

SCAVENGERS

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USBORNE



PART ONE
THE ROOT





ONE

CHASING COVER

The boy growled, dropped to all fours and took one end of the stick between his teeth. The dog at the stick's other end – a hefty Alsatian with long ears – bared its gums and slobbered.

Boy and dog, with eyes as locked as the stick between their jaws, circled each other on the cracked concrete. They jerked their heads in a playful tug of war, with hands and paws clawing gravel and moss.

Landfill could taste the flecks of stick on his teeth. With a snigger and a grunt, he pushed suddenly forward before pulling back. The Alsatian was taken by surprise, loosened its grip, and yelped as Landfill yanked the stick away.

“Got it, Vonnegut, I got it!” Landfill was on his naked feet, dancing and waving his prize in the air. “Two-one to me, shaggy muttler!”

Vonnegut hopped and panted in the heat, his tail wagging like the stick in the boy's hand. Landfill laughed and stooped to rub his face against the dog's. "Next round'll be yours, I bet. Now watch this."

After wiping a sweaty hand on his bare chest and shorts, he squinted at the complex of metal drums, chutes and vents several metres away, closed his eyes and hurled the stick. He opened his eyes when the stick met its target with a loud clang.

Some parakeets in the gash of a metal drum started to chirp, and a squirrel – its fur as orange as the rust below – appeared at a chute's top to investigate the noise. It sniffed the air with twitching nostrils.

Landfill's eyebrows rose in surprise. He pointed a grubby finger at the squirrel. "Joyce! Been skulking with parkits, eh? Too lily-livered to play? Get out of there and we'll see if I can catch you. I'll even give you a running start. How about that?"

He stamped his foot and the squirrel bolted, leaping across vines and onto the pipes that left the chutes. Once it had shot overhead, Landfill and Vonnegut gave chase.

"Scarper all you want, skrill!" laughed the boy. "On a winning streak today!"

Landfill followed the raised piping with gold hair flowing and his eyes on the rodent. He had no need to watch his bare feet, and hopped over the dandelions,

nettles and scrap that pocked most of Hinterland's ground.

The squirrel darted through a gap between some metal flues and mounted a squat, wooden tower covered in lichen. Landfill circuted the tower until he reached its ladder. He was making quick progress upward, but faltered suddenly. Fear rippled across his features.

"Rule twelve," he muttered. He searched the sky anxiously, barely aware of the fact that he was reaching for the glass blade in his pocket. "Not fair, Joyce." He pouted at the squirrel. "You know I can't go that high."

A bark from the Alsatian waiting below sent Joyce scampering. When the squirrel hit the tubing that left the flues, Landfill's grin returned to reveal goofy yellow teeth. He dropped from the ladder and landed with fingers to the floor, the sweat on his back glistening in summer's glare. On he ran with Vonnegut, until he was following the squirrel to the Gully's edge.

While Vonnegut bounded down the Gully's sloping, concrete bank and through the sludge at its bed, Landfill wormed his way through the Hard Guts – a mossy tangle of pipes that spanned the Gully like the remnants of a bridge. He squeezed past valves bursting with flowers, and a knock of his heel against a conduit filled the air with butterflies.

Landfill giggled at the tickle of their wings, and sprang from the Guts onto a steel gangway. He followed the squirrel up some metal steps lining the base of the tall,

concrete tower at Hinterland's heart, the Pale Loomer. Turning a corner, he entered the shade of the Thin Woods. Green leaves danced as Joyce leaped from tree to tree, causing a woodpecker to stop its hammering and several grey squirrels to jerk their heads. The boy continued in pursuit, running beneath the conveyor that sloped into the Pale Loomer's sooty flank.

Landfill had soon crossed the narrow strip of trees that split Hinterland's centre, and turned another corner to find Joyce scabbling up a stout white chimney. The squirrel blinked at the boy, who was now kneeling on mossy concrete. Landfill panted for a moment, wiped his fringe from his eyes and flashed a goofy grin. "No more pipes, little skrill. So come on down. Let's see if you're as wily on the ground."

Joyce blinked and brushed his whiskers.

The boy's blue eyes sparkled. "Gutless twitcher, eh?" He cackled and thumped the ground with his palms. "Tell you what – come down and I'll give you another running start. That's more than fair."

Joyce tilted his head, scuttled groundwards and sped away. Landfill was soon back on his feet, and Vonnegut caught up to join him in pursuit. The Alsatian yapped and howled, causing other dogs to peer out from nearby toppled railway-carts. Some of them joined the chase, and the boy dropped to all fours to lope among the hounds.

They raced along the train tracks that extended from the Pale Loomer's wide concrete opening, hopping on and off the cables that flanked the rusty rails. Baying with the dogs, the boy ran and ran, following the tracks until he was forced to skid to a stop. He watched helplessly as Joyce scaled the perimeter wall.

The wall spanned far to the left and right, and Landfill took a few steps back to take in its height. He saw Joyce at the top, sat carefully between broken-bottle teeth. The dogs held off too, backing away from the nettles that smothered the wall, tangled around creepers, scraps of mirror and jutting shards of glass.

Landfill arched his neck and grimaced. He had to shout for his voice to reach the squirrel. "Okay! Game over, Joyce. Shouldn't go up there. It's not safe."

Joyce rubbed his tiny paws together. He backed away slightly, towards the other side of the wall.

"I mean it! Come down!" Landfill was pleading now. His eyes roamed the sky. "Don't go Outside. *Please*. Come down, Joyce. You're safer *in here*."

The squirrel chattered, then was gone.

"Come back!" Landfill cupped his hands around his mouth to yell, but it was no use. The dogs wagged their tails while his gaze moved down the wall. He stood staring for some time, scratching his calf with a long toenail.

He crooked a hand and wet his wrist with his tongue,

then ran it through his hair. The dogs' ears pricked up. Landfill tensed. He could hear it too: a distant rumble.

"The Eye... It's the Eye!" He whirled around, searching for the nearest place to hide. There were shrubs and bushes, some scraps of corrugated iron, rubble and plasterboard – but nothing provided enough cover. His eyes followed the train tracks to the Pale Loomer's opening, then zoomed back to a railway cart toppled midway between the Loomer and the wall.

Landfill ran for it. Behind him the dogs barked at blue sky. The rumbling became louder and he knew this would be close. He could hear the other animals adding to the commotion, only to have their growls, hisses and howls swallowed by the drone.

It was a long stretch to run – nearly a quarter of Hinterland's breadth. Landfill's heart was pounding as he realized how heavy his legs were. He should never have tired himself out so far from cover.

The noise from above became louder and louder. He could almost feel it bearing down upon him when he sprang headfirst into the cart. He covered his ears, tucked in his legs and pushed his body as far into the cart's shelter as he could.

The boy's panting was amplified by his hands over his ears, but he could still hear the roaring from the sky. It screamed directly above, and he noticed flecks of paint

vibrating along the cart's inner lining. He could see some dogs from another cart – all snarls and teeth and frothing gums – barking skywards while the shadow passed.

The noise faded, and the dogs settled down. After listening out carefully, Landfill crawled along the cart's interior and peeked up over its rim. The sky seemed to be clear. Exhaling loudly, he climbed slowly out and kneeled to stroke the dogs that gathered around him. "It's gone. We're okay." He cocked his head suddenly, struck by a thought. "Where's Woolf? Haven't seen her around."

The dogs trailed him to Woolf's fallen cart. He stooped to look inside, and when his eyes adjusted he saw the husky on her side on a musty blanket, eyes closed and ribs barely moving.

"Woolf? You alright? You don't look...too hunkadory." He moved in to stroke the grey fur on her neck, but recoiled when he saw her bulging stomach.

With a hand clamped firmly over his nostrils and mouth, Landfill backed away and turned slowly to the other dogs.

"Woolf's got the swelling. Keep your distance – don't breathe it in. I'll tell Babagoo."

He got up to go, but couldn't help pausing to scan the perimeter wall's north side. Finding no sign of Joyce, he scowled, kicked a crumbling bolt and walked away.