

2. INSIDE THE DRAGON NURSERY



You have probably guessed by now that Hiccup was not your natural Viking Hero.

For a start, he didn't LOOK like a Hero. Somebody like Snotlout, for instance, was tall, muscley, covered in skeleton tattoos, and already had the beginnings of a small moustache. This consisted of a few straggly yellow hairs clinging to his upper lip and was deeply unpleasant to look at, but still impressively manly for a boy not yet thirteen.

Hiccup was on the small side and had the kind of face that was almost entirely unmemorable. He DID have Heroic Hair, which was a very bright

Snotlout

Dogsbreath the Duhbrain

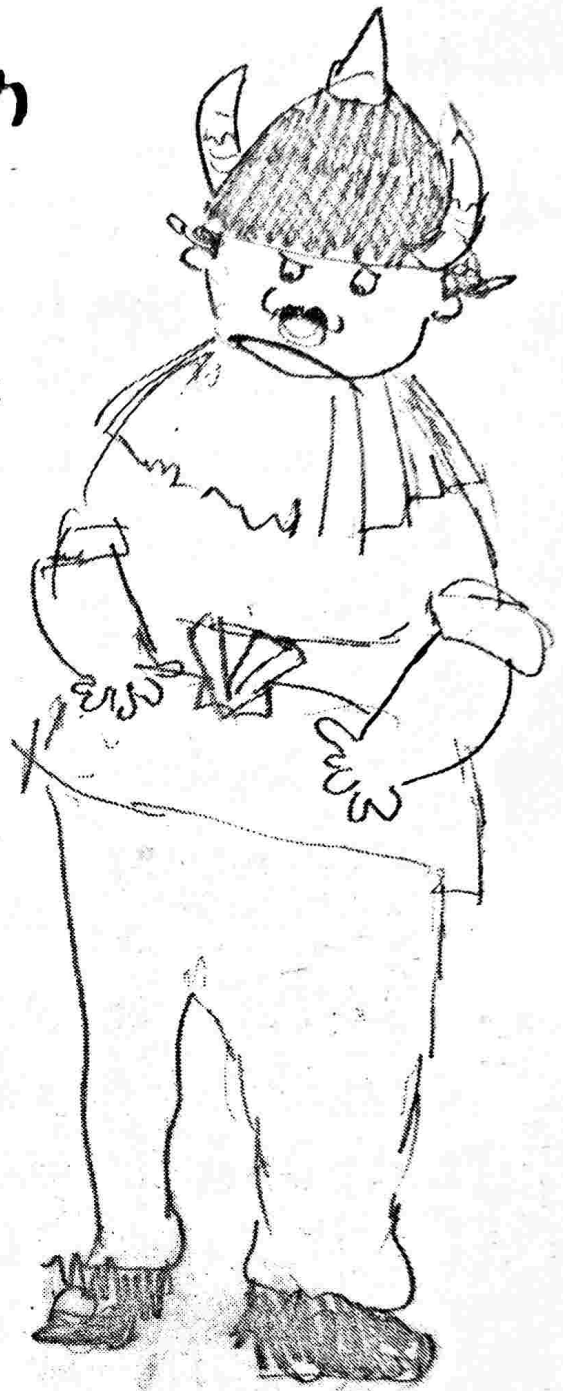
red and stood up vertically however much you tried to wet it down with sea-water. But nobody ever saw that because it was hidden under his helmet most of the time.

You would NEVER have picked Hiccup out of those ten boys to be the Hero of this story. Snotlout was good at everything and a natural leader. Dogsbreath was as tall as his father and could do amusing things like farting to the tune of the Berk National Anthem.

Hiccup was just absolutely average, the kind of unremarkable, skinny, freckled boy who was easy to overlook in a crowd.

So, when Gobber blew the horn and moved out of sight to find a comfortable rock to sit on and eat his mussel-and-tomato sandwich, Snotlout pushed Hiccup out of the way and took charge.

'OK, listen up, boys,' he whispered in a menacing fashion. 'I'M in charge, not the Useless. And



anybody who objects gets a knuckle sandwich from Dogsbreath the Duhbrain.'

'Ugh,' grunted Dogsbreath, pounding his fists together in happy excitement. Dogsbreath was Snotlout's chief sidekick and a great, big gorilla of a boy.

'Bash him, Dogsbreath, to show what I mean...'

Dogsbreath was delighted to oblige. He gave Hiccup a shove that sent him sprawling head first into the snow, then ground his face in it.

'Pay attention!' hissed Snotlout. The boys dragged their eyes away from Dogsbreath and Hiccup and paid attention. 'Rope yourselves together. The best climber should go first...'

'Well, that's YOU of course, Snotlout,' said Fishlegs. 'You're the best at everything, aren't you?'

Snotlout looked at Fishlegs suspiciously. It was difficult to tell whether Fishlegs was laughing at him or not, because of his squint.

'That's right, Fishlegs,' said Snotlout. 'I AM.' And, just in case he *had* been laughing at him: 'Bash him, Dogsbreath!'

While Dogsbreath pushed Fishlegs down to join Hiccup in the snow, Snotlout bossily ordered

everybody to rope themselves together.

Hiccup and Fishlegs were the last to be tied on, just behind a flushed and triumphant Dogsbreath.

‘Oh brilliant,’ muttered Fishlegs. ‘I’m about to enter a cave full of man-eating reptiles tied up to eight complete maniacs.’

‘If we *get* to the cave...’ said Hiccup nervously, looking up at the sheer black cliff.

Hiccup put the lighted torch between his teeth to leave his hands free, and started climbing after the others.



It was a perilous climb. The rocks were slippery with snow and the other boys were thoroughly over-excited, making the ascent far too quickly. At one point Clueless missed his footing and fell – luckily on to Dogsbreath, who caught him by the back of the trousers and heaved him back on to the rock again, before he brought the whole lot of them down.

When they finally made it to the mouth of the cave, Hiccup looked down briefly at the sea pounding the rocks way below, and swallowed very hard...

‘Untie the ropes!’ ordered Snotlout, his eyes popping with excitement at the thought of the dangers

to come. 'Hiccup goes into the cave first because HE is the son of the Chief...' He sneered. 'And, if any of the dragons ARE awake, he'll be the first to know about it! Once we're in the cave, it's every man for himself. Only the strong can belong...'

Although he wasn't your usual mindless thug of a Hooligan, Hiccup wasn't a wimp, either. Being frightened is not the same as being a coward. Maybe he *was* as brave as anyone else there, because he went to catch a dragon *despite* knowing what dragons are like. And, when he had climbed perilously to the mouth of the cave and had found that inside there was a long, twisty tunnel, he *still* went down it, despite not being too keen on long, twisty tunnels with dragons at the end of them.

The tunnel was dripping and clammy. At times it was high enough for the boys to walk upright. Then it would close down into narrow, claustrophobic holes that the boys could only just squeeze through, squirming on their stomachs, with the flares held in their mouths.

After ten long minutes of walking and crawling into the heart of the cliff, the stench of dragon – a salty stink of seaweed and old mackerel

heads – got stronger and stronger, until finally it became unbearable and the tunnel opened out into a ginormous cavern.

The cavern was full of more dragons than Hiccup could ever have imagined existed.

They were every possible colour and size, and they included all the species that Hiccup had heard of, and quite a few more that he hadn't.

Hiccup started sweating as he looked around him at pile after pile of the animals, draped over every available surface; even hanging upside-down from the roof like giant bats. They were all fast asleep, and most of them were snoring in unison. This was a sound so loud and so deep that it seemed to penetrate right into Hiccup's body and vibrate around his soft insides, churning his stomach and bowels, and forcing his heart to beat at the same slow dragon pulse.

If one, just *one*, of these countless creatures were to wake up, it would raise the alarm to the others and the boys would meet a horrible death. Hiccup had once seen a deer that had wandered too close to Wild Dragon Cliff torn to pieces in a matter of minutes...


Hiccup closed his eyes. 'I will NOT think about it,' he said to himself. 'I WILL NOT.'

None of the other boys were thinking about it. Ignorance is very useful in such circumstances. Their eyes were popping with excitement as they walked through the cave, hands over their noses to keep out the revolting smell, looking for the biggest dragon they could find that would fit in their basket.

They left the torches in a pile at the entrance. The cavern was already well-lit by the Glowworms, huge, sluggish animals dotted here and there that shone with a steady yet dim fluorescence, like a low-watt lightbulb. And the Flamehuffers gave off extra little bursts of light that flickered on and off as they breathed in and out.

Predictably, most of the boys headed towards the plug-uglies of the dragon world.

Snotlout made a big fuss about grabbing a vicious-looking Monstrous Nightmare, smiling nastily at Hiccup as he did so. Snotlout was the son of Baggybum the Beerbelly, Stoick the Vast's younger brother. He was intending to get rid of Hiccup some time in the future so that he, Snotlout, would become Chief of the Hairy Hooligan Tribe. And a gruesome and terrifying Chief, as Snotlout meant to be, would need a properly awesome dragon.



Wartihog and Dogsbreath got into a loudly whispered fight over a Gronckle, a heavily-armoured brute with fangs like kitchen knives sticking out in such numbers that it couldn't keep its mouth shut. Dogsbreath won, then managed to drop it as he was trying to bundle it into his basket. The weaponry of the beast made a horribly loud clatter as it landed on the floor of the cavern.

The Gronckle opened its evil, crocodile eyes. Everybody held their breath.

The Gronckle stared ahead. It was difficult to tell from its blank expression whether it was awake or fast asleep. Hiccup realised, in an agony of suspense, that the gossamer-thin third eyelid was still down.

And there it stayed for a few heart-stopping moments, until...

It slowly closed its upper eyelids again.

Amazingly, not one of the other dragons woke up. A few grumbled groggily before making themselves comfy again. But most were in such a stupor that they barely even stirred.

Hiccup let out his breath slowly. Maybe these dragons were so dead to the world that *nothing*

~VIKING DRAGONS AND THEIR EGGS~

THE GRONCKLE

The Gronckle is the plug-ugly of the dragon world. But what it lacks in looks, it makes up for on the battle-

field. They can be slow and, dare I say it, stupid ~ and sometimes they get so fat that they are unable to take off. They are also prone to dragon acne.



~ STATISTICS ~

COLOURS: Snot green, bogey beige, pooey brown.

ARMED WITH: All the best in dragon weaponry. Fangs like daggers, extra spike on neck, ball with spikes on end of tail.

FEAR FACTOR: 7

ATTACK: 8

SPEED: 8

SIZE: 7

DISOBEDIENCE: 5

would wake them.

He swallowed hard, muttered a prayer to Loki, the patron saint of sneaky exploits, and edged forward cautiously to grab the most unconscious-looking dragon, so he could get out of this nightmare as fast as possible.



It is a little-known fact that dragons grow colder the deeper they sleep.

It is even possible for a dragon to go into a Sleep Coma in which they are icy-cold, with no obvious pulse, or breath, or heartbeat. They can stay in this state for centuries, and only a highly-skilled expert can tell from looking at them if they are alive or dead.

But a dragon who is awake or lightly sleeping is very warm indeed, like bread that has just come out of the oven.

Hiccup found one that was about the right size and fairly cool to the touch and manoeuvred it into his basket as quickly and carefully as he could. It was a very basic Basic Brown, but at that moment Hiccup could not have cared less. Even though it was barely half-grown, it was surprisingly heavy.

'I DID it, I DID it, I DID it!' he chanted happily to himself. At least he wasn't going to be the only boy in the class who didn't have a dragon. Everybody seemed to have got themselves one by now and they were all making their way quietly towards the exit. Everybody, that was, except for...

... Fishlegs, who was already covered in a bright red, itchy rash, and was at that very moment approaching a pile of knottily entangled Nadders on very loud tiptoes.

Fishlegs was even worse at burglary than Dogsbreath.

Hiccup stopped dead in his tracks. 'Don't do it, Fishlegs – PLEASE don't do it!' he whispered.

But Fishlegs was fed up of Snotlout's taunting and of being sneered at and jeered at. He was going to get himself a really cool dragon that all the other boys would respect.

Squinting so hard he could barely see the pile of dragons, his eyes streaming, and scratching himself violently, Fishlegs reached slowly towards the bottom-most dragon, took one leg in his hand, and gently ... yanked.

The entire pile came crashing down in a furious

tangle of limbs and wings and ears. Every boy in the cavern gave a horrified gasp.

Most of the Nadders snapped crossly at each other before settling back down to sleep.

One brute bigger than the others opened his eyes and blinked a few times.

Hiccup noted, with great relief, that the third eyelid was still down.

The boys waited for the eyes to close.

And then Fishlegs sneezed.

Four **GIGANTIC** sneezes that went echoing and bouncing off the cavern walls.

The big Nadder stared sightlessly ahead, frozen like a dragon statue.

But ve-ry faintly, an ominous purring noise began in his throat.

And ve-ry slowly...

... the third eyelid slid upward.

'Uh-oh,' whispered Hiccup.

The Nadder's head suddenly whipped round to face Fishlegs, its yellow cat's eyes snapping into focus on the boy. It unfolded its wings to their greatest extent and stealthily advanced, like a panther about to spring. It opened its mouth wide enough to show the



forked dragon tongue and...

'R-R-R-U-U-U-U-N-N-N!' shouted Hiccup, grabbing Fishlegs's arm and dragging him away.

The boys ran for the exit tunnel. Fishlegs and Hiccup were the last to get there.

There was no time to pick up the torches, so they were running in the pitch dark. The basket with the Basic Brown dragon in it was bumping on Hiccup's back.

They had two minutes start on the dragons because it took a while for the first dragon to wake everybody else up. But Hiccup could hear a furious roaring and flapping as the dragons started to pour into the tunnel after the boys.

He ran a little faster.

The dragons could move more quickly than the boys because they could see better in the dark, but they were held up when the tunnel got smaller, because they had to fold their wings up to squirm through.

'I... haven't... got... a... dragon,' panted Fishlegs, a couple of paces behind Hiccup.

'That,' said Hiccup, as he scrambled frantically on his elbows through a narrow bit, 'is the **LEAST**...

ow... of our problems. They're gaining on us!'

'No... dragon,' repeated Fishlegs stubbornly.

'Oh, for THOR'S SAKE,' snapped Hiccup.

He thrust his basket into Fishlegs's arms and grabbed the empty one from Fishlegs's back. 'Have MINE, then. Wait here.'

And Hiccup turned and went back through the narrow bit even though the roaring was getting louder and closer by the second.

'WHAT... ARE... YOU... DOING???' screamed Fishlegs, frantically dancing up and down on the spot.

Hiccup came back through the hole again precious moments later. Fishlegs grabbed hold of an arm to help haul him through.



The Flight from the Dragon Nursery

They could hear a horrible snuffling as what sounded like the nose of a dragon entered the other end of the hole. Hiccup bunted a rock at it and it squealed indignantly.

They turned a corner and suddenly they could see light from outside at the end of the final tunnel.

Fishlegs went first, but, just as Hiccup was kneeling down to follow, a dragon pounced on him with a flap and a shriek. Hiccup hit it and it fell back enough for him to crawl towards the light. Another dragon – or maybe the same one – sank its fangs into Hiccup's calf. He was so desperate to get out he dragged the animal through with him.

As soon as Hiccup's head and shoulders were through into the light, there was Gobber. He grabbed Hiccup under the armpits and hauled him out, dragons pouring after him.

'JUMP!' yelled Gobber, as he stunned a dragon with one blow of his mighty fist.

'What do you *mean*, JUMP??' Hiccup hesitated as he looked down at the dizzying drop into the sea.

'No time to climb down,' panted Gobber, banging a couple of dragons' heads together, and bouncing three more off his gigantic belly. 'JUMP!!!'

Hiccup closed his eyes and leapt off the cliff.

As he plunged through the air, the dragon that was attached to his leg released its jaws with a squawk of alarm and flew off.

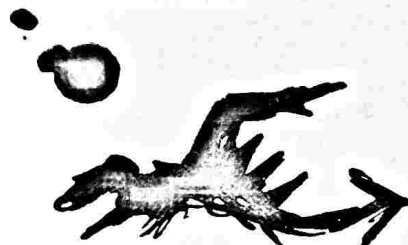
Hiccup was travelling at such speed by the time he hit the water that it didn't feel like water at all, more like something hard and painful, and so cold that he nearly passed out.

He spluttered to the surface, amazed to find that he didn't appear to be dead, and was immediately drenched by the gigantic splash of Gobber the Belch landing a couple of feet away from him.

Shrieking furiously, the dragons swarmed out of the cave and dive-bombed the floating Vikings.

Hiccup pulled his helmet as far down as it would go. There were horrible scraping sounds as dragons' talons raked across the metal. Another one landed, hissing, on the water right in front of Hiccup's face. It took off again with a screech when it felt how cold the sea was. The dragons didn't like flying through the snow and, with relief, Hiccup watched as they flew back to scream terrible dragon insults in Dragonese from the warmth of the cave entrance.

Gobber started to pull the boys out of the sea



and on to the rocks. Viking boys are strong swimmers but it is difficult to keep afloat when you have a basket full of trapped, terrified dragon on your back. Hiccup was the last to be saved – just in time, as the cold was beginning to put him to sleep.

Well, at least that wasn't **DEATH**, thought Hiccup, as Gobber grabbed him by the neck to rescue him, nearly drowning him again in the process – but it certainly wasn't **GLORY**, either.

