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For Charlie and Isabel
PART 1

The Plague
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 $r$.


“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 choco-
late. 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.