

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, 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 PAW 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.