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opening extract from

# How to Ride a Dragon's Storm

written by

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# 1. A PROPER VIKING SWIMMING RACE

One chilly spring day in the Barbaric Archipelago, Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, the Hope and Heir to the Tribe of the Hairy Hooligans, was standing miserably on the West Beach of the Murderous Mountains with absolutely nothing on but his helmet, his sword, his waistcoat, and a teeny weeny pair of hairy swimming trunks.

The Murderous Mountains were not the kind of place you wanted to visit at the best of times. They gave Hiccup the shivers. Tall, cruel-looking, dizzyingly high peaks that were home to some unspeakably dangerous dragons and mutant wolves, not to mention the Murderous Tribe, the fiercest and most ruthless Vikings in the uncivilised world.

The Murderous Tribe did not often receive visitors. Perhaps it was their uncomfortable habit of sacrificing unwelcome intruders to the Sky Dragons at the point of Mount Murderous that kept people at bay.

But on this occasion, Madguts the Murderous had taken it into his head to be hospitable, and to invite two of the other Tribes, the Hooligans and the Bog-Burglars, over to his island for a jolly little

Inter-Tribal Friendly Swimming Race.

It was a traditional *Viking* Swimming Race, and the Vikings were a little bit crazy, so they were going swimming with their weapons on: swords, axes, daggers, that sort of thing.

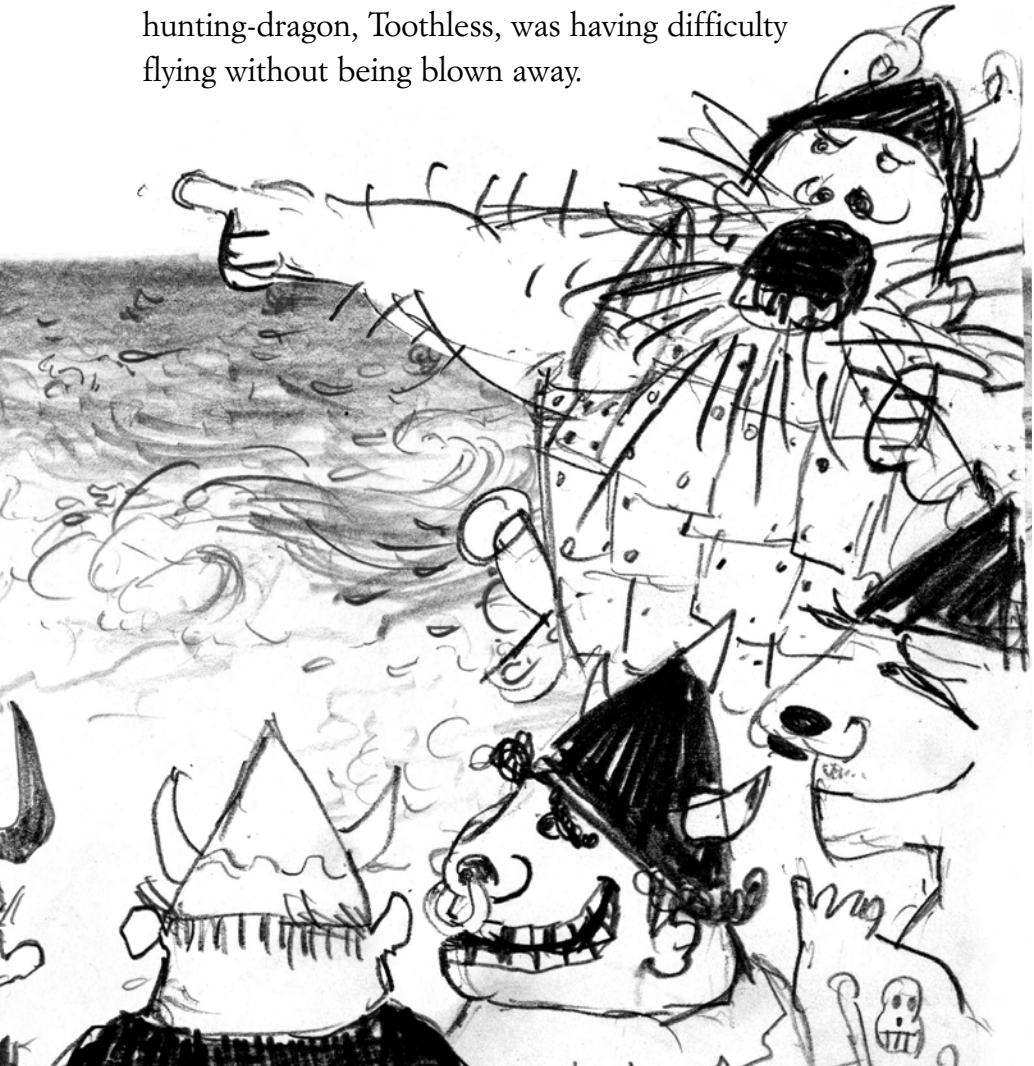
It did not seem to have occurred to them that this would make them less floaty.

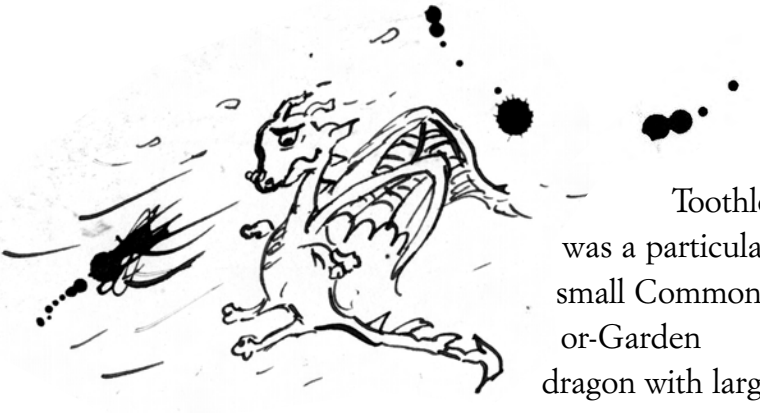
So there they were, the entire Warrior populations of the Murderous, Hooligan and Bog-Burglar Tribes, hopping up and down on the uncomfortable shingle beach, trying to pretend they



weren't freezing their horns off, with the mutant wolves howling cheeringly up in the mountains above.

There was a strong easterly wind that brought goose-bumps to Hiccup's skinny, freckled arms, and whisked off helmets, cloaks and swords, and sent them bowling briskly down the beach. Hiccup's tiny hunting-dragon, Toothless, was having difficulty flying without being blown away.





Toothless was a particularly small Common-or-Garden dragon with large, innocent greengage eyes.

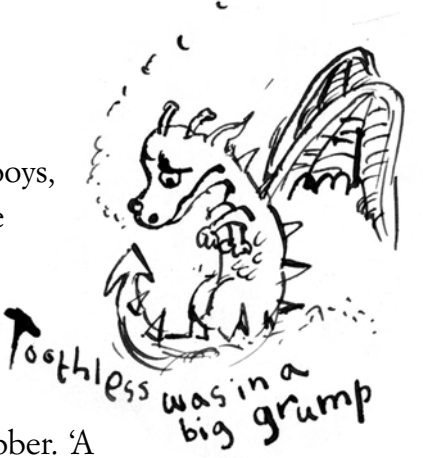
'Toothless w-w-wouldn't go swimming today if Toothless was you,' he advised Hiccup. 'Is very ch-ch-chilly in there, Toothless has been in already and it nearly froze Toothless's wings off.'

'Yes, thank you, Toothless,' said Hiccup. (Hiccup was one of the very few Vikings, before or since, who could speak Dragonese, the language in which the dragons speak to each other.) 'Very helpful, I'll bear that in mind.'

Gobber the Belch, the teacher in charge of the Pirate Training Programme on Berk, had stripped down to his smalls, and was breathing in the gale as if it were the loveliest of summer breezes. 'Lovely swimming weather!' he roared delightedly, beating his chest with his fist like a great red-headed gorilla. 'Gather



round and stand to attention, boys, and I'll explain the Rules of the Race…'




The twelve boys stood before their teacher in a shivering line.

'Now boys!' boomed Gobber. 'A Proper Viking Swimming Race is not like those pathetic little competitions they carry out on the mainland. It is a test of your ENDURANCE, your STRENGTH and your SUICIDAL BRAVERY…'

'Oh brother,' moaned Hiccup's best friend Fishlegs, who was the only boy on the Programme who was even worse than Hiccup at all the Viking activities. He had legs as limp as two strings of spaghetti, and he couldn't swim. 'I don't like the sound of this…'

'In a proper Viking Swimming Race,' continued Gobber, 'the winner is the person who is LAST.'

There were gasps of surprise, and 'oh sir, please sir, that can't be right, sir,' from the line of boys.

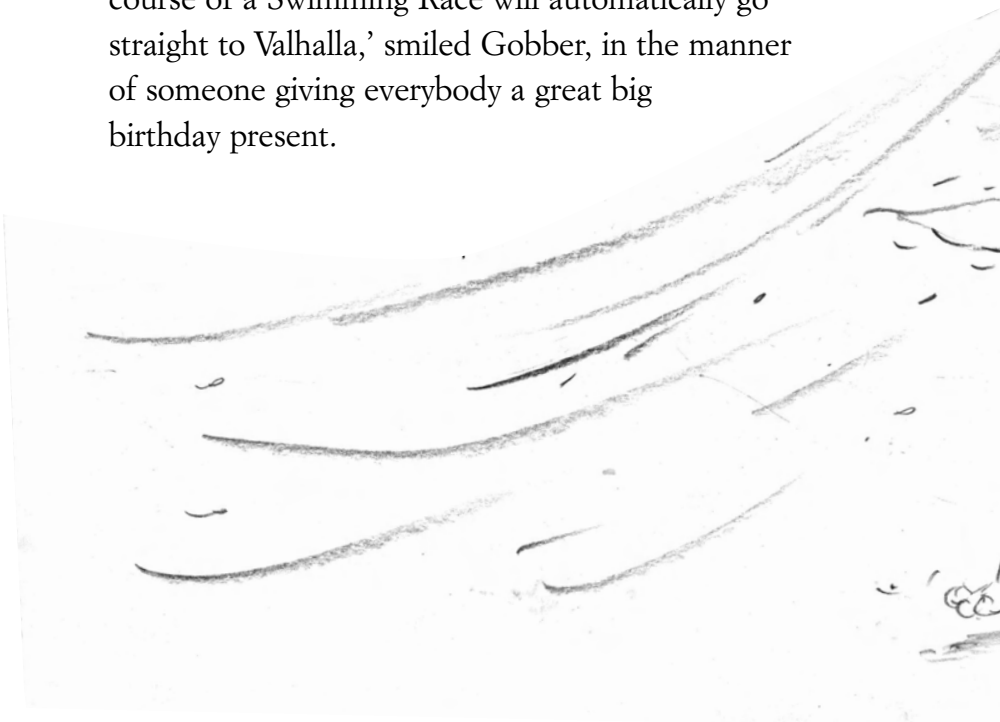
'In which case,' sneered Snotface Snotlout, a great bullying brute of a boy whose muscly arms were covered entirely in skeleton tattoos, 'Hiccup the Useless will win, no problem. *He's* always the last at everything…'

Hiccup stood on one leg, tried to smile, and fell over in the sand.

'*Aha*,' grinned Gobber, his beard bristling with keenness. He laid one finger to his nose. 'But think carefully about this, boys… we all set out from the beach and start swimming, and from then on it's a game of Chicken. Who can swim out the furthest, the longest, into the deepest ocean, and still return? Many are the Warriors over the centuries who in their pride have misjudged the swim BACK, and who have drowned as a consequence…'

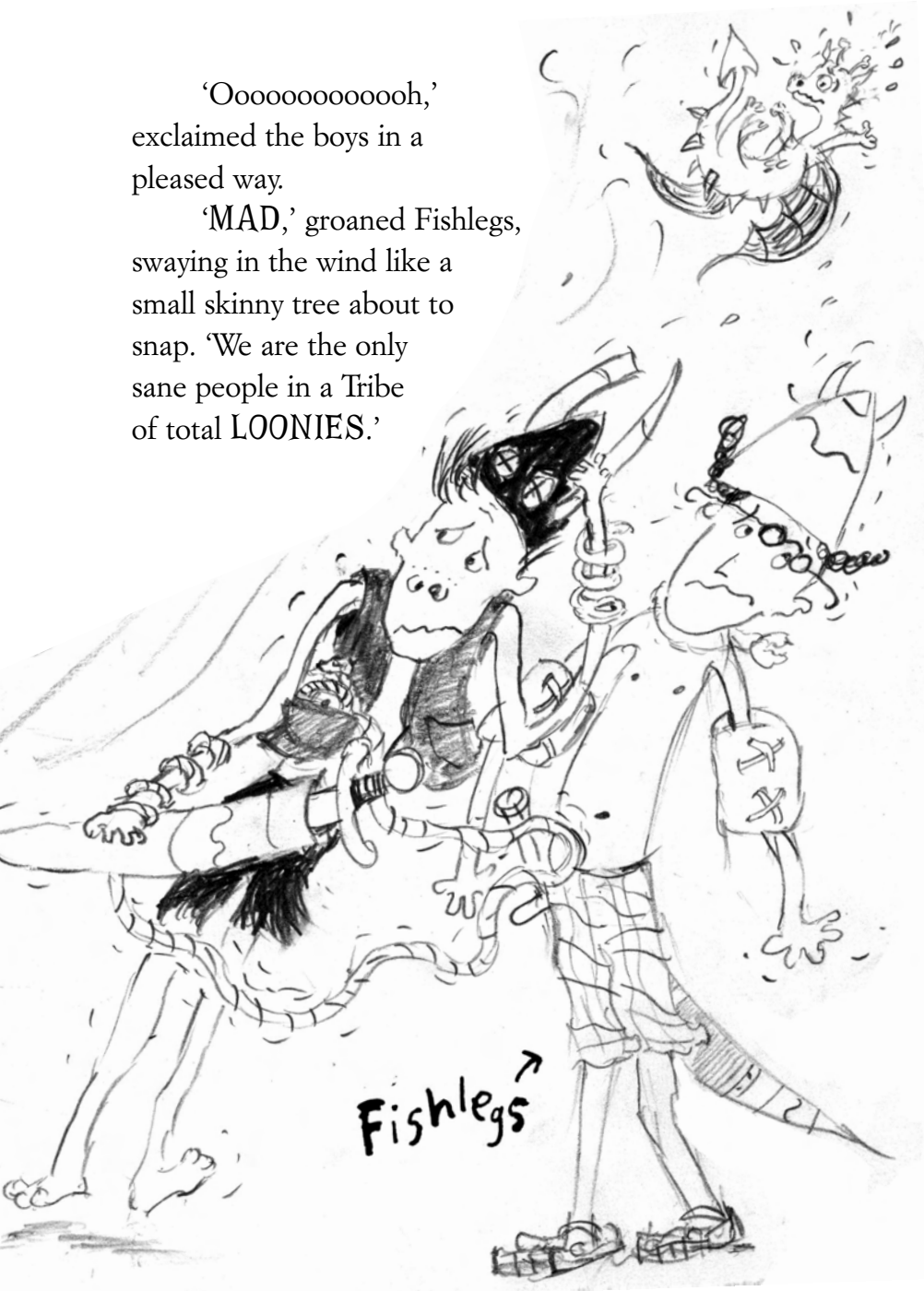
'Oh yippee…' moaned Fishlegs.

'But on the plus side, anyone who drowns in the course of a Swimming Race will automatically go straight to Valhalla,' smiled Gobber, in the manner of someone giving everybody a great big birthday present.



'Ooooooooooooh,' exclaimed the boys in a pleased way.

'MAD,' groaned Fishlegs, swaying in the wind like a small skinny tree about to snap. 'We are the only sane people in a Tribe of total LOONIES.'



'Any questions?' roared Gobber.

Hiccup put up his hand. 'A small point, sir. Won't we freeze to death in about five minutes?'

'Don't be a softy!' roared Gobber. 'The Blubberwing fat you have rubbed all over you SHOULD keep you warm enough to prevent actual DEATH… but it's all part of the game, of course. Can you use your skill and judgement to stay out long enough to win the Race… but not SO LONG that you freeze to death?'

Gobber walked up and down the line of boys inspecting them before they went out to join the competition. 'Very smart, Snotlout… Chin up, Tufnutt Junior… Haven't you forgotten something, Clueless?'

'I've got my sword, sir,' said Clueless.

'You do have your sword,' admitted Gobber, 'but you DO NOT have your swimming costume. Put it on quick, boy… I don't think that Thor will be welcoming you into Valhalla in the altogether. It really doesn't bear thinking about…'

He moved along the line until he stopped dead in front of Fishlegs. 'WHAT,' roared Gobber in an awful voice, 'WHAT in Thor's name are THESE?'

'Armbands, sir,' replied Fishlegs, looking straight ahead.

'Fishlegs can't swim, sir,' offered Hiccup in defence of his best friend. 'So we made him these out of a couple of pig bladders. Otherwise he sinks like a stone.'

'Like a stone,' repeated Fishlegs helpfully.

'Oh for Woden's sake,' blustered Gobber, 'what are the Murderous Tribe going to think if they catch sight of THOSE? I'll lend you my cloak, Fishlegs, and you can drape it over them, and let's just hope nobody notices. Thor give me strength…'



'Now, has everybody got their hunting-dragon?' bellowed Gobber.

The boys had brought their hunting-dragons. They were huddled on the beach, their wings over their heads, shielding themselves from the rain.

'Your hunting-dragon can fly over your head as you swim. It makes you easier to spot from the beach, and they can maybe fight off any predators… sharks, Darkbreathers, that sort of thing… OK, you can fall out now and get ready, and I'll see you at the start line in about five minutes.'

The boys began their last-minute preparations, chattering excitedly.

'Hi there, LOSERS,' sneered Snotlout, a tall, mean boy with nostrils so large you could stick a cucumber up them (Toothless had actually DONE this once) and the repellent beginnings of a moustache sprouting on his upper lip like a little hairy caterpillar. 'I hope ickle baby Hiccup has been practising his doggy-paddle then…'

He gave Hiccup a big shove that sent him sprawling in the sand.

'Her her her…' snorted Dogsbreath the Duhbrain, Snotlout's equally unpleasant sidekick. Dogsbreath looked rather like a gorilla in goggles who

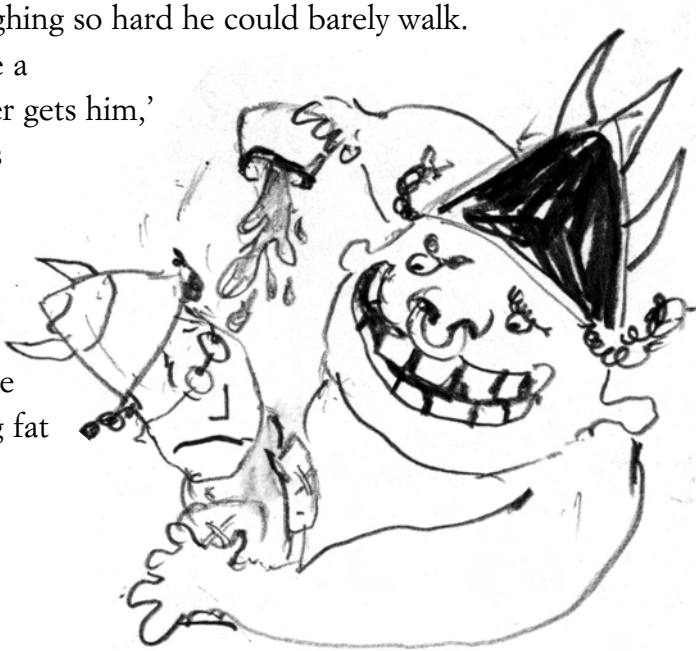
had been over-doing it with the doughnuts.

'Very funny, Snotlout,' replied Hiccup, spitting sand out of his mouth.

'You guys are normally so good at coming in last…' sneered Snotlout. 'In fact this may be your only opportunity ever to come in FIRST, for once… Just try and at least go out of your depth, won't you, before you crawl back to the beach like the pathetic cowardly little plankton you are? You don't want to embarrass us PROPER Hooligans more than you actually have to… Nice armbands, Fishlegs, by the way…'

And Dogsbreath took the pot of slimy green Blubberwing goo Fishlegs was holding in his hands and poured it over Fishlegs's head, before strolling off with Snotlout, who had a rather basic sense of humour, and was laughing so hard he could barely walk.

'I hope a Darkbreather gets him,' said Fishlegs gloomily, taking off his glasses and trying to rub off the Blubberwing fat



with the edge of his swimmers, but only succeeding in smearing it all over the glass so that they were impossible to see through.

'It would just spit him out again,' replied Hiccup even more gloomily, trying to rub the sand off himself, but completely failing because the Blubberwing fat was so sticky. 'I bet he tastes horrible.'

PAAAAA-AARAAAP!

A musician from the Murderous Tribe sounded the horn to summon the competitors to gather for the beginning of the Swimming Race…

