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Opening extract from
Urgle

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ONE

'Damn it, Cubby! I said go back!' my voice cut right through the rumbling thunder of the Ikkuma fire mountains.

The brat just stared at me, his blond scraggly hair covered with ash, his cheeks streaked black from the sweat mixed with soot. His little face was wearing that annoying scowl he saved just for me.

He'd been following us since the A-Frame, all the way to the Hotpots. I looked back towards our triangular dwelling, now just a brown-coloured dot in the distance against the charred black earth.

The Ikkuma Pit, our home, is just a giant hole filled with black rock. Black rock and the discarded junk of people living on the outside: metal scraps, soiled clothes, and us, the Ikkuma Brothers. Normally, the blanket of ash that covers the place cushions your foot, but as I stomped away from Cubby shards of black crystal and stone hiding beneath the soft, squishy layer stabbed at my bare feet.

I knew my job, knew I was supposed to love my Little

Brother no matter what, but right then I wanted to punch his stupid scowlface.

'I want to go hunting!' Cubby screeched for the eightieth time that day.

The mountains groaned, just as sick of hearing his incessant whining as I was. Hunting for Slag Cavies with Av was supposed to be my time, my break. A chance to get away from him and just practise. And Cubby knew it.

'Forget it, Urtle. Just let him come,' said Av. Av was my best friend, great hunter and the best shot in the whole Ikkuma Pit. He'd never had much patience for arguing, though I guess he never had to worry about it – *his* Little Brother was a breeze.

'Av, no way!' I said. 'He can't navigate the Hotpots!'

'I can so!' screeched Cubby.

'You can't!'

'Relax!' Av yelled, gripping fistfuls of his dark, matted hair. 'I'll help him across, all right? Everyone stop the yelling.'

Furious, I wiped the sweat pooling on my cheeks and took in a deep breath through my nose, the hot dry air singeing my nose hairs and rushing a warm calm into my lungs, for the moment, anyway.

Cubby's scowl disappeared, replaced by a big fat grin. *Thanks, Av, big help.*

Cubby always got his way. Not because he should, but because he wouldn't stop pushing. Ever. Not until he'd made me as mad as he could.

I glared at the field of Hotpots stretched out before us, pools of molten lava glowing an ember red. I fought the urge to toss the kid in and be done with him.

From somewhere, a voice sniggered, 'Goin' to hunt them big bad Slag Cavies, Urgs?'

Two grubby Brothers were squatted over a small Hotpot not far off – Fiver and Wasted. Fiver was sneering, pleased with what he considered a good joke, his thin lips spread across his fat face while his Little Brother Wasted stifled his laughter, heating up some pebbles for a game of Whip It. My cheeks burned. It *had* to be Fiver who watched me lose an argument to my Little Brother. All my life, I've got on OK with everyone. I'm certainly nobody's favourite person, not like Av – everybody loves Av – I'm just sort of there. But for Fiver, I was *too* there . . . and it bothered him.

'Those junk rodents aren't bad practice,' he went on. 'You just keep at it. Maybe this'll be the year you finally make the Hunting Party.'

At that, Wasted could contain himself no longer, and exploded with wheezy laughter.

'Yeah, keep it up, you two,' warned Av. 'Urgs has come a long way with a spear. You'll see.'

I hadn't. I had terrible aim, bad eyesight, poor hearing and I was slow. The exact opposite of the Brothers in the Hunting Party. No matter how much Av practised with me in the Landfill, I never got any better at hunting.

'Oh, I bet,' laughed Fiver. 'From what I've seen, Urgs, you're gonna need a lot more help than even Av can give you.'

I clenched my jaw and spat. Fiver was right. At the rate I was going, I'd never make the Hunting Party before my Leaving Day.

'Remember,' said Fiver, 'you keep the sharp part of the spear pointed *away* from you.'

Wasted's laughter turned into a fit of hysterics, and I couldn't tell if the rumble vibrating my chest was the rumble of the fire mountains or my own wild fury bubbling up inside.

Cubby stepped out in front of me and Av, his filthy face wearing a new scowl, this one for Fiver. 'He knows how to hunt!'

Just what I needed. My Little Brother fighting my battle for me. I swallowed the groan rising in my throat.

Fiver's beady, dark eyes narrowed on little Cubby, his mouth oozing into a fatter grin, 'Never even had a chance. Poor little scroungee.'

'Hey!' barked Av.

I watched Cubby, his voice had caught in his throat, his mouth hung open, trembling.

One word, and it was like Fiver had punched us both in the face. Scroungees were Brothers who could only scavenge the junk piles in the Landfill for food, Brothers who couldn't hunt because their Big Brother was a useless lump who couldn't teach them how.

I grabbed Cubby's boney shoulder and pulled him in behind me. 'What did you just call him?'

'I know a scroungee when I see one. That one's a scroungee.'

'What's your problem, Fiver?' said Av.

Cubby was close to tears, but Fiver had meant the insult for me more than him, and he'd got the rise he wanted.

'That's it!' I growled, throwing my pack to the ground and advancing on Fiver.

Av leaped out in front of me, trying to calm me down, but Fiver was on his feet, waiting for the brawl, his amused sneer begging me to let him have it.

'Relax,' said Av. 'He wants this, Urgs. Come on, it's getting late.'

'It won't take me long,' I said through gritted teeth. In fact, I was ready to let Av talk me out of it; Fiver was easily a foot taller than me, weighed about as much as two of me, was stronger and faster. I didn't stand a chance.

I felt a tugging at my arm – Cubby. 'Did you hear that?' he whispered, his wide eyes staring up at the tree line of Nikpartok forest, the dense wood that surrounded the Ikkuma Pit.

'What?' asked Av.

'I heard something.'

Everyone's eyes followed Cub's, up the steep black walls of the Pit to where the withered trees peeked out. I listened. Nothing but thunder, and the quiet bubbling of the Hotpots.

'It's a forest, Cub,' I told him, 'it's filled with creatures.'

'Like you would know,' giggled Wasted.

My cheeks burned for the second time. I'd never been into the forest, never hunted anything but Slag Cavies and everyone knew it.

'All right, all right,' said Av. 'Let's just get to the Landfill. Give me your pack.' He snatched it up from the ground by my feet and fastened it securely to his own. 'You take the kid.'

'What?! I specifically remember you saying *you'd* help him across the Hotpots.'

Av ignored me. He faced the first row of smouldering Hotpots, took a few big steps back. Then, with that speed no Brother could match, Av ran full tilt, hands open, always open, slicing through the air and leaped, landing with a thud on the other side.

'Come on, Cub.' I crouched so he could get up onto my back.

'No way!' he shouted.

'I don't blame you, kid!' laughed Fiver, sitting back down beside Wasted.

'You can't make that jump,' I told him.

'Can so.'

'You can't!' I snapped.

'I can!'

I turned away from him. *What an idiot.* The Hotpots were no joke. Brothers died in them all the time and he knew that.

'Cub!' called Av, 'Listen to Urgle.'

'Fine,' he groaned. Fiver and Wasted sniggered some more. I was humiliated.

Cubby shimmied onto my back, his sweaty arms wrapping around my neck. I was suddenly nervous, I'd never made the jump with this much weight. Didn't help that I had an audience in Fiver and Wasted.

'You're holding on tight, right?' I said. 'I mean like really tight.'

'Yes!' he snapped. 'Let's go.'

I backed up farther than usual. I charged ahead full tilt, leaving my hands open like Av. It worked for him. I came to the edge of the first pot and jumped.

'SCROUNGEE!!' yelled Fiver, but he was too late, I was airborne. I came down with a thud, Cubby's chin slamming into my shoulder, and my left foot slid back, nearly dipping into the boiling lava.

Fiver. He'd wanted me to fall. Wanted me to burn. If he'd yelled a couple of seconds sooner... I would have.

When we reached the Landfill, the three of us stood and scanned the giant trash mounds, eyes peeled for movement. Rusted metal branched from the mounds, reaching out, refusing to stay buried – smooth, rough, twisty, flat – all of it busy and messy, a lot of noise for my eyes. Not a Slag Cavy in sight. No problem, though, there'd probably be hundreds beneath the trash, scavenging for food. I didn't really care. I was still seething about Fiver.

I threw down my pack viciously and began fishing out my spear and thrower.

'Just forget him, Urgs,' said Av.

Easy for him to say.

Cubby was chewing on his dirt-crusting fingers, no scowl anymore, just wide, wet eyes.

'I'm – I'm no scroungee,' he murmured.

'That's right, Cub,' said Av. 'You're not.'

My blood was boiling. 'It wasn't about you, Cubby, it was about me.'

'But he said it to *me!*'

'You don't even know what it means.'

'I know it's really bad!'

I ground my teeth and clenched my fists to keep from slugging the kid. It wasn't him I was mad at, it was Fiver, but Cubby had a way of annoying me like no one else. I turned my back on him to stop the argument and hunkered down on the rusty shards to fish out my hunting gear.

'There it is again,' Cubby whispered. 'Can you hear it?'

'It's nothing, stop scaring yourself!' He had been a paranoid mess about Nikpartok forest creatures all his life. The kid had nightmares every time the Hunting Party brought

back a big animal he didn't recognise.

Cubby came over to me, and sat down cross legged with his head in his hands watching eagerly.

'I think the Cavies are gone, I haven't even seen one,' he said.

Showed what the kid knew. He didn't take in anything I told him.

'Slag Cavies live under the trash, Cub,' Av explained as he inspected his sling. 'Dens and tunnels all through the mounds.'

'Why?'

'Jeeze, Urgs, don't you teach the kid anything?' laughed Av, smacking the back of my head. Great. First Fiver, now Av.

'I teach him plenty!' I snapped. 'He just forgets!'

'You're right, I'm sorry.'

I shot Cubby an angry look for making me look like a bad Big Brother. He didn't notice. He was staring at my daggers.

'Don't even think about it,' I warned.

'This one's new.' His grimy little finger grazed the handle of my newest piece and I slapped it away.

'It's not finished.'

'I like it,' he grinned, his fingers fidgeting in his lap. I tried not to smile. I liked it too. It was one of the best daggers I'd made in a while. The blade was a polished black fire glass; all my blades were made of fire glass. It was all over our mountains – smooth, shiny black rock that flaked into the sharpest edge, if you worked it right. When this one caught the light, it showed a red stripe pattern that I'd seen only a few times in fire glass. Sort of a shame I'd have to give it up.

'Don't get too attached,' I said, 'because it's leaving with Digger.' Digger was the oldest out of all of us, sixteen, and considered himself some kind of leader. Which was stupid. In the Ikkuma Pit there are no leaders. Big Brothers take care of their Little Brothers, hunters hunt, healers heal, fixers fix. No one needs to tell you to do your part, you just do it. I hated when the tall, gangly jerk gave me orders. Good thing his Leaving Day wasn't far off.

Av bent down to take a look, rubbing his thumb over the end of the handle. The handle was made of bully wood; Av had brought it back for me after a day in Nikpartok with the Hunting Party. The wood was dark, nearly black, and very hard. It had taken me a long time to get used to the way it ground under my tools when I tried to carve it. It took a long time but I got the hang of it eventually.

'I get it,' he laughed, tracing the image creeping up its side, five perfect notches splayed out from the butt to the blade. 'They're fingers! That's great!'

I nodded. Digger's Little Brother, Fingers, came to me after Digger made his Leaving Day announcement. When a Big Brother decides his Little Brother is ready to handle life on his own, he makes an announcement. Always the same announcement: *'When the next baby is dropped, I will leave to make room for him. He will take my place.'* It's a big deal. The boy who leaves and his Little Brother usually exchange gifts. Fingers wanted to give Digger a dagger and asked me to make it. I'm not a big fan of Digger, but I usually get asked to make a dagger for Leaving Days so I told Fingers I'd do it. The Brothers seem to like the ones I make best. It's the one thing I do really well. This one I was particularly proud of. I

had Fingers grip the handle and I traced his fingers with a bit of charcoal and carved away.

‘What’s this for?’ asked Cubby, pointing to a circle impression where the blade met the handle.

‘A-Frame,’ I said. That’s the one thing I put on all my daggers – a small piece of wood from the A-Frame. A little piece of home.

‘When you make mine,’ he said, sitting on his hands, ‘can you make it with *your* fingers?’

I shook my head. ‘You said you wanted a curl, like the one I made for Asher.’ The list of demands for Cubby’s dagger was endless. I’d promised I’d make him one on my Leaving Day, and every time I made a new dagger he liked, he asked for his to be the same.

‘Yeah, but I like this better.’

I chewed the inside of my cheek to keep from laughing. He’d like the next one more, and the one after that even more.

He pointed to the glinting red stripes in the glass. ‘And that too, make mine with that.’

I wouldn’t. What Cubby didn’t know was I’d started his the day he became my Little Brother. So far, I had the blade complete. It was made of fire glass, like the rest, but this was special. I’d found the stone years ago, back when I was a Little Brother. There was a thick line of blue at its centre, I’d never seen that colour in fire glass. Reds, purples, oranges, maybe some yellow from time to time, but never blue. When I finished working on it, Cubby’s blade had this long, thick blue swoosh flowing at its centre. I’d been so busy getting the blade just the way I wanted, I hadn’t had time to think about the rest of it.