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opening extract from

How to Twist a Dragon's Tale

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1. THE HERDING-REINDEER-ON-DRAGONBACK LESSON

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third never forgot the day he met an Exterminator Dragon for the very first time.

How could he?

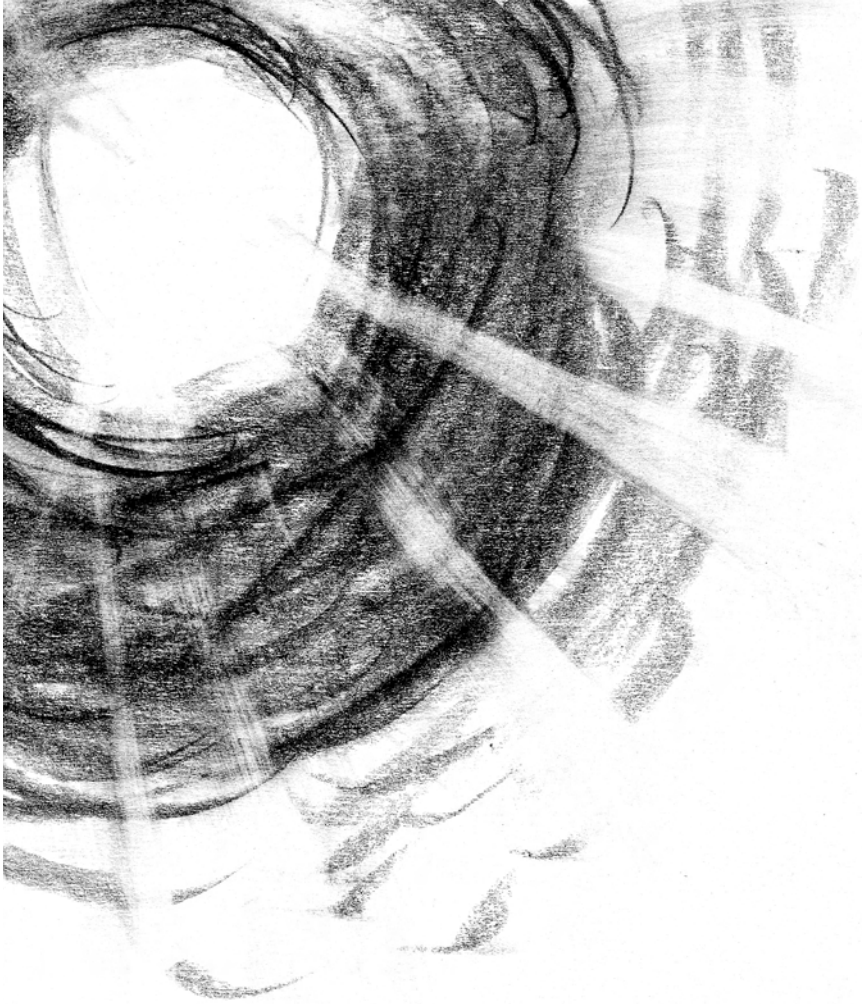
It was one of the most terrifying experiences of his short, adventurous life.

There he was, sitting in the middle of a circle of fire which was getting smaller and smaller, with no way out, and prowling through the flames, getting closer and closer, were these sinister leopard-like shapes, the slinking silhouettes of Exterminator Dragons sharpening their talons and getting ready to leap –

Hang on a second.

I had better start at the beginning.

It all took place during a heatwave in August, which was surprising, for Augusts in the Viking territories were normally rather cool, wet affairs. But it had been growing hotter and hotter over the course of the summer, and as the temperatures rose, Hiccup's grandfather Old Wrinkly had been babbling on about how the unexpected warmth was a terrible Omen of



Doom, and a new kind of Terror-Dragon had awoken in the West, and would descend upon them all with Fire and Destruction…

But unfortunately nobody really took Old Wrinkly seriously, because he wasn't very good at looking into the future.



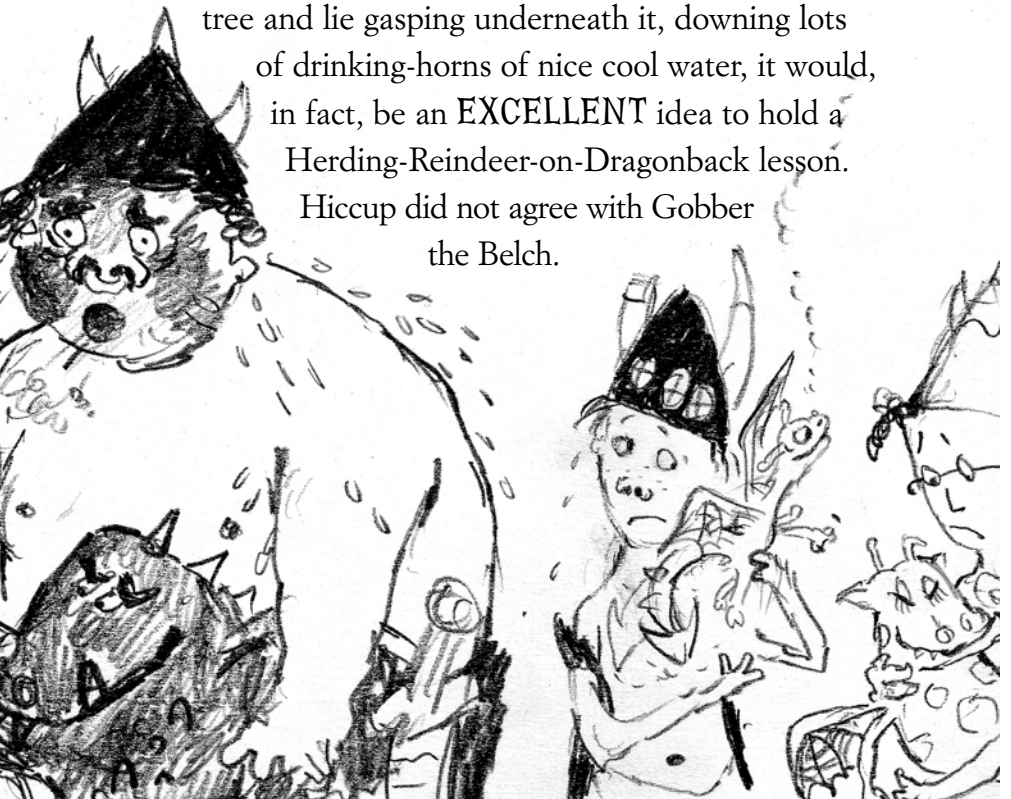
On this particular day, the sun was beating down relentlessly on the usually soggy Isle of Berk as if it had lost its way, and thought it was in Africa.

There was not a cloud (let alone an Exterminator Dragon) in the sky.

Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, only son of Chief Stoick the Vast, was on the Hooligan Pirate Training Programme on the Isle of Berk.

His teacher, Gobber the Belch, had decided that on this particularly still, stuffy summer's day, when all you *really* wanted to do was to find a nice tree and lie gasping underneath it, downing lots of drinking-horns of nice cool water, it would, in fact, be an EXCELLENT idea to hold a Herding-Reindeer-on-Dragonback lesson.

Hiccup did not agree with Gobber the Belch.



Clouds of midges →

But Gobber the Belch had not asked Hiccup's opinion on the matter.

And Gobber the Belch was a six-and-a-half-foot axe-wielding lunatic who was not the kind of teacher you argued with.

So there they all were, all twelve pupils on the Programme, standing in a hot, bedraggled, wilting line, halfway up Huge Hill, swatting off the midges that were gathering in great clouds in the still and steamy air.

There was Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, rather surprisingly the Hero of this story, for he was extremely ordinary-looking, with bright-red hair that shot straight up in the air whatever you did to it, and no obvious Heroic qualities.

There was Hiccup's best friend Fishlegs, the only boy on the Pirate Training Programme who was even *worse* at being a Viking than Hiccup was. He had asthma, eczema, short-sight, flat-feet, knock-knees, an allergy to reptiles, heather, and animal fur, and he couldn't swim. He bore a strong resemblance to a runner-bean wearing glasses.

There was Snotface Snotlout. A delightful boy – if you happen to *like* unpleasant teenagers with skull

tattoos who bully anything that moves and is smaller than them.

There was Tuffnut Junior. A pleasure to meet – if you happen to *like* meeting pimply young plug-uglies who pick their noses, and sleep with an axe under their pillows.

And Dogsbreath the Duhbrain, the largest, sweatiest, and smelliest of the lot of them, had all the grace and charm of a pig in a helmet.

There they all were, this horrid collection of spotty Viking pre-teens, and Gobber was shouting at them, in his usual cheery fashion.





'RIGHT!' yelled Gobber, the sweat pouring down his lobster-red cheeks and into his beard, turning it as limp and steamy as a jungle rainforest. 'I PRESUME YOU HAVE ALL BROUGHT YOUR HUNTING-DRAGONS?'

They had all brought their hunting-dragons. All except for Clueless,who really was so stupid that he shouldn't have been allowed out without a minder. He had brought his hunting FLAGON, which wasn't the same thing at all.

But everybody else had brought their hunting-dragons.

Most of the hunting-dragons were looking as cross at being called out on this mission as their Masters were, panting heavily with their forked tongues hanging out, and swishing their tails to keep off the midges and the flies.

Snotlout's dragon, Fireworm, who looked a bit like a flame-red Rottweiler with a face like a snooty alligator, was curling dangerously around Snotlout's legs, wondering whether she would get in trouble if she gave Gobber a big fat bite on his big fat hairy bottom.

If it was a big enough chomp, it might just stop the lesson while Gobber went to the Hospital Hut…

But, reluctantly, she decided that she *would* get in trouble.

Fishlegs's dragon, Horrorcow, the only vegetarian hunting-dragon anybody has ever heard of, had gone to sleep in Fishlegs's arms on the way up, and Fishlegs was trying to hold her head up in a way that looked like she was awake, and listening intently, because Gobber had strong views on how everybody at the lesson really ought to be conscious.

And all the other dragons were lounging at their Master's feet, or hovering limply a little way above their Master's heads, wishing they were somewhere else.

Hiccup's hunting-dragon, Toothless, was by far the smallest, a bright-green little Common-or-Garden dragon, about the size of a naughty dachshund, or Jack Russell terrier.

He was also the only dragon showing the same amount of enthusiasm for this expedition as Gobber.

He was fidgeting in and out of Hiccup's waistcoat in a whirl of impatience, scurrying up his shirt, his little claws tickling Hiccup's tummy, and then up out the collar and on to Hiccup's head. Then he would perch on Hiccup's helmet, spreading his wings and hooting in short, excitable bursts before scampering

back down Hiccup's body again.

'Are we s-s-starting yet? Are we s-s-starting?' chirped Toothless. '*When* are we going to start? H-h-how many minutes? C-c-can *T-T-Toothless* go first? Me! Me! *M-m-me!*'

'Calm down, Toothless,' said Hiccup, as Toothless accidentally stuck his claw up Hiccup's nostril on the way down. 'We've only just *got* here.' *

'OK, BOYS, LISTEN UP!' bellowed Gobber. 'Herding reindeer is a lot like herding sheep, but reindeer are bigger.'

Clueless put his hand up.

'*Which* is bigger?' asked Clueless.

'Sheep are the round fluffy ones, and reindeers are the larger ones with the pointy things on their heads,' explained Fishlegs kindly.

'Thank you, Fishlegs,' said Gobber. 'You will use your hunting-dragon to round up any stray reindeer that try to break away from the group we are herding. It's a chance to put into practise all that you have learnt in your Herding Sheep lessons.'

*Hiccup was the only Hooligan who could understand Dragonese, the language that dragons spoke to each other.



'I don't know how Hiccup the Useless is ever going to be the chief of this tribe,' sneered Snotlout, 'when he can't even keep control of that minuscule microbe of a dragon of his. Look what happened *last* Herding Sheep lesson.'

Toothless had lost his head on that occasion, and single-handedly CHARGED the flock, and chased it into the Dragon Toilets. (He claimed it was an accident, but Hiccup had his suspicions.)

It had taken three-quarters of an hour to get the sheep out of the Toilets, and they still stunk to high heaven four weeks later.

'But the main business of the herding,' continued Gobber, 'will be performed by YOU on your RIDING-DRAGONS…'

'C-c-can Toothless EAT the reindeer when he catch them?' squeaked Toothless.

'NOBODY is going to be EATING any reindeer, Toothless!' whispered Hiccup. 'And we're not going to chase them, either. This is *herding*, not chasing. We will just be *gently* guiding the reindeer in the right direction.'

'Oh,' said Toothless, hugely disappointed.

'… None of you have ridden dragons before,' Gobber boomed, 'and you will find it is more difficult

than you think. And therefore the dragons that you will be riding on today are NOT YET FULLY GROWN. This means that they will not have the strength to carry you up into the air.'

'Oh, *Sir*…' groaned Snotlout, 'I thought we were going to be FLYING today.'

'First you learn to ride,' said Gobber, 'and then later, MUCH LATER, you learn to fly. You fall off a flying dragon, Snotlout, and you will end up a SQUASHED Viking. Which would be difficult for me to explain to your father.'

'Can T-T-Toothless just eat a very small one?' asked Toothless, in a very small voice.

'No,' whispered Hiccup.

'So, ON our riding-dragons, we will approach the reindeer QUIETLY – no farting, Dogsbreath – and we will *carefully* surround the herd, and see whether we can guide it back towards Hooligan Village. Any questions so far? Yes, Clueless?'

'Which were the round fluffy ones again?' asked Clueless.

Gobber sighed.

'The round fluffy ones are the SHEEP, Clueless, they're the SHEEP. Now. You will find the

riding-dragons rather a lively ride. They are just over here – *WHERE ARE THE RIDING-DRAGONS?*' asked Gobber in exasperation. 'They were supposed to be following us.'

'I think they're over there, sir,' said Fishlegs, pointing to a small, twisted tree a little way away.

The riding-dragons were looking far from lively. They were lying in the shade, resting their heads on their paws, their forked tongues hanging out.

Gobber strode towards them, clapping his hands and shouting, 'COME ON, *UP* YOU GET THERE, YOU'RE SUPPOSED TO BE TERRIFYING, FOR THOR'S SAKE!'

And as the riding-dragons got to their feet, and slunk towards their Masters through the browned and shrivelled heather, like a pack of surly lions, Hiccup realised something that really WAS terrifying.

Something that gave a small indication that perhaps the day might take an unexpected turn.

The tree the riding-dragons had been sheltering under was blasted and twisted and reduced to carbon. All around the tree were scorch-marks. And when Hiccup moved a little closer to investigate, he found to his horror that the entire hillside behind had been burnt

to a cinder and turned to sooty desert.

Where once heather grew and swayed in the wind, covered with butterflies and grasshoppers and buzzing nanodragons, now there was only ashy stubble, scarred across with white, stretching out across the whole of the slope.

Only one thing could do *that* to a hillside, and it wasn't the sun, however fiercely it might shine.

It was FIRE.

