For Rosemary Stimola,
Kate Egan, and Liz Szabla
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 dimin-
ish 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 pale-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, Pincess,” 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 pincesses!” 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, Pincesses, 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.