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opening extract from

How to Break a Dragon's Heart

written by

Cressida Cowell

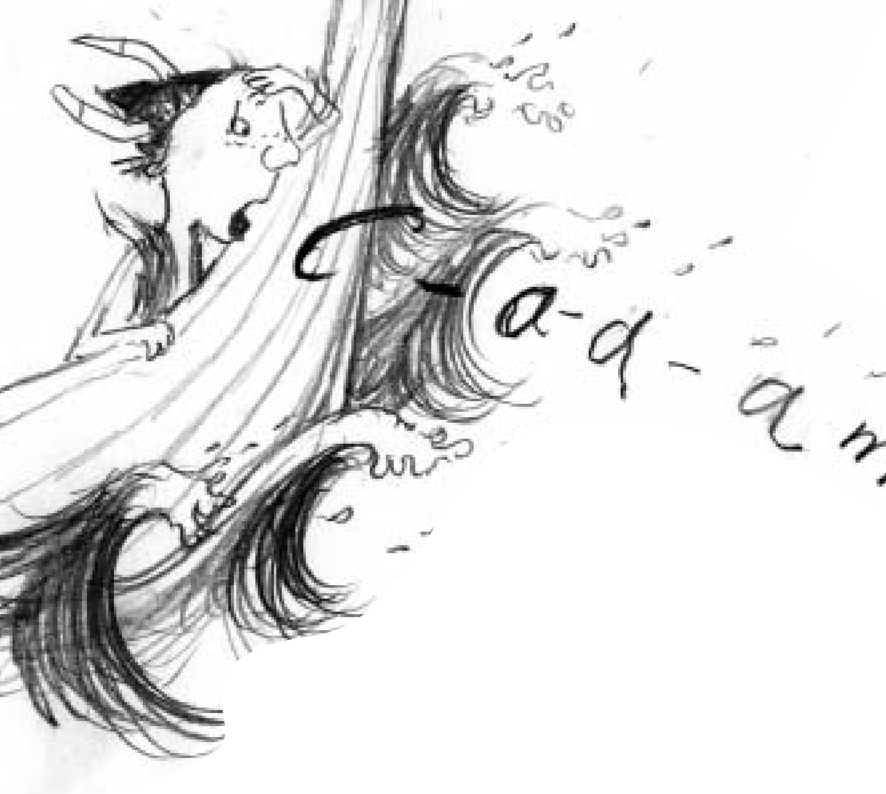
published by

Hachette Children's Books

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1. THE LOST CHILD

And so it was that one late August evening, two Hooligan ships were going round and round in circles around the little island of the Quiet Life in the Eastern Archipelago.

It was odd for Hooligan ships to be in the Eastern Archipelago, for that part of the world is exceptionally dangerous, and the Vikings tended to avoid it at all costs.

There are many many horrors in the Eastern Archipelago. The only reason the Hooligans were there at all was because they were helping Big-Boobied Bertha search for her missing daughter. And now evening was drawing in, and in their quest to find the lost child they had travelled far, far, far from their safe cosy little home on the Isle of Berk, and it was too late to go home. They would have to drop anchor and spend the night in the Eastern Archipelago, never a happy thought.

But where could they camp?

All the lands to the north and east were part of UGLITHUG territory, and the Uglithugs were slavers, and the wickedest pirates in the Barbaric World, and they had a tendency to kill any uninvited visitors on the spot. Besides, a lot of their beaches were haunted.

Of course, there was the island of Berserk.

But then again, the Berserkers went crazy on a full moon and howled like dogs and fed people in baskets to some nameless thing that lived in the wildness of the wood…

So that left the island of the Quiet Life as the *only* safe place in the Eastern Archipelago to spend the night.

Which was why the Hooligans had spent the last hour and a half going round and round it in circles, searching for the Perfect Camping Spot.

'HALT!' shouted Stoick the Vast, O Hear His Name and Tremble, Ugh, Ugh, the Chief of the Hairy Hooligan Tribe. He was an impressive figure with a magnificent red beard like a lion's mane that had been vigorously back-combed by maniacs.

'REST YOUR OARS A MOMENT!'

Stoick turned to his son, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, who was standing beside him on the deck of *The Fat Penguin*, peering anxiously over the figure-head, shielding his eyes from the setting sun as he scanned the horizon.

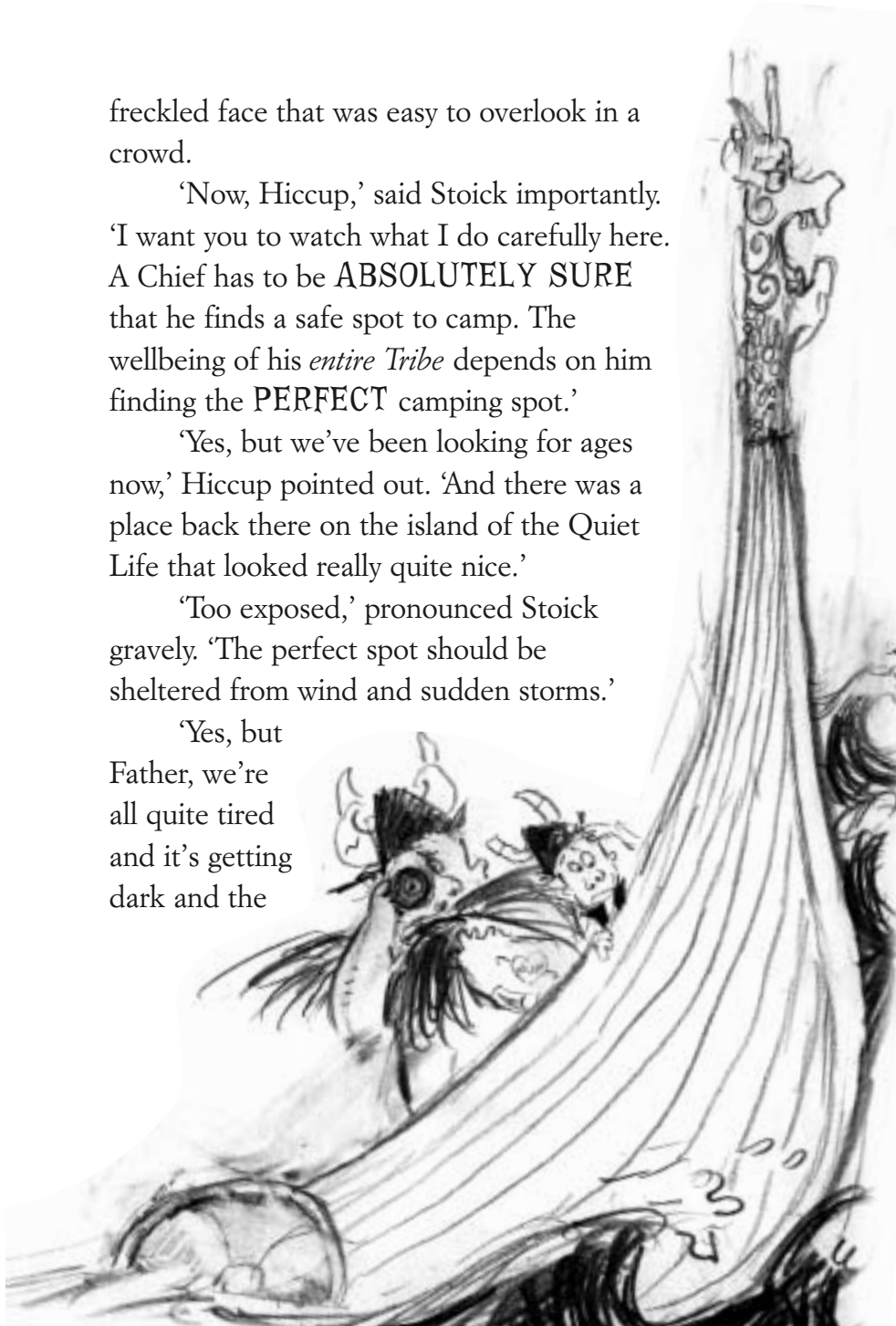
Hiccup was a most unlikely Heir to the Hooligan Tribe. An ordinary looking boy, with red hair, and long skinny limbs, and the kind of anxious freckled face that was easy to overlook in a crowd.

'Now, Hiccup,' said Stoick importantly. 'I want you to watch what I do carefully here. A Chief has to be ABSOLUTELY SURE that he finds a safe spot to camp. The wellbeing of his *entire Tribe* depends on him finding the PERFECT camping spot.'

'Yes, but we've been looking for ages now,' Hiccup pointed out. 'And there was a place back there on the island of the Quiet Life that looked really quite nice.'

'Too exposed,' pronounced Stoick gravely. 'The perfect spot should be sheltered from wind and sudden storms.'

'Yes, but Father, we're all quite tired and it's getting dark and the





Eastern Archipelago is very dangerous,' Hiccup said. 'What about all those other places we looked at?'

'Too muddy, too many jellyfish, not enough

places to pitch the tents, no lookout area…' said Stoick. 'You need to look for the PERFECT spot, Hiccup.' He patted Hiccup condescendingly on the back. 'That's why *I'm* the Captain, son. Watch and learn, my boy, watch and learn.'

Stoick stalked off enthusiastically to look for other suitable spots, while his crew rested their weary arms and grumbled mutinously. Somebody said that perhaps if Stoick was so keen to find the perfect camping spot he might like to take over at the oars.



But they said it very quietly, so that Stoick wouldn't hear.

'I hate camping,' said Fishlegs, Hiccup's best friend. 'It does terrible things to my asthma.' Fishlegs was a tall, spindly runner-bean of a boy, who had eczema as well as asthma, and was allergic to wheat and dairy. Not to mention dragons.

'This is all *your* fault, Useless*…' snarled Snotlout, Hiccup's cousin. Snotlout was a large arrogant adolescent with a natural air of leadership and a lot of skeleton tattoos. He spat thoughtfully into the sea.

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* Hiccup the Useless was Snotlout's nickname for Hiccup.

'We wouldn't be out here looking for a lousy little Bog-Burglar, if *you* hadn't turned your father soft, so that he made allies with those mud-trotting female no-hopers,' sneered Snotlout. 'Before you started interfering, there was an excellent saying, "the only good Bog-Burglar is a dead Bog-Burglar". And what I say is, if we find her dear ickle Bog-Burglar corpse floating down that gorge over there tomorrow morning, I, for one, will not be blubbing into my cocoa.'

'Har har har,' snorted Dogsbreath the Duhbrain, Snotlout's friend and fellow bully.

'You're such a charmer, Snotlout,' snapped Hiccup. 'No wonder you make friends easily.'

'But seriously,' drawled Snotlout, 'look around you, Useless. You and your father have really put us in danger here. We've drifted into UGLITHUG territory. See that island over there?' Snotlout pointed to an ominous, brooding dark shape to the south, from which a strange, humming, drumming noise seemed to be coming. 'You want to know what *that* is, sweet-pea? That's BERSERK, that is. And *this* beach that we're drifting into now? This is the Beach of the Broken Heart…'

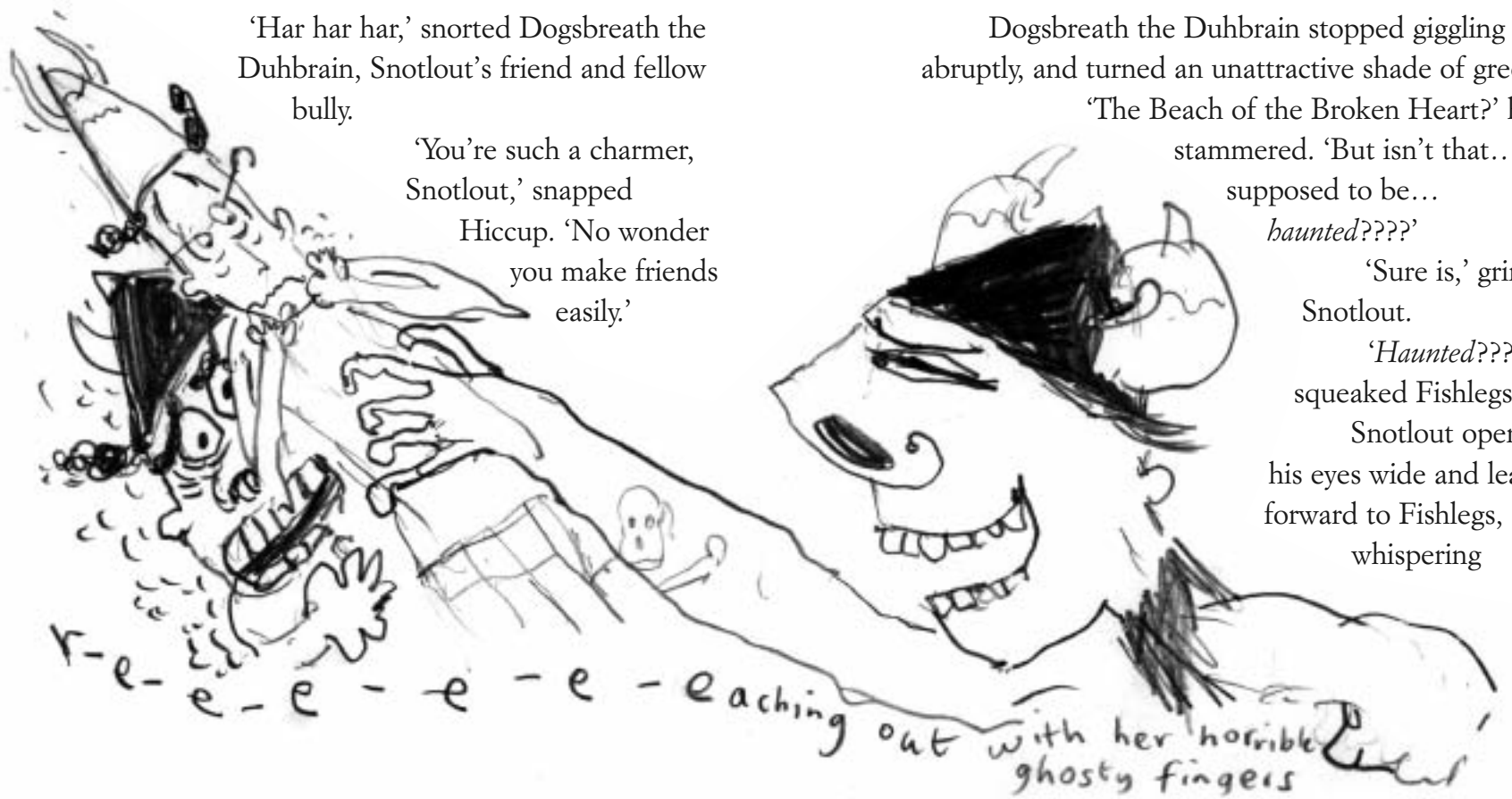
Dogsbreath the Duhbrain stopped giggling abruptly, and turned an unattractive shade of green.

'The Beach of the Broken Heart?' he stammered. 'But isn't that… supposed to be… *haunted*????'

'Sure is,' grinned Snotlout.

'*Haunted*????' squeaked Fishlegs.

Snotlout opened his eyes wide and leaned forward to Fishlegs, whispering



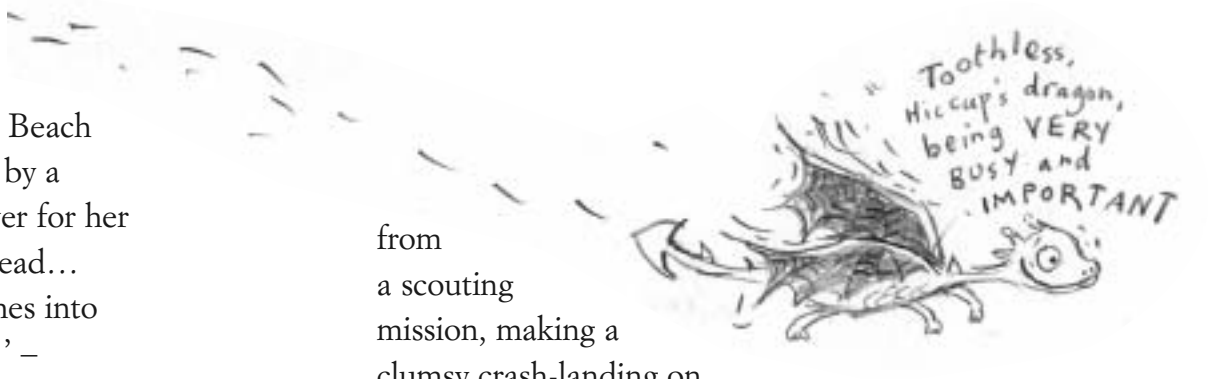
conspiratorially. 'That's right, you weed. The Beach of the Broken Heart is haunted, so they say, by a ghost-lady in a ghost-ship… searching for ever for her lost, dead child… and if she finds YOU instead… why' – and he paused, for effect – 'she reaches into your chest with her horrible ghosty fingers…' – Fishlegs and Dogsbreath both covered their chests hurriedly – '… and she takes out your beating heart and sails with it back to the ghost-world,' finished Snotlout with relish.

Dogsbreath was so anxious that he dropped his drawn dagger rather painfully on to his toe. 'OOOOW…'

'That is such RUBBISH, Snotlout,' said Hiccup loudly. 'That's just a myth, created because the marshes behind the beach are home to a rare kind of bird called the Neverbird, and it makes a sound like a crying ghost.'

Snotlout leant back and crossed his tattooed arms casually. '*Is* it rubbish though?' he said. 'We could be in serious danger here. And all for a dirty little Bog-Burglar who has nothing to do with the Hooligan Tribe. I repeat. All *your* fault, Useless.'

And it was just at that moment that Hiccup's hunting-dragon Toothless returned to *The Fat Penguin*



from a scouting mission, making a clumsy crash-landing on Hiccup's head.

Hiccup had sent Toothless ahead to investigate coves and rocks and beaches and likely places where a small boat might have been blown and wrecked by a mighty storm.

If Hiccup was an unlikely Heir to the Hooligan Tribe, Toothless was an even more unlikely hunting-dragon-to-the-Heir. He was a Common-or-Garden dragon, the least rare of the dragon species (although he claimed to be something much more exotic), and he was at least half the size of the other young Warriors' hunting-dragons. He had no obvious weapons and, as his name suggests, no teeth.

At the moment he was genuinely anxious, but the drama of the search, and the lateness of the hour, and the importance of *him*, Toothless, leading the hunt from the front, not to mention the fact that he had missed two meals and two naps, had led him to cross the line into hopeless, fidgety, over-excitement.

He was wound up tighter than a tick who had feasted on several, large, sugar-laced cups of coffee.

Toothless always had a stammer, but now he was so beside himself he couldn't even get the words out. He just jumped up and down on Hiccup's head, pointing his wings at the Beach of the Broken Heart.

'What is it, Toothless? What is it?' asked Hiccup.* Stoick, who was squinting all around him, and discussing with his second-in-command the relative merits of different camping areas, spotted Toothless pointing, and turned his telescope towards the Beach of the Broken Heart.

'Well *that's* not a suitable camping spot,' Stoick grunted but then he stopped. 'Hang on a second. What's that? *THERE'S SOMETHING ON THE BEACH OVER THERE!*'



* Hiccup was one of the few Vikings before, or since, who was able to speak Dragonese, the language the dragons spoke to each other.