

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.