GREGOR AND THE CODE OF CLAW

BOOK FIVE OF THE BESTSELLING UNDERLAND CHRONICLES

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PART 1

The Code
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 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.”


“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!”

“No, 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 Firelands. “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.”