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Opening extract from

Muncle Trogg

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Muncle being dropped while upside-down.



Chapter one

'Ma!' shrieked Muncle. 'Gritt's upside-downing me!'

Muncle tried to wriggle out of his brother's grip.

'Ma!'

He yelled again, swinging wildly. He was going to be sick if Gritt dangled him upside-down for much longer.

Ma's fire threw a shadow of a larger-than-life Gritt onto the rocky wall, with a much-too-small Muncle dangling helplessly from his hand. At the age of ten, most giants were nearly full-grown and able to stand up for themselves. But Muncle was far from full-grown and at the moment he couldn't stand up at all. Gritt had him firmly by the ankles. It wouldn't

have been so bad if Gritt had been his older brother but he was younger – three whole *years* younger!

It was a good thing Pa wasn't home yet. He always took Gritt's side. Gritt was the sort of son a giant could be proud of.

Ma Trogg, a handsome giantess with a pleasing number of bristly warts, peered through the cloud of steam above her cauldron.

'Gritt!' she roared. 'Put your brother down *right now*!'

'But you told me to play with him till breakfast.'

'I didn't mean you should use him as a toy.'

'He *likes* it,' said Gritt. 'Don't you, Muncle?'

'I do *not*!' squealed Muncle.

'Oh. All right. Sorry, Muncle.' Gritt dropped his brother as quickly as he'd picked him up.

Muncle might have been small but at least that made him nimble. The moment Gritt let go, he somersaulted in mid-air, landing on his bottom rather than his head.

It still hurt.

Other giants had rolls of comfortable fat and would have bounced, but Muncle was only skin and bone.

He wasn't bad-looking, though. He had beautiful skin – grey and dotted with hairy warts – Pa's bushy

eyebrows and fleshy nose, and Ma's bulging eyes and wonky yellow teeth.

It was just Muncle's size that was wrong. He was simply too small to be a giant.

He'd always struggled to fit in, and now time was running out. The day after tomorrow was his school-leaving Gigantia exam. Then he had to find a job. But what sort of job could he do? He was only taking Dragon Science and Smalling Studies – the two subjects that didn't need giant-sized strength – and he knew he wasn't going to do well in either of them.

'We can't wait for your pa any longer or you'll be late for school,' said Ma, ladling sticky grey gloop into wooden bowls. 'Come and eat your fungus porridge, both of you.'

She thumped a large bowl for Gritt and a much smaller one for Muncle on to the low stone table. Ma had given up trying to feed him the same amount as Gritt. Even his appetite was tiny.

She unstrapped Flubb's baby-basket from her back and set Flubb on a stool beside the table. The baby grabbed her leather bottle and glugged eagerly. You could almost see her growing.

Muncle sighed. Life was so unfair. He clambered on

to his bracken-filled cushion to help him reach the table, and Ma and Gritt sat on the bare, rocky floor. Then Muncle picked out the best lumps of porridge and arranged them on the table to cool, while Gritt drained the boiling contents of his bowl in one long swig, just like Pa.

Gritt had real talent. At just seven he was already top of the whole school in Metalwork. He knew exactly what he wanted to be when he grew up: Chief Weapon-Maker of the King's Armoury. There was nothing he didn't know about spears and battleaxes. Pa and Ma thought Gritt was brilliant.

'Seconds!' Gritt demanded.

'Not until Pa's had his,' said Ma, getting up and peering into the cauldron. 'There might not be enough.'

Gritt threw his bowl on to the table. 'It's mean of Pa to stay out all night. If he doesn't come home soon, I'll have to go to school *hungry*.'

Muncle and Ma looked at each other.

'He'll be all right, Ma,' said Muncle. 'He's the best hunter in town.'

Ma bit her lip. 'Raiding isn't the same as hunting, though, is it?' she said. 'Stealing a sheep from a

Smalling farm isn't like spearing a badger. What if he runs into a Smalling with a magic killing stick?'

Flubb hurled her empty bottle onto the floor and bawled loudly. She was given another helping at once. Well, it was hard to say no to Flubb – she *was* as pretty as a toad.

'That's not fair,' whined Gritt. 'Why should *she* get seconds?'

'Gritt—' Ma began sharply, but at that moment the door of their underground home banged and Pa tramped into the room with a sack over his shoulder. Bits of twig and leaf were tangled in his long, greasy hair, and his breeches were ripped. Blood dripped from a wound on one of his hairy grey arms.

'Whatever happened to you?' cried Ma, quickly bandaging his arm with a handful of dusty cobwebs.

'Don't fuss, woman. It's nothing. Just a scratch. I had to take a short-cut through a thicket, that's all.'

Pa threw his sack down beside the fire. There was nothing sheep-shaped in it.

'Didn't you get one?' Ma asked anxiously.

'Of course I did. I've already taken it to the palace.'

'The King must be bored with sheep for his Birthday Supper every year,' said Gritt. 'You should

have brought him a Smalling for a change.'

'Gritt,' said Pa sternly. 'That is not funny.' He seized Ma's cauldron straight from the fire, and swung it to his lips.

'I wanted seconds!' yelled Gritt.

'Hard luck,' said Pa. 'Perhaps that'll teach you not to make bad jokes.'



Centuries ago giants had used Smallings as slaves, and sometimes as supper, but that was before they had invented their magic killing sticks and fought back. Now the giants had to live in secret, deep within Mount Grumble. They'd built a whole town in the mountain's old mines.

'It wasn't a joke,' said Gritt. 'I think we *should* hunt Smallings.'

'Gritt!' cried Ma.

'Don't ever let anyone hear you talk like that,' said Pa, wiping his rubbery lips on the back of his arm and ending up with a mouthful of cobweb bandage. 'You'd be thrown in the dungeons.'

'I didn't mean we should have them for every meal,' said Gritt. 'Not so many that they'd *notice*. Just once a year, on the King's Birthday.'

Pa picked bits of cobweb from his beard and ate them with the porridge dregs. 'Kidnapping has been

against the law for a very long time, as you well know, Gritt Trogg. It's too risky.'

'Have *you* been taking risks tonight?' said Ma, frowning. 'Is that why you had to take a short-cut through a thicket?'

Pa shrugged. 'It was no worse than last year's Birthday raid. A dog barked, but it was a long way off.'

'And you came home through the bog, so there was no scent for the dog to follow?'

'I always *do*.' Pa took off his boots and emptied them into Ma's cauldron.

Gritt peered into Pa's sack. 'Pigeons again,' he said with disgust. 'Just snacks.'

But to Muncle, a pigeon was a meal. Even his breakfast was more than he wanted. 'Here, Gritt,' he said, 'have the rest of my porridge.'

'That's hardly a mouthful,' his brother said scornfully. 'Anyway, I haven't time. I've got to see Titan before school.'

'Titan Bulge is in Muncle's class,' said Ma. 'Why do *you* want to see him?' She ran a hand through her hair, scattering twig hairpins in all directions. Flubb picked one up and chewed on it.

'Gritt wants to be in Titan's gang, Ma,' Muncle explained.

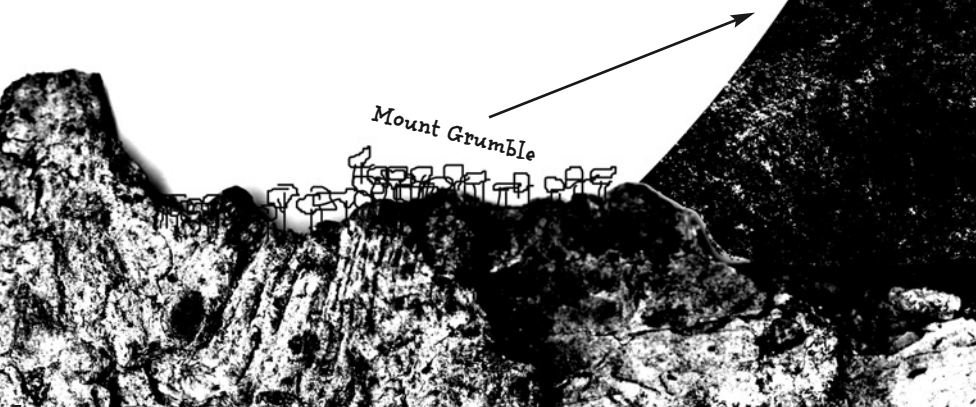
The Thunder Thugs were the toughest gang in Mount Grumble with the most daring of entry tests. Thumper Plodd had passed his test by banging the town gong in the middle of the night and waking the Royal Family. There was a rumour that someone had once wrestled a dragon, and that someone else had tried to steal King Thortless's crown.

'It's just lads having fun,' Pa told Ma, who was looking anxious. 'Titan Bulge is the Head Boy, after all. His friends can't be that bad.'

'Well ...' Muncle began, then thought better of it. Titan Bulge was the worst bully in the school, and he made Muncle's life a misery, but Muncle didn't want to upset Ma. 'I shouldn't worry, he won't get in.'

'I will so get in,' said Gritt, scowling, and he stomped towards the door.

'Wait for me!' Muncle cried, grabbing one of Ma's acorn-bread rolls for his dinner as he dashed after his brother. If he walked to school with Gritt, he



might not be picked on until he got into his classroom.

'Take care,' shouted Ma.

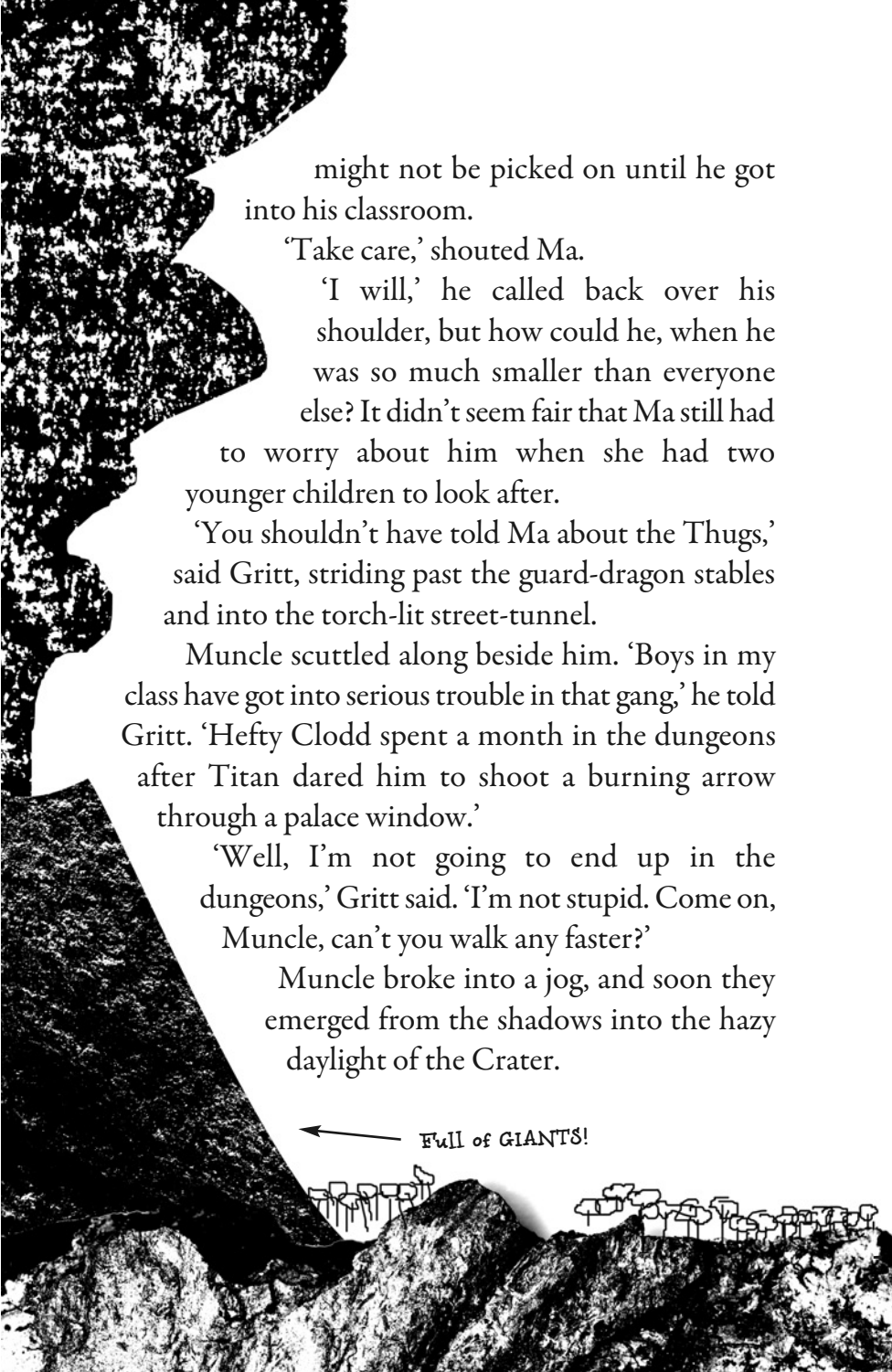
'I will,' he called back over his shoulder, but how could he, when he was so much smaller than everyone else? It didn't seem fair that Ma still had to worry about him when she had two younger children to look after.

'You shouldn't have told Ma about the Thugs,' said Gritt, striding past the guard-dragon stables and into the torch-lit street-tunnel.

Muncle scuttled along beside him. 'Boys in my class have got into serious trouble in that gang,' he told Gritt. 'Hefty Clodd spent a month in the dungeons after Titan dared him to shoot a burning arrow through a palace window.'

'Well, I'm not going to end up in the dungeons,' Gritt said. 'I'm not stupid. Come on, Muncle, can't you walk any faster?'

Muncle broke into a jog, and soon they emerged from the shadows into the hazy daylight of the Crater.



The Crater was a huge open-air hollow in the centre of Mount Grumble – the only place in the town that was open to the sky. It was the giants' playground, market-place, park and theatre. All the main street-tunnels led to it and the most important buildings were carved into its walls. Here were the shops, the alehouses, the school and the King's palace. Smoke from homes and factories trickled from cracks in the Crater wall and merged into the cloud that sat on top of the mountain, hiding the giants and their guard-dragons from the Smallings in the town below.

Muncle felt a pair of enormous hands grab his shoulders, hoisting him into the air.

'Got you!'

It was Titan. He'd been waiting for them.

'Get the string out of my pocket, Gritt,' he ordered.

Gritt hung back.

Titan raised his huge bushy eyebrows. 'Well, do you want to join the Thunder Thugs or don't you?'

'But he's my broth—'

'You're such a weed, Gritt Trogg,' Titan sneered.

This was too much for Muncle. Tormenting *him* was one thing, but taunting his younger brother was quite another, even if he was twice as big. He gathered



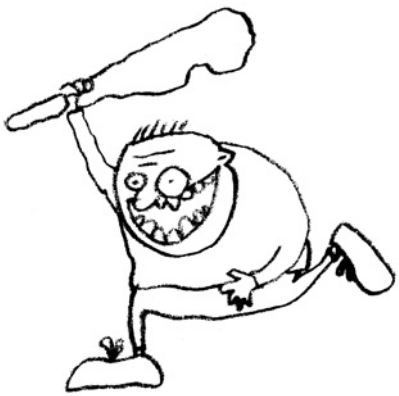
all his strength, and swung his school bag straight into the Head Boy's face. It was a perfect shot. An enormous spot on the tip of Titan's nose erupted. Blood and pus squirted out in a most spectacular display.

'Yee-ow!' cried Titan. 'You'll pay for that, you runtling. I was growing that for the Biggest Boil sideshow at the King's Birthday. Get the string, Gritt. NOW!'

'Um ... well ...' Gritt stammered.

Titan dumped Muncle on the floor, pinning him down with a vast foot, and wrenched out the rope-like string himself. He shoved one end of it through Muncle's belt, tied it in a knot, and began spinning Muncle through the air.

Muncle squeezed his eyes shut and waited for take-off – but before he could be launched across the Crater, there was a deafening crash. Titan stopped abruptly, and Muncle skidded to a halt in the dust.



He'd been saved by the school gong.

'Got to go,' said Gritt. 'If I'm late for Dragon Science again I'll be in trouble with Mr Thwackum.' He threw Muncle a sorry look, then belted across the Crater.

Titan gave Muncle a final punch in the ribs, and took off after Gritt, leaving Muncle gasping – and trussed up like a braised badger. Titan was in a hurry, too, and Muncle knew why.

Normally boys like Titan didn't worry about being late. And normally Muncle preferred playing in his den in the forest outside Mount Grumble to going to school at all. But today was not normal. Today was the School-Leavers' Trip, and the whole class had been looking forward to it for weeks – Muncle more than anyone.

They were going to the Smalling world!

