

**GREGOR AND
THE
MARKS OF SECRET**

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by Scholastic Press in 2006.

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ISBN 978-1-338-72279-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 20 21 22 23 24

Printed in the U.S.A. 40
This edition first printing, August 2020
The text was set in 12-point Sabon.

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 diminish 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.