

CHAPTER

2

Gregor twisted around in the air, trying to position himself so he wouldn't land on Boots when they hit the basement floor, but no impact came. Then he remembered the laundry room was in the basement. So what exactly had they fallen into?

The wisps of vapor had thickened into a dense mist that generated a pale light. Gregor could see only a few feet in any direction. His fingers clawed desperately through the white stuff, looking for a handhold, but came up empty. He was plummeting downward so fast, his clothes ballooned around him.

"Boots!" he hollered, and the sound bounced eerily back to him. "There must be sides to this thing," he thought. He called again, "Boots!"

A bright giggle came from somewhere below him. "Ge-go go wheee!" said Boots.

"She thinks she's on a big slide or something," thought Gregor. "At least she's not scared." He felt scared enough for the both of them. Whatever strange hole they had slipped into, it must have a bottom. There was only one way that this spinning through space could end.

Time was passing. Gregor couldn't tell exactly how much, but too much to make sense. Surely there was a limit to how deep a hole could be. At some point, you'd have to run into water or rock or the earth's platelets or something.

It was all like this horrible dream he had sometimes. He'd be up high, somewhere he wasn't supposed to be, usually like the roof of his school. As he walked along the edge, the solid matter under his feet would suddenly give way, and down he'd go. Everything would disappear but the sensation of falling, of the ground closing in on him, of terror. Then, just at the moment of impact, he'd jerk awake, soaked in sweat, heart pounding.

"A dream! I fell asleep in the laundry room and this

is the same old crazy dream!" thought Gregor. "Of course! What else could it be?"

Calmed by the notion that he was asleep, Gregor began to gauge his fall. He didn't own a wristwatch, but anybody could count seconds.

"One Mississippi . . . two Mississippi . . . three Mississippi . . ." At seventy Mississippi he gave up and began to feel panicky again. Even in a dream you had to land, didn't you?

Just then, Gregor noticed the mist beginning to clear a little. He could make out the smooth, dark sides of a circular wall. He seemed to be falling down a large, dark tube. He felt an updraft rising from below him. The last wisps of vapor blew away, and Gregor lost speed. His clothes gently settled back on his body.

Below him, he heard a small thump and then the patter of Boots's sandals. A few moments later, his own feet made contact with solid ground. He tried to get his bearings, not daring to move. Total darkness surrounded him. As his eyes adjusted, he became aware of a faint shaft of light off to his left.

A happy squeak came from behind it. "Bug! Beeg bug!"

Gregor ran toward the light. It leaked through a

narrow crevice between two smooth walls of rock. He barely managed to squeeze himself through the opening. His sneaker caught on something, causing him to lose his balance. He tripped out from between the rock walls and landed on his hands and knees.

When he raised his head, Gregor found himself looking into the face of the largest cockroach he'd ever seen.

Now, his apartment complex had some big bugs. Mrs. Cormaci claimed a water bug the size of her hand had climbed out of her bathtub drain, and nobody doubted her. But the creature in front of Gregor rose at least four feet in the air. Granted, it was sitting up on its back legs, a very unnatural-looking position for a cockroach, but still . . .

"Beeg bug!" cried Boots again, and Gregor managed to close his mouth. He pushed back onto his knees but he still had to tilt his head back to see the roach. It was holding some kind of torch. Boots scampered over to Gregor and tugged on the neck of his shirt. "Beeeg bug!" she insisted.

"Yes, I see, Boots. Big bug!" said Gregor in a hushed voice, wrapping his arms tightly around her. "Very . . . big . . . bug."

He tried hard to remember what cockroaches ate. Garbage, rotten food . . . people? He didn't think they ate people. Not the little ones, anyway. Maybe they wanted to eat people but they kept getting stepped on first. At any rate, this wasn't a good time to find out.

Trying to appear casual, Gregor slowly edged his way back toward the crack in the rocks. "Okay, Mr. Roach, so we'll just be going, sorry we bugged you — I mean, bothered you, I mean —"

"Smells what so good, smells what?" a voice hissed, and it took Gregor a full minute to realize it had come from the cockroach. He was too stunned to make any sense of the strange words.

"Uh . . . excuse me?" he managed.

"Smells what so good, smells what?" the voice hissed again, but the tone wasn't threatening. Just curious, and maybe a little excited. "Be small human, be?"

"All right, okay, I'm talking to a giant cockroach," thought Gregor. "Be cool, be nice, answer the bug. He wants to know 'Smells what so good, smells what?' So, tell him." Gregor forced himself to take a deep sniff and then regretted it. Only one thing smelled like that.

"I poop!" said Boots, as if on cue. "I poop, Ge-go!"

"My sister needs a clean diaper," said Gregor, somehow feeling embarrassed.

The roach, if he could read it right, acted impressed. "Ahhh. Closer come can we, closer come?" said the roach, delicately sweeping the space in front of it with a leg.

"We?" said Gregor. Then he saw the other forms rising out of the dark around them. The smooth black bumps he had taken for rocks were actually the backs of another dozen or so enormous cockroaches. They clustered around Boots eagerly, waving their antennae in the air and shuddering in delight.

Boots, who loved any kind of compliment, instinctively knew she was being admired. She stretched out her chubby arms to the giant insects. "I poop," she said graciously, and they gave an appreciative hiss.

"Be she princess, Overlander, be she? Be she queen, be she?" asked the leader, dipping its head in slavish devotion.

"Boots? A queen?" asked Gregor. Suddenly he had to laugh.

The sound seemed to rattle the roaches, and they

withdrew stiffly. "Laugh why, Overlander, laugh why?" one hissed, and Gregor realized he had offended them.

"Because, we're, like, poor and she's kind of a mess and . . . are you calling me Overlander?" he wound up lamely.

"Be you not Overlander human, be you? No Underlander you," said the torchbearing roach peering closely at him. "You look much like but smell not like."

Something seemed to dawn on the leader. "Rat bad." It turned to its comrades. "Leave we Overlanders here, leave we?" The roaches drew closely together in consultation and all began to talk at once.

Gregor caught snippets of their conversation, but nothing that made sense. They were so immersed in their debate that he thought about trying to escape again. He looked at his surroundings. In the dim torchlight, they appeared to be in a long, flat tunnel. "We need to go back up," thought Gregor. "Not sideways." He could never scale the walls of the hole they'd fallen down with Boots in his arms.

The roaches came to a decision. "You come, Overlanders. Take to humans," said the leader.

"Humans?" said Gregor, feeling relieved. "There are other humans down here?"

"Ride you, ride you? Run you, run you?" asked the roach, and Gregor understood it was offering him a lift. It didn't look sturdy enough to carry him, but he knew some insects, like ants, could carry many times their weight. He had a sickening image of trying to sit on the roach and crushing it.

"I think I'll walk — I mean, run," said Gregor.

"Ride the princess, ride she?" said the roach hopefully, waving its antennas ingratiatingly and flattening itself on its stomach before Boots. Gregor would have said no, but the toddler climbed right up on the roach's back. He should have known. She loved to sit on the giant metal turtles at the Central Park Zoo.

"Okay, but she has to hold my hand," said Gregor, and Boots obediently latched on to his finger.

The roach took off immediately, and Gregor found himself jogging to keep up with it. He knew roaches could move fast; he'd watched his mother swat enough of them. Apparently these giant roaches had maintained their speed with their size. Fortunately the floor of the tunnel was even, and Gregor had only finished up track a few weeks ago. He adjusted his pace

to match the roaches and soon found a comfortable rhythm.

The tunnel began to twist and turn. The roaches veered into side passages and even doubled back to choose a new route sometimes. In minutes, Gregor was hopelessly lost, and the mental picture of their path that he'd been making in his head resembled one of Boots's squiggly drawings. He gave up trying to remember directions and concentrated on keeping up with the insects. "Man," he thought, "these bugs can really move!"

Gregor began to pant, but the roaches didn't show any visible signs of exertion. He had no idea how far they were going. Their destination could be a hundred miles away. Who knew how far these things could run?

Just when he was about to tell them he needed to rest, Gregor heard a familiar roar. At first he thought he was mistaken, but as they drew closer he felt sure. It was a crowd and, judging by the sound of it, a big one. But where could you fit a crowd in these tunnels?

The floor began to slope sharply, and Gregor found himself backpedaling to avoid stepping on the roach

leader. Something soft and feathery brushed against his face and arms. Fabric? Wings? He passed through the stuff, and the unexpected light nearly blinded him. His hand instinctively covered his eyes as they tried to adjust.

A gasp went up from a crowd. He'd been right about that part. Then it got unnaturally quiet, and he had the sense that a great number of people were looking at him.

Gregor began to make out his surroundings. It wasn't really that bright — in fact, it seemed like evening — but he'd been in darkness so long, he couldn't tell. The first thing he made out was the ground, which appeared to be covered with a dusky green moss. Except it wasn't uneven, but smooth as pavement. He could feel its springiness under his feet. "It's a field," he thought. "For some kind of game. That's why there's a crowd. I'm in a stadium."

Slowly it came into focus. A polished wall enclosed a large oval cavern about fifty feet high. The top of the oval was ringed with bleachers. Gregor's eyes traveled up the distant rows of people as he tried to find the ceiling. Instead, he found the athletes.

A dozen bats were slowly spiraling around the top of the arena. They ranged in color from light yellow to black. Gregor guessed the smallest one had a wingspan of about fifteen feet. The crowd must have been watching them when he stumbled in, because the rest of the field area was empty. "Maybe it's like Rome, and they feed people to the bats. Maybe that's why the roaches brought us here," he thought.

Something fell from one of the bats. It hit the ground in the middle of the stadium and bounced fifty feet into the air. He thought, "Oh, it's just a —"

"Ball!" cried Boots, and before he could stop her she had slid off the roach, wiggled through the other bugs, and started to run across the mossy ground with her little flat-footed stride.

"Most graceful, the princess," hissed a roach dreamily as Gregor headed after her. The insects had shifted easily to let Boots by, but they were an obstacle course for him. Either they were intentionally trying to slow him down, or they were so taken with Boots's beauty that they had forgotten about him entirely.

The ball hit the ground a second time and bounced

back in the air. Boots ran after it, reaching her arms high above her head to follow its path.

As Gregor broke free of the roaches and ran for his sister, a shadow passed over him. He looked up and to his horror saw a golden bat diving straight down at Boots. He'd never reach her in time. "Boots!" he screamed, feeling his stomach contract.

She turned around to him and saw the bat for the first time. Her face lit up like a Christmas tree. "Bat!" she shouted, pointing at the monstrous animal above her.

"Geez!" thought Gregor. "Doesn't anything scare her?"

The bat swooped over Boots, lightly brushing her finger with its belly fur, and then soared back into the air in a loop. At the top of the arc, while the bat was flat on its back, Gregor noticed for the first time that someone was sitting on it. The rider had its legs wrapped around the bat's neck. He realized it was a girl.

The upside-down girl released her legs and dropped off the bat's back. She executed a perfect double back-flip, twisting around at the last moment to face

Gregor's direction, and landed on the ground as lightly as a cat in front of Boots. One hand went out, and the ball fell into it in what was either a feat of remarkable timing or incredible luck.

Gregor looked at the girl's face and could tell by her arrogant expression that there had been no luck involved at all.

CHAPTER

3

Hands down, she was the strangest-looking person Gregor had ever seen. Her skin was so pale, he could see every vein in her body. He thought of the section on the human anatomy in his science book. Flip one page, see the bones. Next, the digestive system. This girl was a walking circulatory system.

At first he thought her hair was gray like his grandma's, but that wasn't right. It was really more of a silver color, like blond hair with a metallic tint. The hair was woven in an intricate braid down her back and was tucked into a belt at her waist. A thin band of gold encircled the girl's head. It could have been some kind of hair band, but Gregor had a bad feeling it was a crown.

He didn't want this girl to be in charge. He could