

URGLE

When you leave the only home you
have ever known, the world can be
a dangerous place...

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URGLE

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For Mom and Dad

PART ONE



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.

‘Cubby,’ said Av, ‘you know making it look good doesn’t make it work good. It’s how you use it that matters.’

Cubby shrugged. Something in the mound must have caught his eye because he got up and left us to rummage through the junk. He loved collecting worthless trash from the Landfill, stashing it away in his little hiding place he liked to pretend I didn’t know about.

‘Don’t do any of that fancy stuff for me when I go, Urgs,’ Av went on. ‘I just want three real good blades. Light and easy to throw.’

I looked up at him. ‘What? What do you mean?’ Av and I were the same age, everything we did we did together. He was dropped at the wall only a few days after me, and he got Goobs not long after I’d got Cubby. Whatever we did, we did it together. We’d never discussed leaving before.

Av didn’t say anything, just focused on picking out his wooden darts.

‘Av, are you thinking of leaving?’

He shrugged. ‘Digger’s going. He’s only two years older than me.’

‘Two years is a lot, Av.’ It was. Digger’s voice had already bubbled – it had turned deep and scratchy, and his neck had that bubble that only the oldest boys get. He had hair too, right on his chin. Av’s voice was still the same, his skin still smooth and bare. He was too young. We were too young.

‘Maybe, but Goobs is already the same age I was when I got him.’

I wiped the sweat off my forehead. The thought of Av’s Little Brother, Goobs, all alone and with a baby made me

uneasy. Goobs was the same age as Cubby. What would he do without Av? What would I do without Av?

'But you bring down the most game,' I said. 'The Hunting Party needs you.'

'Fiver'll be with them.'

I frowned.

'I know Fiver's not your favourite person, Urgs. But he's an amazing tracker, really. I may bring 'em down but I wouldn't find them if Fiver weren't out there with us.'

I didn't say anything. I hated when Av said anything good about that Cavy fart.

'He's still your Brother, Urgs,' said Av. 'He's one of us.' Maybe. But I didn't have to like him.

We sat in silence for a minute, both of us watching Cubby tugging on some shiny stick he couldn't budge.

Without Av, Cub would be all that was left for me. And he wasn't ready for me to go, not ready to take care of himself, let alone a new Little Brother. I hadn't taught him enough yet. Maybe Fiver was right. Maybe I was turning Cubby into a Scroungee.

Av squinted as he watched my Little Brother, and for a second I worried he was thinking it too. 'I had it again last night.'

No, his mind was on something else. 'The dream?'

He nodded.

Av had always had vivid dreams. Ever since we were small, but they never bothered him before, not like this. Lately he'd been having the same one, over and over, and it was one that would upset any Brother.

'About your Mother?' I asked.

He kicked me on instinct, to shut me up. He didn't want anyone to know, and I didn't blame him. It was a secret between us. But there was no one around to hear besides Cubby, and he wasn't paying any attention.

'Sorry,' said Av.

I nodded, rubbing my thigh where his foot had slammed into it. 'So it was the same one?'

He jabbed lightly at the ground with his spear, staring at his feet. 'When they get out there, the Brothers I mean, outside the Pit. Think it's true about some of them?'

I waited, not sure what he was getting at.

'You know, going to find her?'

No. Without question, no. Not the good ones anyway. No self-respecting Brother who left the Pit went to find those monsters. No self-respecting Brother would ever go looking for his Mother.

Av was one of the good ones.

When I didn't say anything he hurried by me with his spear thrower. 'Anyway, I was just talking. We better get going, here. Don't want to waste the day.'

He was just talking. I knew that. Av hated the Mothers just as much as any of us, he'd said it plenty of times. But if anyone heard him talking like that . . .

'I still hear it!' Cubby had freed his shiny stick and was pointing back at the tree line with it. 'There's something out there, I swear.' One thing was for sure. If Av was thinking of leaving, I was going to have to get better at hunting real fast. If I didn't, I'd let down Cubby.

TWO

I sat on a big scrap of metal, inspecting the black, furry rodents I'd brought down. I'd only managed to catch three Slag Cavies over the course of the afternoon, which was in itself embarrassing. But on top of it, they were awfully skinny for Cavies, probably why I'd managed to hit them – they were slow and unhealthy.

I blamed my poor performance on Av and Cubby, they'd been chattering the whole time about hunting tips and everything I was doing wrong. And I was doing everything wrong, according to Av. But I couldn't concentrate. My mind was on Av, on his Leaving Day. I tried to tell myself it was just talk, like he'd said, but I couldn't help being worried.

'Well?' called Av from the top of a neighbouring trash mound. 'Head back to the A-Frame? I'm getting hungry.'

I'd lost track of time, which wasn't hard to do in the Ikkuma Pit. The billowing black smoke and ash from the fire mountains blocked out the sun and sky, the only light to be seen was the orange glow of fire and lava. Time was kept by

hunger. I felt a faint grumble in my stomach and realised Av was right, nearly meal time.

'Bringing those back with you?' Av smirked, nodding to the Slag Cavies lying beside me. Cubby covered his mouth, trying to stop his giggles.

I scowled at Av, who was holding at least twelve fat juicy Cavies.

My jaw locked and I got up and looked out across the junk heaps, scanning for another Cavy, a fat Cavy, a trophy Cavy. Then I heard a rustling by my feet.

Poking his head out from under my rusted metal scrap was the little black head of a chubby one. Slowly and quietly, I unhooked my spear from the throwing cradle, and held it over the unsuspecting creature. Then, too soon, I slammed the spear down missing the Cavy and hitting the ground with a crunch. The Slag Cavy squeaked in terror, and in a wild, determined fit I slammed my spear down again and again trying to nail him. The confused and frightened rodent managed to dart out of the way every time until finally taking off and disappearing down a hole and into the garbage.

Trophy-less.

Frustrated, I threw down my spear. Then, taking a deep breath that burned away what was left of my nose hairs, I began my walk of shame to join Av and Cubby on top of their mound, waiting to hear them laughing.

But when I joined them, they weren't even looking at me. Av, still and alert, was facing the East Wall of the Pit, his neck cranked up towards the dark tree line, Cubby copying his stance exactly.

'Hear that?' Av asked.

He knew I didn't. I didn't have the kind of ears Av did; no one had the kind of ears Av did.

'No,' I grumbled.

'It's getting closer,' he said.

I half-heartedly scanned the tree line at the top of the East Wall as I stuffed my gear into my pack. I didn't see or hear anything.

'See?' Cubby whispered. 'I *told* you, I heard something.'

I couldn't help it, I had to laugh, 'Av! Cubby's just a big baby, don't listen to him!'

'I'm not a baby!'

Then I heard it for the first time, a hideous, deep, guttural call from somewhere in the distance.

I stiffened, Cubby looked at me nervously. He was right. There was something out there. The noise was sick, twisted, unlike anything I'd ever heard before. No wonder Cubby was so worried.

'Some kind of bird?' I asked hopefully.

'Nah,' said Av. 'Bigger than that.'

'Outsiders, then? Making a dump?' For centuries, people from beyond Nikpartok would come to the Pit and toss in their junk. I'd never seen it happen but the Landfill was proof enough, and I'd heard stories from other Brothers who'd seen it.

Av just shook his head.

The call sounded again, closer than before.

Cubby jumped and moved in nearer to Av. Another call, loud and angry.

I jumped and winced when I found myself doing the same.

We watched the tree line, waiting to catch a glimpse of

whatever was making that noise. The dead trees, bent and broken, twisted into each other. All was still and silent, not a sign of life. The three of us stood frozen for what seemed like for ever when I noticed how ridiculous Av and Cubby looked: Av's brow furrowed in concentration, Cubby's mouth agape in terror.

'By Rawley!' I said finally. 'Doesn't matter what it is, it's a forest animal!'

'But, but what if it's coming down here?' asked Cubby.

I rolled my eyes, 'Cub, have you ever seen anything but us and Cavies in the Pit?'

'No.'

'There you go, then. Nothing can survive down here but us,' I said, heading back to my pack. 'That's how it's always been!'

Always. The Pit was ours. We were alive here. We belonged to the Pit. Anything outside that and the Pit would make it dead in no time.

Cubby followed me back to my pack and began gathering up my Cavies, but Av stayed rooted to the spot, listening and watching.

The call rang out again, louder, echoing off the walls of the Pit and slopes of the fire mountains a hundred times over.

Cubby and I yelped at the sound and turned back to the East Wall.

'There,' Av pointed.

I saw movement in the undergrowth, then movement in the tree tops.

A two-legged figure burst out of the brush and flung itself over the edge, tumbling down the East Wall – tumbling into the Pit.

Our Pit.

'They're coming in!' shrieked Cubby, the pitch forcing my stomach up into my throat.

'They can't!' I said. 'They'll die!'

The figure's limp form bashed helplessly into boulders and outcrops until it managed to grab hold of a rocky ledge.

A shrill wail echoed out from the trees, so hideous and loud I thought my ears would bleed.

Scrambling out of the trees at the top of the East Wall came three pasty, bald creatures. They looked like Brothers, naked, but crouched and disfigured. No, not Brothers, their sickly yellow colour gave them away as something else entirely. The way they moved, jerky and sharp, looked clumsy, but they weren't. Even from where we stood, I could see they were fast, faster than any Brother. They stalked back and forth along the wall, watching the figure, their lost prey, unwilling to climb down after it.

The figure had managed to stop its fall, and was now carefully inching its way down the East Wall. The East Wall had never been an easy climb for the Brothers up or down, and with an injury I decided the figure probably wouldn't be able to make it. But it was doing well, taking the same route the Brothers would take. Its movements seemed familiar, precise.

'It's a man,' I realised.

'He's Ikkuma,' corrected Av.

By the time the three of us reached the man we could hardly breathe. We'd run as fast as we could from the Landfill to the base of the East Wall, Av tirelessly leading the charge, Cubby

lagging behind, wheezing and begging me to slow down. When we arrived, a group of Little Brothers who must have witnessed the man's daring escape as well had gathered around him, they were all tentatively sucking their thumbs or holding up whatever rocks they'd found, ready to protect themselves. They didn't need the makeshift weapons, the man had collapsed, motionless in the dirt and rocks on the floor of the Ikkuma Pit.

Cubby stayed back with the other little ones as Av and I moved our way to the front of the group.

We stood over the man, looking down at him. He was covered in layers of hides, types I'd never seen before. Furs with black stripes slithered on white, grey spots circled brown on gold, covering his shoulders and boots. I'd never seen so many skins on one person. The Pit is so hot, the Brothers mostly just wear one skin from their waist down, made from Larmy pig or Arid mule from Nikpartok. This man could have covered ten brothers and still have skins left for himself. Beneath all that he was wrapped in something, not made out of any hide, the colour of an angry bruise. The layers were so thick I couldn't tell if he was breathing. I could see the blood, though. His shoulder must have been wounded by those things still pacing back and forth along the East Wall. They had hurt him good, made him bleed so much that the blood soaked through all those layers.

His belt, the same bruise colour, secured his fabrics at the waist, and attached to it was a tube, kind of. It wasn't round, not really, as if long flat pieces were fitted together as round as they could be. The ends were pointed and made of a polished, green stone, bright as Cubby's eyes.

One of the creatures let out a call, and one or two of the little ones started crying.

I looked up the black rock face, a wave of sick washing over me as I realised just how high it was. Somewhere up there, the creatures were pacing.

I could feel Av staring at me. His eyes mirrored what I was wondering. *Is he dead?*

'Hey, fella!' I said. Nothing. The man just lay there. I shoved him with the butt of my spear, 'Hey, fella!' I was a bit surprised, I hadn't been particularly gentle with the spear and I half expected him to leap up and grab me by the throat. But he didn't. The man didn't move.

It didn't take long for a big crowd to form around us. The East Wall was visible from nearly every point in the Pit, and before I knew it the entire clan had shown up to inspect the stranger.

'Is he dead, Urgs?' someone in the crowd asked.

I shrugged.

'Urgle!' It was Digger. 'Figure out if he's dead or alive.'

'What does it look like I'm doing?' I snapped.

'Not a whole lot,' he shot back.

Having no better ideas, I wound back my leg and kicked the man right hard in the side. That did it; he let out a groan.

'Alive,' I announced.

'By Rawley!' a little voice in the crowd gasped. 'Look at his ankle!'

The plain fabrics that covered the man's legs were old, frayed and too short for him. There, on the inside of his left ankle, was a white, bubbly scar. A circle. Without realising it, I scratched my own, identical scar with my right foot.

'Urgle?' said Digger. 'The scar?'

'It's there,' I confirmed.

'Someone run back to the A-Frame!' Digger ordered. Cubby's hand shot up. 'Cubby, tell Crow to bring water and something to carry the man on.'

For a second I didn't think I'd heard him right, but the sound of multiple feet tearing off towards the A-Frame told me I did.

'You're gonna bring him back to the A-Frame?' I said.

'Urgle,' warned Av quietly, 'he's one of us.'

'But we don't know anything about him! You can't just—'

'He's Ikkuma!' Digger yelled. 'The A-Frame's as much his home as yours.'

THREE

I sat alone on my cot, gnawing on the bones of my scrawny Slag Cavy. The orange glow from the A-Frame's hearth fire was making what little greasy meat I had glisten. Cubby had opted to eat with Av and Goobs, leaving me silent in thought amid the evening chatter.

'Looks like your little scroungee's got the right idea,' sneered Fiver as he thundered by my cot, Wasted bouncing along behind him. 'Av might be his only hope.'

I didn't look at him, I'd barely heard him. I was too focused on the A-Frame's new guest.

The Platform, a big wooden stage at the head of the hearth, was used for making important announcements, playing games, and storytelling. Now it was the intruder's place to rest. Digger had him laid there for everyone to see. Brothers had grabbed their furs and blankets, ready to give this unconscious stranger the skins off their back just to make him comfortable. Not me. I just chewed on my Cavy bone as I watched Crow, our healer, clean the man's gnarled

shoulder. I didn't like it, not one bit. No Brother, once they left, ever came back to the Ikkuma Pit. Ever. So what was this guy showing up for, bringing these creatures with him?

A pot dangling above me hit the left-hand side of my face, then another hit the right. My hanging pots, weapons and tools knocked and jingled as Cubby scurried up the ladder to his hammock that hung over my cot. Brothers slept in random spots through the A-Frame. Bunks lined the walls, some hung from the rafters, others just lay in scattered places on the floor. Cubby and I had a sleeping place that was pretty secluded from the rest of them; a little nook in the wall just big enough for our beds.

Without warning, Cubby's dinner bowl was shoved into my face, his bony little arm attached to it. I snatched it from him and hung it from its usual hook. At least he'd cleaned it this time.

Cubby hung upside down. 'Think he's gonna make it?'

'No,' I said. With any luck, he wouldn't.

'You don't like him?'

'I don't know him. So, no.'

Cubby disappeared back over his hammock.

A sudden cry echoed through the A-Frame. I saw Crow leap back from the man, who was writhing in pain. He twisted and jerked, then fell quiet and lay limp again.

'He dead now?' someone called out.

Crow shook his head.

Cubby peeked back over his hammock, 'Think I'll have a beard like his one day?'

I shot him a look. He was annoying me again. But he just smiled his cheery grin and disappeared back on his hammock.

He was still talking to me. I could hear him mumbling something about beards and Adam's apples, and then, 'Wonder who his Little Brother is?'

'What?' The question caught me by surprise.

'His Little Brother,' said Cubby. 'He's gotta have one, right?'

I leaped off my cot and headed straight for the Platform.

The A-Frame was a pretty crowded place; I had to jump over little ones wrestling, Brothers sitting on the floor laughing and eating. I knocked over a cup of water, and someone cursed and whipped a greasy bone at me, nailing the back of my neck.

'Urgle!' I heard Digger bark. 'Stay away from there. Let Crow work.'

I ignored him, and quickened my steps. The man had to be pretty old. He looked old. He had as much hair on his face as he had on his head, and his throat bubble was more pronounced than any I'd ever seen. How old would that make his Little Brother?

Crow's hands and forehead were stained with the man's blood as he dabbed at the wound. He hadn't noticed me.

'Crow,' I said.

'Hand me that.' Without taking the time to look at me, he pointed to a clean rag at the edge of the Platform.

I did, then continued, 'Crow, anyone recognise this guy?'

That made him look at me, 'What? No. Why? You know him?'

'No. Does anyone?'

Crow just stared at me blankly.

'Urgle!' Digger was on his feet, making a beeline for me

and Crow. 'I said let him work!'

'Work this,' I growled, and showed him my bare arse.

Crow threw his arms out over the unconscious man. 'Cover that up, Urgs. I've got a sick Brother here!'

Before I could, Digger made it to the Platform and put me in a headlock. 'Wanna show off your backside, eh, Urgle? Well then get on up here.'

He may have been lanky but he was still pretty strong, and as his bony arm crushed my windpipe, he hauled me up onto the Platform to show off my naked cheeks to the whole A-Frame. Everyone broke into laughter at the sight of me and all I could think about was chucking Digger's stinkin' Leaving Day present into a Hot Pot.

Crow wasn't laughing.

'He had a good point,' Crow said, his attention ever on the patient, even though Digger and I were putting on a pretty amusing show.

'Oh yeah? What's that?' said Digger, ignoring my desperate clawing at his arm.

'Brother,' I gasped.

'Speak up, Urgs!'

I pushed my voice past the force on my neck. 'His Little Brother!'

Digger released me and the whole A-Frame went silent. The eyes of all the Ikkuma Brothers were on me... and my bare arse.

'Keep it down, Useless!' yelled Fiver, followed by a few scattered snickers.

I felt my cheeks burning, I was blushing in front of everyone and I scrambled to yank up my Larmy skin.

It was at this point that Digger decided my question was worth asking, and then, like it was his idea all along, addressed the Brothers.

‘Does anyone,’ he yelled, in his best leader voice, ‘know the Little Brother of this man?’

Silence.

‘Does anyone,’ he tried again, ‘know this man?’

‘It’s hard to know what he looks like,’ said a little voice, ‘with that beard.’

Cubby was right. The man had a full-blown bushy red beard that covered half his face. Not to mention how filthy and bloody he was. It would be hard for anyone to recognise him.

‘Shave it off?’ Digger whispered.

‘What?’ I said. ‘You mean should we shave it off? Or are you asking *me* to shave it off?’

‘You know how to shave?’ asked Digger, raising an eyebrow.

‘You’re the one with the face fluff on his chin!’

‘I don’t shave it!’

‘I’ll shave him,’ said Crow. ‘Get me a knife. And round up all the Big Brothers. If anyone is going to recognise him, it’ll be them.’

It had taken Crow a ridiculously long time to hack off all that facial hair, the Little Brothers had fallen asleep by the time he’d finished. Crow had left a number of new cuts for the guy to add to his already impressive collection of wounds, but at least now we could see him.

All the Big Brothers, there was about thirty of us,

huddled around the comatosed stranger. We stared. I racked my brain, trying to remember all the faces of Brothers that had left.

‘I know him,’ said Shroomers.

We all turned and stared at the chubby fifteen-year-old. He had his head down, shifting his feet.

‘Well?’ Digger was impatient, ‘Is he your Big Brother?’

Shroomers shook his head, ‘Cole’s.’

Everyone froze at the name. Cole was dead.

No one spoke, I didn’t know if they were all taking a moment to remember Cole or what, but I figured we had to get on with it.

‘Well that explains why no one recognised him immediately.’

Av shot me an angry look. I guess that was insensitive.

‘What’s his name?’ asked Digger.

‘Blaze.’

FOUR

My bleary eyes blinked open and I stared groggily into the dark. Something had startled me out of sleep, and I groaned when I realised what it was – Cubby.

Awake, the kid was annoying enough, asleep he was worse. Every night over the last few months he'd wake me up with his coughing fits, hacking up snot and phlegm over and over in his sleep. It was a common thing in the Ikkuma Pit. With all the smoke and ash flying through the air all day, some of the Brothers' lungs just weren't built to take it and Cubby was one of those Brothers. I knew he couldn't help it, but I felt like his stupid coughing was just another reason everyone thought I was so useless, just more proof for Fiver that I was a lousy Big Brother.

I slammed my fist onto my cot and mustered the strength to get out of bed.

I stood on lazy legs and wiped the cold drool from the side of my face, then reached for the little cup dangling from the underside of Cubby's hammock. The hearth fire had died,

the quiet hissing of the fading embers and the smell of smoke floated through darkness.

Half asleep I stumbled towards the back. The water holder sat tucked in a corner beside the Platform – a drink usually helped stop the little rat’s incessant coughs. He kept hacking, I could still hear him, his hoarse cough joining the din of snores, groans, and sneezes of all the Brothers.

The muffled call of the pasty creatures sounded in amongst the noises, and I realised they were still out there, waiting. But what for? Blaze, I guessed. If they wanted him so bad at least make a decision. Either come in and die or go back to wherever they came from. I just wanted that awful screaming to stop.

Then I felt my foot come down on something soft, a sleeping body, and I shifted my weight to my other foot to keep from stepping on it. Too late. My confused lazy legs gave out and I came crashing down on a Brother.

‘Argh! What the Mother?!’ growled the figure beneath me. It was Fiver.

I scrambled off him, scurrying like a frightened Cavy, hoping to hide myself in the dark. A punch from Fiver’s big ugly fist was like getting hit by the full force of a raging fire mountain. I wasn’t about to take that kind of pain in the middle of the night. He grabbed my leg and pulled me back.

The feathery tickle of his curly hair grazed my hand and I grabbed a fistful, wrenching it.

He growled and grabbed my hand, but I kicked his side. ‘Oof!’ he coughed.

I tried to step over him but my knee hit the edge of the Platform. I heard him shifting in the dark, searching for me

so I scrambled up onto the Platform on my hands and knees. That's when I remembered Blaze. I froze. All I could hear was Fiver's growling.

I felt around me, my hands only ever touching the wood of the platform, never Blaze's unconscious body. He wasn't there.

'Sh!' I snapped at Fiver.

'There you are you little—' my hand shot out in front of me, afraid Fiver would pounce, and my palm slammed into his nose. He cried out.

'Shut up!' I said again. 'He's gone!'

'I'm bleeding!'

I strained to listen, expecting to hear the stranger shifting in the shadows behind me. I had a sick feeling the two of us would be jumped at any second. But Fiver was groaning and sniffing, and it was blocking the background noise.

'Urgle! I'm gonna kill you for this. I'm— Wait, who's gone?'

Finally the big oaf had heard me.

'Blaze,' I rasped.

The two of us stayed frozen in the dark, our ears searching for any sign of the stranger.

Nothing but snores, and coughing, and a mumbling sound.

'Wait, hear it?' I whispered.

The mumbling voice was gruff and deep, unfamiliar, not one of the Brothers.

'I see you, I see you,' it hissed, 'filthy demon Tunrar. Bah!' It was coming from near the entrance, along with the

shuffling sound of feet. Blaze was up and he was moving.

'What's he doing?' asked Fiver.

I didn't know, I wasn't sure I wanted to. But if he was moving, Crow had fixed him good enough. He was feeling better.

I scrambled off the platform and headed for Crow's sleeping space as best I could. I felt Fiver's desperate fingers touching my back every so often as he tried to follow me through the dark.

Again, the cry of the creatures somewhere in the distance invaded the A-Frame and my head knocked into the post that held up Crow's hammock. My eyes welled with tears and I cursed as Fiver grabbed my arm and moved in close to me. He was panting, his rank breath wrinkling my nose. He was scared.

I reached up and felt around, my hands landing on Crow's sleeping face.

'Hey! Hey!' he whispered. 'What are you doing?'

'Wake up!'

'Urgs?'

'Yeah! Get up. Blaze is on his feet.'

'What?' Crow was groggy, he hadn't quite come to.

Fiver scoffed in the dark and I heard a scuffle, then a body slammed against my shoulder and pushed me back.

'Hey! Easy!' yelled Crow.

Fiver must have grabbed him and pulled him down off his bed because in that instant Crow was standing in front of me, his hands on my shoulder.

'What's going on?' he asked.

'Blaze!' snapped Fiver.

'He's up,' I said. 'Listen.'

Crow said nothing for a moment.

'Not the baby, not my baby, can't let them have the baby.'
The mumbling was faster now, rambling. 'What have I done?
What have I done?'

At that, I felt Crow move away from me. He was headed for Blaze.

'Hey! What are you—?' I knew Crow wouldn't answer. When Crow was focused on something, everything else fell away from him. I reached back towards Crow's sleeping space and felt around for anything. I felt a heavy pot, and clanged a bowl. Fiver figured out what I was doing and followed suit. Armed with cookware, we tried our best to follow Crow.

It was tough, especially with Fiver's clumsy hands constantly reaching out for me making me jump. I could hear Crow, a long way in front. My best guess was by the fire pit.

Suddenly, a small flame lit up Crow's face.

'*Psst!*' he motioned to us, waving his little torch.

Thrilled to have light, Fiver and I scurried over to him.

'You better not break those,' Crow said when we reached him.

I looked at the charred black skillet in my hand, then the wooden spoon in the hands of Fiver. We looked pathetic.

Crow suppressed a smile and led the way.

We passed the entrance, headed towards the front corner where Av and his Little Brother slept. The mumbling was easier to hear now, Blaze was close.

'Beginning is secrets...Beginning is lies!' Blaze's outline appeared in the light of the torch. He was pacing back

and forth, not far from Av and Goobs' sleeping place.

He was shaking his head back and forth, over and over. Crow broke away from me and Fiver, moving in for a better look. 'Look at his eyes,' he told us.

In the light of the torch I could see Blaze's pale blue eyes, not fixed on anything, like he was looking inside, not out.

'He's asleep,' said Crow.

Beside me, Fiver snorted a laugh.

'Stolen secrets!' Blaze went on, pulling at his hair, scratching his neck. 'Hidden victory! End to the Beginning!'

'What's the Beginning?' I asked.

Crow just shrugged and reached out to touch him.

'Uh...' I whispered, 'I'm not sure that's the best—'

As soon as Crow's fingers touched the man's arm, the blank eyes filled with consciousness, wild and confused. He grabbed Crow by the throat and threw him to the ground, torch and all.

Fiver pounced just as quick, jabbing the spoon handle into Blaze's side with his right hand, wrapping his left arm around his neck.

Blaze grunted in pain, but never let go of Crow, who was gurgling as he tried to breathe.

Dumbfounded, I couldn't move.

I felt someone grab the skillet from my hand, and Av stepped into the torch light. He brought the skillet down with an assertive *thunk*, straight onto the back of Blaze's head.

Dazed, Blaze released Crow who rolled away, rubbing his neck and coughing.

Fiver let go of Blaze and he stumbled onto his hands and knees trying not to pass out. Then I caught Av's face, his

mouth tight with anger, catching his breath through his nose. He wouldn't look at me.

'How to protect your Brother. Big help there, Useless,' panted Fiver. 'Thanks for that.'

My insides withered. I was useless.

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