor.

"Hang on!" said Ares, and suddenly they were spinning over and over, and Gregor found himself directly under the Bane's foreleg. He plunged his sword into the soft flesh. The Bane gave a strangled cry and jerked backward, freeing Gregor's blade.

"Get out!" Gregor cried. "Get out, Ares!" He had a terrible sense of dread. Something was wrong about their position, their proximity to the Bane. Even before his bat opened his wings, Gregor knew there was no way they could clear the claws. He thrust his sword in the Bane's direction but it was too late. "Ares!" Gregor cried. "No!" Everything seemed to move in slow motion as the rat caught Ares's wing, spun him around so they were face-to-face, and pulled him forward. Gregor dropped Solovet's dagger and wrapped both hands around the hilt of his sword. As the Bane sank his teeth into Ares's neck, Gregor's blade pierced the rat's heart. For a moment, they hung there, interconnected, supported by teeth and swords and claws. Then

the Bane made an unearthly sound and rammed his free paw into Gregor's chest. Gregor lost his grip on his sword as he flew back into the air and slammed onto the stone floor. His hand went to his breastbone. The claws had torn aside his armor and opened a hot wet hole in his chest. His fingers pulsed with the rapid beating of his heart.

Above him, Ares still dangled from the Bane's jaws. The rat opened his mouth and the bat fell, lifeless, to the ground. The Bane pawed at the blade in his chest, trying to dislodge it. Then he became still and slowly sank down to four legs, onto his side as if to curl up, and rolled onto his back.

He knew they were dead. Both Ares and the Bane. Because only one creature was breathing. And it was Gregor. Despite this knowledge, despite the pain, he dragged himself across the floor to his bond. Ares lay on his back, his wings bent at awkward angles. The entire front of his neck had been torn off. Gregor pressed his face into the bat's blood-soaked chest, hoping in vain for a heartbeat, a chance to revive him. "Ares? Ares? Don't go, Ares, okay? Don't." But he had gone. No one could survive a wound like that. "Ares?" Gregor's right hand reached out and found Ares's claw and latched on to it.

Ares the flier, I bond to you.

The words went through his mind but he couldn't speak them. Not anymore.

Still clutching Ares's claw, Gregor rolled over onto his back and found himself cradled by the bat's wing. The blood was leaving his body fast. Seeping out of his chest and mingling with Ares's blood, then running onto the ground to join the Bane's.

"This is it," thought Gregor. "This is the end." The blood was flowing too quickly and no one who could help even knew where he was. Sandwich was right. He was right after all. The Bane would die, Gregor would die, and they could even throw in Ares for good measure. This is where they would eventually find them, already buried in this sunless hole far beneath the earth's surface.

"It's okay," Gregor whispered to himself. "It's okay. Think of the knight." He remembered the calm, smooth face of the knight in the Cloisters, a face free of all earthly pain, and a feeling of peace slowly descended on him. He realized his death was not only okay, it was for the best. He was never going back to New York, anyway. That had been some laughable dream. How could he go back after all that had happened? After

what he had become? Where would a twelve-year-old kid, a warrior, a killer, ever be at home? Not in the Overland. And the Underland? No, he'd eventually end up like Ripred. Like Ares. A dangerous character. Suspicious. Scraping out a life in some desolate place. Because no matter how much the humans loved him during a war, who would want him around on a regular basis? There was no place for Gregor. Over, under, or in between.

He wasn't really so different from the Bane. Both of them were pulled into this whole mess without having any real understanding of it. Both of them were used — the Bane by the rats, Gregor by the humans — to play out this war. And both of them were paying with their lives. To have them dead would be a relief to everyone.

Except maybe Gregor's family... but they had no idea who he had become ... how much he had killed ... and he hoped they never found out....

The images of the cavern were dimming. His breathing became shallow. He could feel the world slipping away. "It's okay," he whispered to himself. "It's okay."

Far away, a pure, blue light appeared. It must be the light people talked about. The ones who'd had near-death experiences. You went down a tunnel. There was a light. People you'd loved who had already died were reaching for you. "Maybe Ares is there," thought Gregor. "Maybe he's waiting for me."

The pain left his body and Gregor had the sensation he was traveling. He was gliding closer and closer to the beautiful blue light. In a few seconds he would reach it. He wanted to reach it. To dissolve into the blueness. He was almost there.

Then everything went black.

CHAPTER 25

Something sprinkled across his forehead. Sand maybe. Was he at the beach, awaking from a long, warm nap in the sun? There it was again. People needed to be more careful. Kicking sand around. He should have picked a better spot. But when he'd died in that cave he'd been thinking more about — Wait! When he'd died in that cave? Where was he?

Gregor's eyes flew open. Above him, the hospital ceiling was brightly lit by torches. Boots's face slid into the frame. She took a bite of a cookie, showering crumbs down on his face. "Hi, you!" she said.

Something must have gone terribly wrong. He was still alive.

Boots took another bite of cookie and he shut his eyes to avoid the fallout. "You slept a long time. I got tired waiting." She did seem slightly put out.

"You're getting crumbs on him, Boots," he heard Lizzie whisper.

They were both alive. Ripred had gotten them out somehow.

"Gregor?" said a voice he had never hoped to hear again. His dad leaned over him, his face worn, older. "How you doing? How's my little guy?"

His dad? What was his dad doing here? What was going on? Why wasn't he dead? Where was the blue light? Who could possibly have found him in that forsaken place?

"Can you understand me, Gregor?" asked his dad. Gregor could see the concern in his eyes.

"Yeah." His voice was rusty and almost inaudible. "Hey, Dad. You're here."

"I came down just as soon as I could," his dad said. "Come to take you all home."

Gregor slowly became aware of his body. With great effort, he managed to wiggle his toes. Why was he so weak? How long had he been here? He struggled to move the fingers on his right hand but found it impossible. His left arm jerked up in a panic and pain spiked through his arm, his chest, oh, man, his chest! He dropped his arm back quickly. The pain ebbed but was still there. It was better if he didn't move.

"So, you have decided to wake up?" Howard's smile was so warm that Gregor couldn't help smiling back. The muscles on his face felt stiff and unused.

"What happened?" Gregor asked.

"You were rescued from the Dead Land by a pair of daring adventurers, who risked all to carry you back to our doctors," said Howard. "At least, this is how they tell the story. Some, myself included, feel it had less to do with a love of you and more to do with a love of cake."

"Cake?" said Gregor. And suddenly it became clear to him. "Not the fireflies."

"Oh, yes. Our old and dear friends Photos Glow-Glow and Zap," said Howard.

That explained it. The beautiful, blue light wasn't from another world; it was from Photos Glow-Glow's butt. Gregor couldn't help laughing, even though it hurt like crazy. The whole thing was so absurd.

"They have spent the last two weeks gorging themselves in a room off of the kitchen. You see, it is quite impossible for them to leave until they are assured of your recovery. And Luxa indulges them for her own reasons," said Howard. "So, Gregor, just how bad do you feel?"

"Very," said Gregor. "Whole body hurts."

"Good. Then your nerves are working. Drink this," said Howard, lifting his head to help him swallow some medicine and a little water.

"I can't move my fingers." Gregor glanced down at his right side, where he hoped he still had a hand.

"Yes. Well. They will work by and by," said Howard. His face was sober as he gently lifted Gregor's hand into his line of sight. Locked in his fingers, cemented with blood, was Ares's claw. "The shiners were unable to release your grip. Zap managed to gnaw his claw free. We have not wanted to force your hand open, for fear of breaking bones. We can soak it... but you will have to let him go yourself."

Ares. The last horrible moments of his bat's life replayed in Gregor's head and he squeezed his eyes shut tight. Howard asked him more questions, but he couldn't respond.

"In his mind, all of this happened only minutes ago. We must give him time," said Howard to his family. "He must rest."

"Girls, you go up to the nursery. Give Dulcet some help with those mouse babies, okay? I'll sit with your brother," said his dad.

Gregor heard his own voice in his ears. *"I've got to get in closer if I'm going to take him out!"* Wing snagged. Bane drawing them in. Locking his jaws on Ares's throat. Sword in heart. Chest ripped open. Falling. Dying.

"Don't go, Ares, okay? Don't." Lying in blood. Soaked in blood. Dying. Dying.

The darkness began to close in around him again. But through it he heard his dad's voice. "It's going to be okay, Gregor. You don't think so now. You don't see how it ever could be. But one day, I promise, it's going to be okay."

When he woke again, Mareth was sitting in the chair next to his bed. His dad was asleep on a cot. A couple of nurses propped Gregor up a bit with pillows and brought him some broth. Mareth volunteered to feed him, and the nurses accepted and dashed off.

"The hospital staff is still working around the clock," said Mareth. "Come, you need some nourishment." The soldier spooned broth into his mouth and filled him in on the last couple of weeks. The minute the fireflies had brought word of the Bane's demise —along with Gregor's unconscious body — to the Plain of Tartarus, the Bane's forces had fallen to pieces and been easily defeated by the humans and their allies. They were already weakened psychologically, having by that time figured out that the Code of Claw must have been cracked. Lapblood's armies fighting against them had been a significant blow, too. The Bane's death had just been the final straw that had broken their spirit. There would be an official surrender in the arena soon. Terms would be agreed upon.

As for his loved ones, Vikus was recovering but had lost much of the use of his right side. Just as Ripred had predicted, everyone was turning to Luxa for leadership. Her uncle, York, was going to come down from the Fount for the surrender as well. He would bring Gregor's mother with him.

"She's better, then?" asked Gregor.

"Yes. But still very weak," said Mareth. "Your family will have much healing to do."

"Who else was lost?" asked Gregor.

"Many," said Mareth. "Better perhaps to think of who still lives. Your family. Luxa. Hazard. Aurora. Nike. Howard. Nerissa. Vikus. All of the code team survived."

"And Ripred," said Gregor. "I've got a lot to tell him."

Mareth stirred the broth, avoiding his eyes. "No, Gregor, he did not make it."

"What? But everybody got out of that cave," said Gregor.

"It was a tunnel actually. A short one that ran between the Plain of Tartarus and another cavern beyond the walls. The rats attacked from both sides. Ripred was able to fight a path out the back, enabling Nike to flee with your sisters, Hazard, Temp, Heronian, and Reflex. But he was overcome, his body flung into the abyss below. We sent a rescue team when word came. When they arrived, he had already been devoured by the swarms of flesh-eating mites in that nest there. You know the ones. We met up with them on the Waterway."

"The mites who killed Pandora," said Gregor.

"The same," said Mareth.

"Then you never actually found Ripred," Gregor said stubbornly.

"We found rat skeletons. Three of them. One, a large male who had evidently survived the fall and dragged himself some twenty yards before the insects overcame him," said Mareth. "The rescue team saw only this much, as they were forced to flee. But ask yourself, who but Ripred could have managed such a feat?"

"No one," said Gregor softly. Still, it did not seem quite real. That Ripred had died. Ripred couldn't die. He was invincible. A rager. Then he remembered Ripred's words. "Even a rager can be outnumbered, Gregor. I start to crack at about four hundred to one." There would have been more than four hundred mites in a nest. There would have been thousands and thousands.

"Beyond that, we have had no word of him. It is unlikely, having been so instrumental in this war, that he would be silent in the aftermath," said Mareth.

"Yeah," said Gregor. To his surprise, he felt as devastated by Ripred's loss as he had by Ares's. His bond at least knew how Gregor felt about him. He had never showed any gratitude toward Ripred. Never really thanked him. Never once told the rat how much he admired him. Maybe even loved him. It was not the kind of thing they discussed.

"I didn't expect... to have to deal with this. Up until that last morning, I was sure I'd be dead. Then Ripred—" Gregor stopped. He wasn't supposed to tell about how Ripred didn't believe in Sandwich's prophecies. Did it make any difference now the rat was dead? Maybe Ripred would want everyone to know his position. And there was proof now, because he had been right about Gregor surviving the war. But who could Gregor tell this

to? Luxa? Vikus? He was too weak to go into it now. "Ripred gave me a pep talk. Told me I could beat the Bane."

"And you did," said Mareth.

"Not by myself," said Gregor. His right hand contracted around Ares's claw, not wanting to let go. But he had to let go. Ares wasn't coming back. Holding his claw wouldn't bring him back. It should be buried with the rest of him. "Howard said I could soak my hand."

"He left you a basin," said Mareth. He placed it at Gregor's side and then guided his hand into the water.

"You don't have to stay, Mareth," said Gregor. "I know they need a lot of help right now. I'm fine."

Mareth seemed to understand that Gregor did not want company just then. "I will check on you by and by," he said, and left.

The water was warm and comforting. Slowly, Gregor loosened his grip. The blood that glued him to the claw dissolved. One by one, his fingers peeled away and he extended his stiff fingers. The claw broke away from his hand and floated beside it in the basin.

Somehow Luxa was beside him with a towel. She solemnly removed the claw and wiped the remaining blood from it. When it was clean, she wrapped it in a white cloth and laid it on the table beside him. Then she sat on the side of the bed, lifted Gregor's hand, and carefully dried it. "It does not seem to be injured. How does it feel?" she asked.

"Empty," said Gregor. Luxa entwined her fingers with his. Her skin was warm, like the water, but alive. "That's better."

There were probably a million things they should be saying to each other, but they just stayed like that for hours, not talking, until his dad woke with a start from a nightmare, and Gregor had to reassure him that everything was going to be okay. "Maybe if we just keep telling each other that, one day it will be true," he thought.

For the next few days there was not much Gregor could do but sleep and let people feed him. He was so weak it was an achievement when he sat up himself, a small miracle when he could walk across the room again. It wasn't until he took his first bath that his condition really hit him. He was so skinny, shaky, and beat up. The wound on his chest was unreal. They had painstakingly stitched closed the stripes left by each individual claw mark. When it healed, Gregor could see there would be five scars to remind him

of the Bane's final attack. How would he explain that to someone in the Overland?

His dad kept talking about their new life in the Overland. And Gregor didn't know how to tell him that he didn't want to move to the family farm in Virginia, didn't even want to go back to New York. That the boy who had fallen down the air shaft on a hot summer's day was gone, replaced by someone who could never find a home anywhere. But there was his dad going on about planting extra tomatoes so they would have plenty to fry up green, and going fishing, and how Gregor could join the school band again.

The school band? It took him a minute to even remember what instrument he had played. "Saxophone. I ran track, too. I liked science class. At least, he did. That other kid from that other time," Gregor thought. And what about his sisters? Boots would be fine. She was only three. Eventually she'd stop talking in Crawler and probably forget all of this, which was sad in a way, a blessing in another. But Lizzie ... Lizzie would forget nothing. She would just keep turning it over and over in her mind. She hardly talked since the war had ended. She just sat with her legs tucked up under her in a chair, her face thin and sad. Half the time she didn't even hear people when they spoke to her. Ripred's death had hit her hard.

One night, when their dad and Boots were asleep, Gregor asked her about it. Why Ripred had even brought the code team so close to the battle.

"Because of me. He didn't say it, but I knew he wanted to keep an eye on me. To protect me the way he couldn't —" Lizzie cut herself off.

"The way he couldn't protect Silksharp," Gregor finished for her.

"How did you know about her?" asked Lizzie.

"Heard you guys talking one night," said Gregor.

"It was my fault he died, Gregor," said Lizzie. "If I hadn't been there, he'd still be alive."

And there was nothing Gregor could say to convince her otherwise.

"Oh, yeah, let's move on down to Virginia and plant those tomatoes," Gregor thought. "That's going to fix everything." But he couldn't say something like that to his dad.

By the end of the week, Gregor was taking walks around the hospital. Luxa spent as much time as she could with him, but she was already being consumed by her new responsibilities. With the council members and Solovet dead and Vikus trying to learn to feed himself with his left hand, everyone turned to her for answers. More than a third of the human

population had been wiped out, Regalia was a wreck, and the entire nibbler nation was homeless. In public, Luxa was steady and strong, but sometimes when she was alone with Gregor, she would bury her head in her hands, repeating again and again, "I do not know what to do." And he would put his arms around her and hold her, but he had no idea what to tell her. In his mind, Gregor knew how to kill things, not bring them back to life.

At least Luxa had a strong support system: Aurora, Mareth, Perdita, Howard, Hazard, Nerissa, Nike, and several mice helped however they could. York advised her in letters from the Fount. And Gregor had to smile when he saw her in deep conversations with Temp. But ultimately, all of the decisions were landing squarely on her shoulders.

Looming over her was the day of the surrender. Although the Bane's forces had thrown in the towel when they had learned of his death, this was the official acknowledgment of the rats' defeat. But what was to be done with Lapblood and the rats who had sided with the humans in the end? Would they all be lumped together with the enemy rats? That wouldn't be fair, but as some pointed out, Lapblood's armies hadn't fought to save the humans, they had fought to save themselves from the Bane. Besides, there was so much hatred between the species now that anything was possible. Everyone knew the surrender was merely a gesture that would be directly followed by the question "What will happen now?" And Luxa, as the head of Regalia, would be expected to have answers about who would control what lands, and how the living would now pay for the acts of the dead, and if rats could be divided into friends and foes. It was very complicated stuff.

Gregor once walked in on Luxa and Nerissa trying to unravel the last stanza of "The Prophecy of Time" ...

When the monster's blood is spilled,
When the warrior has been killed, you must not ignore the rapping, or
the tapping, tapping, tapping.
if the gnawers find you napping, you will rot while they are mapping
Out the law of those who gnaw
In the Code of Claw.

... but they stopped abruptly when they saw him. He wanted to tell them it didn't matter. Couldn't they see that? Wasn't he living proof that the prophecy was wrong? That Sandwich was a fraud? But he didn't know how to convince them to change their minds about Sandwich. They had lived by his words for too long.

The night before the surrender, Luxa was eating dinner with his family in the hospital room, when Gregor's mom walked in. She was way too skinny and unsteady on her feet, but she walked in and opened her arms without a word. They all ran to her and wound up in one big embrace. Boots, who was too little to get in on the main action, began to squawk, "Me! Me! Kiss me!" and his dad scooped her up and everyone covered her in kisses, which only made her giggle and call for more.

After a minute, Gregor noticed Luxa, standing alone by the door, watching his family reunite. He couldn't help thinking of how once she'd had so many people to love her who were no longer here. He reached out a hand for her to join his family, but she just gave him a small smile, shook her head, and slipped out the door. And for the first time in forever, Gregor remembered why he was lucky.

The next morning, Gregor met Luxa before the surrender. She was dressed in a gorgeous gown with a jewel-studded tiara on her head. "Wow, you look so grown-up in that. At least thirteen," he said.

That made her laugh, although he could tell she was pretty nervous. Gregor was just wearing a plain shirt and pants. And his swords. He felt naked without them. Back in the Overland, he couldn't wear them, of course. He had separation anxiety just thinking about it.

His sisters and dad had already flown ahead to the arena, but Gregor had promised Luxa he would walk through the city with her. When the platform lowered them to the ground, Gregor could see the road was lined with people. No one cheered. Rather, they bowed as Luxa passed. A lot of people had tears running down their cheeks. Luxa acknowledged the crowds, nodding, occasionally lifting a hand. She spoke only once when they came to a crossroads where four streets met. She stopped and surveyed the wreckage around her. The rats, with the help of the diggers, had turned buildings into rubble. The paving stones beneath their feet were stained with blood and scorch marks from the fallen torches. A little girl missing an arm stared at them with empty eyes.

"Look at my city, Gregor," said Luxa. "Look at my home."

When they got to the doors of the arena, Luxa paused. Gregor reached out and gave her hand a quick squeeze. Then she took a deep breath and headed in. Gregor followed a few steps behind. The place was packed with delegations from every species that had played a principal role in the war: crawlers, spinners, diggers, nibblers, fliers, gnawers, and humans. Gregor

even noticed Photos Glow-Glow and Zap sitting on a bench. He hadn't seen them since the rescue, hadn't even thought to thank them. He would try to remember to after the ceremony. Even though a path had been left for them, it was hard to make a dignified entrance because the floor of the arena was so pitted with the tunnels the diggers had made. But Luxa swept around them gracefully while Gregor sort of hopped along after her. At the center of the arena was an empty circle. Three rats waited before it.

When Luxa stepped into the circle Gregor hung back at the edge. Aurora fluttered down and landed just outside of the circle as well. Nearby, Gregor could see his dad and Lizzie. Mareth, Perdita, York, and Howard stood in a group. Even Nerissa had pulled herself together for the event. Somewhere in a bunch of cockroaches he spotted the tops of two curly heads and knew that Boots and Hazard were watching, too.

As Luxa took her place, what little conversation there had been in the arena ceased. If she was still nervous, it didn't show. She held herself with dignity and her voice was clear and steady. "Greetings, all. We have gathered here to mark the end of an unhappy and costly war. I have come to accept the surrender and present the terms of the defeat. Gnawers, who speaks for you?"

One of the rats stepped forward to reply when there was a commotion. Small stones and dirt began to fly out of the mouth of one of the diggers' tunnels. A general ripple of alarm ran through the arena. Everyone was still so jumpy from being under attack. Then the bedraggled creature nosed its way out.

He was almost unrecognizable. Half of his fur and a good portion of his skin had been eaten away, leaving bloody, oozing places. One of his back legs was useless, trailing behind him. His face had received another diagonal slash, which crisscrossed with the existing scar. But his voice was unmistakable.

"I do," said Ripred, dragging himself into the circle.

"I speak for the gnawers."

CHAPTER 26

The stunned silence in the arena was broken by Lizzie's squeal of joy, "Ripred! Ripred!" She pushed her way out of the crowd and threw her arms around his neck. "I thought you were dead."

"I told you, it takes a lot to kill me. More than a few bugs, anyway," said the rat.

"But they found your skeleton," said Lizzie.

"That must have been Cleaver's. I dove under his body as soon as we landed and then ran. The mites had to chew him up before they got to me so it bought me some time. Not a lot, but enough to get away. Funny, I always despised Cleaver, but I can't help thinking warmly of him now," said Ripred.

"How did this happen?" asked Lizzie, reaching up to lightly touch the new slash on his face.

"Oh, a rat cut me. It's nothing. Now up you go." He nudged Lizzie up onto a patch of fur on his back.

"I'll hurt you," she said.

"No. You'll remind me why I'm here," said Ripred, and locked eyes with Luxa.

"And why is that, Ripred?" Luxa said icily.

"I told you. To speak for the gnawers. Or did you think I spent years risking life and limb so that you could dictate our future?" asked the rat.

Now the creatures in the crowd found their tongues, and everyone was turning to their neighbor in either dismay or confusion. Most of the rats had long considered Ripred an enemy. And he'd been fighting with the humans and their allies for so long, even they'd begun to take his allegiance for granted. But taking Ripred for granted was a big mistake. Gregor had the feeling that he had always been working toward this moment. Maybe he hadn't expected to be dealing with Luxa, maybe he'd thought Solovet or Vikus would be there to negotiate with him. It didn't really matter who he was up against, as long as he stood for the rats.

Luxa raised her voice above the hubbub. "Is this true, gnawers? Does he speak for you?" The rats were clearly as amazed by Ripred's appearance as anyone else. They shifted around, whispering among themselves, trying to reach some kind of consensus.

Then a voice rose, clear and forceful, above the others. "Yes! I say he speaks for us!" Lapblood and her two children made their way out of the crowd. If Ripred had always been an object of suspicion, it was clear that Lapblood was trusted among her own kind. She had been chosen to find the plague cure and had had the influence to lead the dissenters against the Bane. A moment after her declaration, the rats united with her and began to call for Ripred to act as their representative.

Gregor could see the tension in Luxa's shoulders. It was hard enough to have to lay out the postwar plan in front of the entire Underland. But to do it with Ripred standing by to challenge her every move? Ripred? She was out of her league and she knew it. Who wouldn't be out of their league with Ripred?

To make matters worse, Nerissa suddenly cried out, "Oh, Luxa, see you the mark on his face?"

Luxa scrutinized the rat's face. "It is but another scar among many."

"But look! It forms an X! The mark borne by the peacemaker!" said Nerissa.

"Many of us have scars that cross!" York strode out of the crowd.

"Think of the words," said Nerissa. And the arena quieted to hear her recite the poem from the prophecy room in her quavering voice:

*On soft feet, by none detected,
Dealing death, by most rejected,
Killed by claw, since resurrected,
Marked by X, two lines connected.*

Finally, they intersected, two lines met, one unexpected.

"Do you not see?" insisted Nerissa. "It describes Ripred exactly. Slipping in undetected, deadly, hated, thought lost, but brought back to life. And the X! One half was given by a human. One half by a gnawer. Two lines intersecting. And now the human line and the gnawer line meet in the flesh as well. In Luxa and Ripred."

The arena went nuts but Luxa remained unmoved. She waited for the commotion to die down, then said, "Do you fancy yourself the peacemaker, Ripred?"

"Well, I don't like to blow my own horn, but it does make a lot of sense, what Nerissa's saying. And if I am, there's really nothing I can do about it one way or the other, is there?" said the rat.

Gregor could hear everyone murmuring to one another that this was true, that the prophecies were written in stone. But the rat was looking at Gregor, smirking and rolling his eyes ever so slightly as if to say, "See what I mean?"

While he had no way to prove it, Gregor was suddenly convinced that Ripred had given himself the second wound. It would be a small price to pay for being designated the peacemaker.

"Good. Then you should have no problem peacefully leading your fellow gnawers into the Uncharted Lands," said Luxa.

This surprised even Gregor, although in retrospect, maybe it shouldn't have. When she had started the war, Luxa had told Gregor, "We may as well get it over with. Have the war that will answer the question of who stays and who goes." But he had thought, with all that had happened during the war, that she might have changed her mind. Apparently not.

With her proposal, everything became ugly and hard.

"Yes, I do have a problem with that, Your Highness. So much so that I flatly refuse to do it," Ripred spat at her. "What do you say to that?"

"I say that you may go peacefully or by force; it is your choice!" said Luxa.

"If it is another war you are looking for, then believe me you shall have it!" growled Ripred. "But I wonder how you will fare, with your limping army and your broken city and me at your throat instead of your back!"

"I do not need you, Ripred. I have Gregor!" said Luxa.

"Do you? I wouldn't count on it. Even if he stays, I'll wager he finds your measures too harsh. Perhaps he will even remember past kindnesses and take my side instead!" retorted Ripred.

Gregor's mouth dropped open in disbelief. What were they talking about? What were they both doing? Could they actually be going back to war? And did they plan for him to join them?

"We will leave it to him to decide," Luxa said, and then turned to him. Everyone in the whole arena turned to him, wanting to know where he stood.

"You're really going to do it, aren't you? You're really going to go back to war?" Gregor said. He could feel something boiling up inside of him. "So, we'll just forget about what happened. The jungle, the Firelands, the Bane." His voice was rising and he could feel the rager side of him taking over. "Forget about everybody who's dead! Tick and Twitchtip and Hamnet

and Thalia and Ares! And your parents, Luxa! And your pups, Ripred! Let's just forget about everybody who gave their lives so that you could have this moment where you could — could make things right again! So you could stop the killing! We were fighting for the same thing, remember? You two owe each other your lives! You owe me your lives! And now you stand there and ask me to choose between you? To help you kill each other?" Gregor yanked Sandwich's sword from his belt and swung it so violently that even Luxa and Ripred stepped back. "Well, guess what? The warrior's not fighting for either of you!"

And with that, Gregor took the sword blade between his hands and slammed it across his leg with such force that it snapped in two. He flung the pieces aside, one toward Luxa, the other toward Ripred. Fresh blood was running from his empty hands as he held them up. "There. The warrior's dead. I killed him."

"And so 'The Prophecy of Time' is fulfilled!" said Nerissa breathlessly.

Gregor shook his head. Would they never shut up about those prophecies? But he only said, "Whatever. Now what are you two going to do?"

"What, indeed, after such a display?" said Ripred to Luxa. "Although the boy does make a point about the perversity of starting a new war while the blood is still drying from the last one. Especially when the cutters are amassing at our borders." The crowd reacted, and Ripred circled around to make sure everyone could hear him. "Oh, didn't I mention that before? Now I'm not saying they're taking this opportunity to finish us all off, but you have to admit it'd be an excellent time. With them so strong, and us so weak. Of course, if things were different between us ..."

"Yes, I see. We might deter them," Luxa said sharply.

"We have done it in the past," said Ripred.

"The past is gone. How do we know we can trust you now?" asked Luxa.

"Trust us? You just tried to banish us to the Uncharted Lands! I think if anyone needs a little reassurance, it's the gnawers!" answered Ripred. "So — I don't know, write up a treaty or something."

"No one trusts treaties. They go up in a flash," said Luxa.

"Then you decide, Luxa. Friends or enemies. Trust or no trust. Between you and me. Between our species. You decide how it is to be," Ripred said.

It was the moment of truth. Gregor could see Luxa's internal struggle playing out on her face. Flickers of Solovet's hardness interchanging with Vikus's desire for understanding. All of the old hatreds and sacrifices and debts and hopes swirling around inside her as she tried to decide the fate of the Underland. War or peace. Battle or compromise. Solovet or Vikus. It was the very decision that had destroyed Hamnet. Made him go mad, then flee, then die in battle.

Finally Luxa's expression solidified. "There will be no treaties," she announced. "They have always failed us in the past." Gregor's heart slammed somewhere down around his feet. But she had not finished.

"There will be no treaties!" Luxa repeated. "But I offer this." She stepped forward and raised her right hand to Ripred.

The crowd let out a gasp at what she was proposing. Even Ripred was initially taken aback. But he recovered quickly. "A bond?"

"A bond between all humans and gnawers. A vow to defend each other to the death. I offer it. Do you dare take it?" asked Luxa.

"Do I dare?" said Ripred. "Yes, I do." He lifted his paw up and pressed it against her hand.

After a moment, Luxa began:

Ripred the gnawer, I bond to you, Our life and death are one, we two. In dark, in flame, in war, in strife, I save you as I save my life.

To which Ripred replied:

Luxa the human, I bond to you, Our life and death are one, we two. In dark, in flame, in war, in strife, I save you as I save my life.

Then the rat dropped his paw and gave a big stretch. "Don't we get a feast now?"

"Let it be as he says," said Luxa. And the whole arena broke into cheers.

"Your grandpapa is going to be so proud of you," Gregor heard Ripred say to Luxa.

"And my grandmama is rolling in her grave," replied Luxa.

"She was always too hard to please," said Aurora. Luxa put her arms around her neck, and the bat enfolded her in her golden wings. "It was the best thing to do," Aurora said.

"If you think so, then I can survive it," answered Luxa.

"What about me? Don't I get a hug?" Ripred asked.

"Ugh, you are teeming with infection. Lizzie, get off of him before you catch something vile." Luxa lifted Lizzie off of Ripred's back. "You had best get to the hospital," she told Ripred. "And then I suppose we must meet to determine the specifics of this historic day."

Ripred sighed. "I suppose so. You and I seem to end up doing everything. Shall we say four members for each delegation?"

"Why not?" Luxa said. "Four can be as stupid as ten. No need to crowd the room."

Ripred laughed. "You know, I think you and I are going to get on famously."

"And you, Overlander," said Luxa, turning to Gregor finally. "You are bleeding, too."

"Well... I did kill myself," Gregor said with a smile.

"I do not suppose we left you much choice," said Luxa. "Come, then. I will walk you two down to the hospital. I want the pleasure of telling Vikus what happened. I need one human to genuinely approve of what I just did."

"You've already got that," said Gregor. He collected the broken pieces of his sword and they headed for the hospital.

As they walked into Regalia, Luxa said, "You should have made that cut a little deeper, Ripred. It may leave no scar at all, and then where will our peacemaker be?"

Gregor laughed. Ripred hadn't fooled her one bit.

"I have no idea what you're suggesting," Ripred said loftily.

"Bet there aren't any cutters on the border, either," said Gregor.

"Well, there might be," said Ripred. "It's their border, too. And may I add that I think it's very ill mannered of you two to be doubting me. Particularly my new bond."

"I expect you will get used to it," said Luxa. The rat did not deign to reply.

Lizzie went with Ripred to be treated, but Gregor wanted to see Vikus first. The old man was sitting, propped up in bed. The right side of his body was impaired by the stroke. But his left eye brightened and his good hand reached out when Gregor and Luxa came in. Gregor clasped his hand with his bleeding one. "Hey, Vikus, how you doing?" Vikus couldn't really speak yet. "Look, I just wanted to return this to you." Gregor held up the pieces of Sandwich's sword and laid them on the bed. Vikus raised his eyebrow for an

explanation. "Luxa and Ripred were recruiting me for a new war, this time against each other. So, I retired the warrior. Killed him off really."

Vikus's face was registering alarm.

"Do not worry," Luxa said. "Yes, Ripred is alive and leading the rats, but there is to be no war. Do you not wish to keep the sword, Gregor? For memories' sake?"

"No, thanks. I've got more memories than I can handle." Gregor removed Solovet's dagger from his belt and put it with the sword. "Besides, my mom won't even let me have a pocketknife," he said.

Vikus gave him half a smile. With great effort, he worked a word from himself. It was difficult to distinguish, but Gregor thought he knew what Vikus wanted to say. "Hope?" Gregor asked. The old man nodded and pointed at Gregor's chest. "I give you hope?" Vikus nodded. "Well... just wait until you hear what Luxa did." Gregor leaned down and kissed him on the cheek. "Take care, Vikus."

Gregor left so that Luxa could tell Vikus about what had happened in the arena. Besides, he was dripping blood everywhere. He found Ripred and Lizzie in a room. A team of doctors was trying to put the rat back together, putting his leg in a cast, cleaning and bandaging his mite-eaten flesh. For somebody who was so tough, Ripred was putting up an awful big fuss. But not as big as it would have been if Lizzie hadn't been comforting him.

By the time Howard had bandaged Gregor's hand, the meeting of the delegates was about to begin. Lizzie wanted to go to be near Ripred, so Gregor went, too, to keep an eye on her. It was held in a room with a large, round table. Gregor and Lizzie sat up against the wall, but four delegates of each species, humans, rats, bats, mice, spiders, cockroaches, and moles gathered around the table. There were twenty-eight in all, but it was soon clear that Ripred and Luxa planned on doing most of the talking. For a couple of characters who had just bonded, they sure didn't agree on much. Not land division, not restitution, not military control. Other voices chimed in and soon the conversation had moved away from the future and back to the past evils they had done to one another. Things looked like they might actually turn physical when Ripred jumped on the table and shouted, "Don't feel superior! Don't anyone in this room feel superior! We have all inflicted unspeakable evils upon one another! Let's admit that or we're just sliding backward!"

"Hey, like in the prophecy," interjected Gregor. "Time is turning back."

"Shut up!" Ripred spat at him. The rat climbed off of the table and no one knew where to pick up the conversation. Then Lizzie timidly spoke up. "I have an idea." She wasn't really supposed to talk, but everyone respected the code-breaker.

"I am sure we would all welcome it, Lizzie," said Heronian encouragingly.

"I think there are too many of you. I think each group should only get one delegate." Lizzie licked her lips. "And that that delegate should be chosen by the other species."

There was a long pause while everyone considered this. Of course, everyone liked the idea of choosing the others' delegates. But to let the others choose theirs ...

"We make no headway here. I believe we should give Lizzie's suggestion a try," said Luxa.

"Well, I'll just leave now, shall I?" said Ripred, giving Lizzie a wounded look.

"Oh, stop sulking! It is not as if I will be invited to stay," Luxa snapped.

"Well, I wouldn't vote for either of you," put in Gregor. They both glared at him but that only made him grin.

The delegates were chosen. The seven were Mareth, Nike, Temp, Heronian, Lapblood, Reflex, and a mole whose name no one could pronounce.

"Oh, look, all the reasonable delegates are left," said Gregor as he left with the rejects.

"All the weak ones, you mean," muttered a spider who Gregor didn't know.

Gregor looked into the room. "No," he said. "There's nobody weak in that room. Good luck, you guys." He took Lizzie's hand. "And good idea, Liz."

"It's kind of like the logic puzzle about the cheese. Only you turn it inside out. So there's one cheese and seven creatures have to share it. The trick is, you have to figure out who are the most likely to share," said Lizzie. Then she added sadly, "But now Ripred's mad at me."

"On the contrary," said Ripred, tugging on her braid. "Ripred's very cranky that no one voted for him, but very pleased that he can go to the feast now. Hop on," he said, and Lizzie scampered up onto his back. "It's ideal really. They will come up with a plan. No one will like it. Everyone

will feel they have been treated unfairly, but will be happy that their neighbors feel the same. And that is the nature of compromise. Now let's go eat an awful lot."

Gregor and Luxa lingered in the hall as the others went to the feast.

"When must you go?" asked Luxa.

"My mom wants to go today. In a few hours, maybe," said Gregor. "My dad convinced her it was important for us to stay for the surrender. But she wants to get to Virginia as soon as possible." , They collected a basket of food from the kitchen, and Aurora carried them out of Regalia to Ares's old cave. Then she flew out around the lake, leaving them alone.

"We finally can have that picnic," said Luxa.

"Yeah," said Gregor. But neither of them could eat. They just sat with their arms around each other.

"Where is Virginia?" Luxa asked.

"A long way from New York. Hundreds and hundreds of miles," said Gregor.

"We shall never see each other again," said Luxa.

Gregor found himself wishing Sandwich had been able to cough up a few more prophecies about the warrior. "Probably not. Won't even be able to write."

"Will you be glad to be home?" asked Luxa.

"No," Gregor said. "I can't even imagine being back. Anyway, Virginia isn't my home. It's just a place I've visited."

"It will be easier for you. Here there will always be talk of you. In the Overland, who but your family even knows my name? And they will not want to dwell on your times here. It will be quite simple to forget me," said Luxa.

"Never," said Gregor. "I'll never get rid of you, no matter how hard I try." It was no longer an effort to say the words. "I love you."

"I love you, too," said Luxa.

And after that, there was nothing left to say.

Tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, tick, ...

In no time, horns were blowing from Regalia. Aurora fluttered in. "They are calling us back," she said.

Gregor had trouble believing it was really happening. The quick flight back. His family waiting on the docks, ready to go. His few possessions

from the museum already neatly packed in a bag. There were hugs and good-byes but only Boots said, "See you soon," as she showered Temp with kisses.

Ripred made a point of giving Gregor some last-minute rager advice. "Watch yourself. That rager thing isn't going to magically disappear. It's part of you. There won't be anyone you can't take. And you've killed enough that you don't have to think twice to do it. Remember, it's a lot easier to lose your head than to keep it."

The words made Gregor's blood run cold. "I'll remember," he said. He'd better remember. Or who knows what he might do? "Run like the river, Ripred."

"Fly you high, Gregor the Overlander," said the rat, and then turned his attention to Lizzie, who was crying her eyes out.

Nike and Aurora flew his family and Luxa over the Waterway and dropped them at the stairway beneath Central Park. Gregor said good-bye to the bats, then held Luxa's hand while his dad pushed the rock aside. Cool night air rushed in.

"Come and look, just for a second," said Gregor. But Luxa would only climb up to where her head and shoulders were aboveground. It was a clear night. A few stars were visible and the moon was magnificent.

"This is where I will think of you," she said. "You know where I will be."

Gregor kissed Luxa good-bye and climbed out into the park. Then she backed down a few steps and they held each other's gaze until Gregor's dad slid the rock in place, parting them forever.

CHAPTER 27

It was late. Two-fifteen by the clock on the taxi's dashboard. The driver was tired, uncommunicative, and didn't seem to wonder what they were doing hanging out in Central Park at that hour.

When they got to their building, the elevator was broken, so they took the stairs up to their apartment. Gregor's mom had to rest every couple of flights. His dad finally gave him the keys and told him to take the girls on ahead. When Gregor opened the door to his apartment, he couldn't believe how small and cramped the place looked. He and Lizzie slumped back on the couch while Boots immediately dumped a basket of plastic animals on the rug and arranged them in a parade. When she came to a little black bat she'd gotten last Halloween she held it up happily. "Look! Ares!" Gregor could think of nothing to say as she flew the bat around her head.

His parents came in about ten minutes later, and even though she was dropping from fatigue, his mom went right in to check on his grandmother. That's when Gregor realized she didn't know that Grandma wasn't there. His dad had been waiting until they got home to break the news. "It's her heart, Grace. She's in the hospital. We'll go see her first thing tomorrow," his dad said.

They went straight to bed. Gregor didn't even bother with pajamas. He just stripped down to his Underland briefs and crawled between his blankets. They had a dusty, familiar smell. A siren went by. Music from a car radio blared then faded. A toilet flushed. The old comforting sounds of New York City lulled Gregor to sleep....

The tunnel was dark. The flashlights long dead. Gregor was relying solely on echolocation. It had been stupid to go this way. Ripred had told him that but he hadn't listened. Now they had found him. As he ran he could feel the rats panting so he turned and swung, slashing open several faces, splattering himself with blood. But then something happened to his sword. It became rubbery, melting in his hand. He tried to run again but the floor was crumbling beneath his feet and then he was falling, falling, falling into a black pit. He screamed for Ares but there was no Ares and he could see the sharp rocks as they rushed up to meet him, feel the agony as they pierced his chest!

Gregor bolted up in bed, heart pounding, sweat-soaked, his right hand clutching his throbbing chest. Had his own voice woken him? No one came running in. No one called his name. The screams must have stayed in his dream.

The falling nightmares that had plagued him growing up had stopped when he'd had Ares. Now they were back again, filled with rats and blood.

Dawn was just breaking over the city. He'd been in bed only a few hours. He knew he should go back to sleep. But the nightmare had been too real. He sank back on his pillow and watched the sunlight brighten until it stung his eyes.

Gregor cracked open his window and took a deep breath of the exhaust-scented air. What day was it? What month was it? He had no idea. He hadn't been home since Hazard's birthday. That had been in the dead of summer. This air was crisp. Suddenly he had an urgent need to know how much time had passed, to ground himself in some kind of reality. The calendar in the kitchen would be worthless, but he could turn on the TV... No, that would wake everybody... He could go down to the corner and check the date on a newspaper. He flung off his blanket and froze as he got his first look at his body in sunlight.

"Oh, geez," he said. He knew he'd gotten beat up pretty bad in the Underland, but things healed up and you moved on. Only he hadn't accounted for the accumulation of scars that dated all the way back to his earliest visits. Marks left by squid suckers, vines, pinchers, teeth, claws. Then there were the wounds he'd made on his hands when he'd broken Sandwich's sword less than a day ago. His skin was like a map where you could trace all of the terrible things that had happened.

The Underlanders had given him more of that fish ointment. Maybe it would help. But some of these things ...like the five claw marks the Bane had left on his chest... They were going nowhere fast. They were part of him forever. How could he ever explain them? Say he'd been in a car wreck? Fallen through a plate-glass window? Wrestled a pack of tigers? If he couldn't explain them, he'd have to hide them. Forget the beach, forget gym class, and forget even going to the doctor unless he was on death's doorstep. A doctor wouldn't accept some lame excuse. He'd want answers and the truth would land Gregor in a mental ward.

Gregor dressed in a long-sleeved shirt and pants, both of which seemed too short. He'd done quite a bit of growing in ... in however long he'd been

gone. He put on his socks and his only Overland footwear, a pair of dress shoes he'd gotten for the spring concert. His toes felt cramped and they looked stupid with his outfit. He wanted those great sneakers Mrs. Cormaci had sent him but they'd been ruined in the war.

He left quietly, but as he passed Mrs. Cormaci's apartment, the door opened. She had always been an early riser. "So. You stayed in one piece," she said, looking him up and down critically. "Your pants are too short. Want some French toast?"

Gregor followed her into the kitchen and sat at the table while she made breakfast. She filled him in on his grandma's condition. "She's not doing too well, Gregor.' She's in intensive care. If your mother has some idea about taking her on a road trip to Virginia, well, that just isn't going to happen." She piled the thick slices of challah bread fried in egg batter on Gregor's plate and placed a platter of bacon in front of him. "I don't see how we can stay here," he said, pouring syrup on the toast. "Maybe she'll just take us kids." It would be awful breaking up the family again, though. They'd just gotten back together.

"Maybe. So, what's been going on with you, mister?" Mrs. Cormaci asked.

Gregor thought about all that had happened since he'd last been home. All he'd seen and done. He couldn't form any of it into words.

"Cat got your tongue?" asked Mrs. Cormaci. "It's okay. You don't need to tell me or anyone else about it unless you feel like it." She dipped a piece of bacon in his syrup and chewed it thoughtfully. "You know, Mr. Cormaci fought in a war. He didn't want to talk about it, either. I knew there'd been some terrible things, though. That man had bad dreams until the day he died."

"One woke me this morning," said Gregor.

"It won't be the last," said Mrs. Cormaci. "Want some juice?" She poured him a glass without waiting for him to answer. "It's like this. You spend your whole childhood hearing about being nice to other people and how hurting someone's a crime, and then they ship you off to some war and tell you to kill. What's that going to do to your head, huh?"

"Nothing good," Gregor said.

"You'll be all right, though, Gregor," said Mrs. Cormaci.

"I don't know. In my dream, I fell to my death," said Gregor. "I used to have falling dreams before, but this was the first time I hit bottom."

"Don't worry. If you hit bottom, there's a whole lot of people here to help you up," said Mrs. Cormaci.

"Help me up?" Gregor thought. "Wipe me up is more like it. Nothing left to help once you hit those rocks." And even if people wanted to help, Gregor was alone in his dreams. No one could help him there.

While he ate, Mrs. Cormaci found a pair of old sneakers that had belonged to one of her sons about twenty years ago. They weren't exactly in style but they fit pretty well and looked better than the dress shoes.,

"You're going to need new clothes for school," she said.

"Has it started already?" he asked.

"Weeks ago," she said. "We're halfway through October, Gregor."

"I didn't know," he said.

The morning was spent watching his sisters while his parents and Mrs. Cormaci went to the hospital. While Lizzie and Boots ate breakfast, Gregor stood at the kitchen window watching the neighborhood kids go off to school. He thought of his friends Larry and Angelina and wondered what they must make of his disappearance. Did they think he had moved? Was sick? Part of him wanted to see them badly and another part never wanted to see them again. He had been through so much, changed so much, that the idea of hanging out with them and pretending everything was back to normal seemed impossible.

His parents got back around lunch. The visit had been a shock to his mom. No one could say when his grandmother would be able to leave the hospital, and even then she'd probably have to go to some kind of nursing home with full-time medical care.

"Can I see her?" asked Gregor.

"Not now, son. Maybe when she's stronger," said his dad.

"What are we going to do now?" asked Gregor. "About Virginia?"

"I don't know. We'll work it out," said his dad.

"I don't want to go to Virginia," said Lizzie, and they all looked at her in surprise.

"But you said you did, Lizzie," said their mom. "You were the first one packing when I mentioned it."

"I don't want to go anymore. This is our home. I don't want to run away," said Lizzie. "Ripred says if you run from things that scare you they just chase you."

"What about you, Gregor?" asked his dad.

Gregor tried to imagine living in Virginia. Tried to imagine staying here. "It doesn't matter. I don't care where we live," he said. It would be awful wherever he was. He pulled his jacket off of the hook by the door. "I'm going for a walk."

He hadn't had a destination in mind when he'd left, but in a few blocks he knew where he wanted to go. He checked his pocket. Thirty-five bucks. That would be plenty. He hopped on the subway and headed to the Cloisters. He had to see the stone knight who had gotten him through these last weeks. Maybe that would help him make sense of things.

The day was cool and sunny. The trees were starting to turn. But Gregor kept thinking of another world, one without sunlight and precious few trees, that he seemed to belong to now. What if he'd told his parents he wanted to go back and live in the Underland? Where he was not such a freak? Where he had friends? Where he had Luxa? They would never let him go. And did he really want to go? He didn't know. He only knew that he felt like a stranger in what used to be his home. And he felt very alone.

The woman at the booth hesitated when he tried to buy a ticket. What did she see? Some kid in mismatched clothes showing up alone in the middle of the school day. Weird bandages on his hands. And Gregor couldn't remember the last time he'd had a haircut. He tried to cover. "I have to do a school report. We're supposed to write about the coolest building in New York. I picked here. Do you have any information or anything I could look at?" She was still wary, but she let him in with a couple of glossy brochures and a warning not to touch anything.

The place was almost empty. Gregorian chants were being piped in, which were sort of eerie and calming at the same time. The Cloisters reminded Gregor of Regalia, with the carvings of strange animals, the tapestries, the stone walls, floors, ceilings. He wandered through a couple of rooms before he found the tomb. The knight was just as Gregor had last seen him, lying beneath the window, his hands resting on his sword, sleeping away eternity. Thinking of this knight had gotten Gregor through some tough times. He had made the trip today because he expected to find some comfort in the stone figure. But now, he realized it was no longer of use to him. He had spent the last months learning how to die, and now he was going to have to learn how to live again. The knight couldn't help him with that.

It was late afternoon when Gregor got home and he wasn't one step in the door when his mom descended on him. "Where on earth have you been? Do you know how long you've been gone? You had the whole family worried sick!"

Boy, she was upset! Her eyes were red as if she'd been crying.

"I'm sorry," Gregor said. "I just went for a walk."

His dad laid a hand on his shoulder. "It's okay. You've just got to get used to having parents again."

"I'm sorry," Gregor repeated. His parents went in the bedroom to talk. Lizzie and Boots were playing some game with the plastic animals on the floor. Gregor turned on the television and flipped through the channels. He stopped on the news. A bomb had blown up in a marketplace somewhere, killing forty-nine. There were body parts and smoke and relatives wailing. The next story was about refugees dying on the road, driven from their homes by an enemy army. The news anchor was just starting to show a grainy video of a soldier who had been taken hostage when his mother reached in and switched off the television. She looked so sad. "I think you've seen enough, Gregor."

It had all looked pretty familiar. The bodies, the fear, the desperation. These things had always been here in the Overland, he supposed, but he had never really paid any attention to them until now.

"Why don't you take your sisters out to the playground?" said his dad. "They've been cooped up in here all day."

"Are we moving to Virginia or staying here?" Lizzie asked.

"We're still working that out," his dad said. "You kids go on out and play a while." When they reached the playground, Boots immediately ran off to build castles with some little boy in the sandbox. Lizzie wandered around alone with her hands deep in her jacket pockets and her eyes on the ground.

Gregor sat on a bench. He had walked a lot today and all of his injuries were hurting. Seeing the news had made him think. He was safe for the moment, here in the playground, but people all over the world were suffering, starving, fleeing, killing one another as they waged their wars. How much energy they put into harming one another. How little into saving. Would it ever change? What would it take to make it change? He thought of Luxa's hand pressed into Ripred's paw. That's what it would take. People rejecting war. Not one or two, but all of them. Saying it was an

unacceptable way to solve their differences. By the look of things, the human race had a lot of evolving to do before that happened. Maybe it was impossible. But maybe it wasn't. Like Vikus said, nothing would happen unless you hoped it could. If you had hope, maybe you could find the way to make things change. Because if you thought about it, there were so many reasons to try.

One tugged on his jacket and lifted up her arms. "Hold me." Gregor pulled Boots up onto his lap and snuggled her inside his jacket. She rested her head on his shoulder and studied his face. "You feel sad," she said.

"A little," said Gregor.

"You miss them," said Boots.

"Yeah, I do," Gregor said. "But I've still got you." He remembered all of the times he'd thought he had lost her, and tightened his grip around her.

"Here." Boots dug in her pocket and pulled out the little black plastic bat. Ares. She put it in his hand. "You can have this, Gregor."

"Thanks," he said. They leaned back and watched as the streetlights came on.

Suddenly Gregor smiled. "Hey, Boots," he said. "Hey. You can finally say my name."

About the Author

Thinking one day about *Alice in Wonderland*, Suzanne Collins was struck by how pastoral the setting must seem to kids who, like her own kids, lived in urban surroundings. In New York City, you're much more likely to fall down a manhole into the sewer than a rabbit hole, and if you do, you're not going to find a tea party. What might you find? The answer to this question can be found in Collins's first novel, *Gregor the Overlander*. Like Alice, Gregor takes a very long fall beneath his world and finds another strange place.

Gregor the Overlander is the first in a five-part series entitled The Underland Chronicles. In each book, Gregor must find the courage and moral fortitude to deal with a different aspect of war.

Although *Gregor the Overlander* is Suzanne Collins's first novel, she is not a stranger to writing for kids. Since 1991 she has had a successful and prolific career writing for children's television. She has worked on the staffs of several Nickelodeon shows, including the Emmy-nominated hit *Clarissa Explains It All* and *The Mystery Files of Shelby Woo*. She has also worked on shows such as *Maurice Sendak's Little Bear*, *Oswald the Octopus*, and *Clifford's Puppy Days*.

Suzanne Collins currently lives in Connecticut with her family.