strong swimmers
you have a
on your back.
in time, as the
thought
eck to rescue
ocess – but it

# 3. HEROES OR EXILES

The boys scrambled over the slimy pebbles at the edge of the beach and back up Madman's Gully, the gorge they had climbed through a couple of hours before. This was a narrow crack in the cliffs filled with large rocks. They tried to move as quickly as they could, but this is difficult when you are slipping and sliding over huge stones covered in ice, and they made painfully slow progress.

A dragon that *hadn't* been put off by the snow came shrieking down into the gorge. He landed on Wartihog's back and started savaging him, sinking his fangs into Wartihog's shoulder and ripping red lines into his arms. Gobber bashed the dragon on the nose with the handle of his axe, and the dragon let go and flapped away.

But a whole wave of dragons replaced him, pouring into the canyon with awful, rasping cries, fire shooting from their nostrils and melting the snow before them, talons spread wickedly as they swooped downward.

Gobber stood, legs wide apart, and whirled his big, double-headed axe. He threw back his great,

hairy head and yelled a terrible primeval Yell, that echoed down the sides of the gorge and made the hairs on the back of Hiccup's neck stick straight up like the spines on a sea urchin.

Individually, dragons tend to have a healthy sense of self-preservation, but they are braver when they hunt in packs. They knew now that they had the advantage of massive numbers, so they didn't check their flying for an instant. They just kept on coming.

Gobber let go of the axe.

Spinning end to end, the axe soared up through the softly falling snow. It hit the biggest dragon of the lot, killing him instantly, and then carried on going, landing in a snow-drift hundreds of feet away and disappearing.

This made the rest of the dragons think a bit. Some of them scrambled over each other in their haste to fly away, yelping like dogs. The others came to a halt, hovering uncertainly, screaming defiance but

keeping their distance.

'Waste of a good axe,' grunted Gobber. 'Keep going, boys, they could come back!'

Hiccup needed no encouragement to keep going. As soon as he got out of the gorge and on to the marshy land behind it, he broke into a stumbling run, every now and then falling flat on his face in the snow.

Some time later, when Gobber reckoned they were a safe distance from Wild Dragon Cliff, he yelled at the boys to stop.

Very carefully he counted heads again, to check he hadn't lost anybody. Gobber had spent an unpleasant ten minutes standing at the mouth of the dragons' cave wondering why there was such a terrible racket and what he was going to say to Stoick the Vast if he lost his precious son and heir for good.

Something Tactful and Sensitive, he supposed, but Tact and Sensitivity were not Gobber's strong points and he took the first five minutes to come up with 'Hiccup copped it. SORRY.' and then spent the second five minutes tearing his beard out.

Consequently, although secretly mightily relieved, he was not in a Good Mood and, as soon as

he could get his breath back, he exploded all over the place, as the boys stood, shivering violently, in a bedraggled line.

'NEVER... in FOURTEEN YEARS... have I come across such a load of HOPELESS BARNACLES as you lot. WHICH OF YOU USELESS MOLLUSCS WAS RESPONSIBLE FOR WAKING UP THE DRAGONS????'

'I was,' said Hiccup. Which wasn't strictly true.

'Oh, that's BRILLIANT,' bellowed Gobber, 'just BRILLIANT. Our Future Leader shows off his magnificent Leadership Skills. At the tender age of ten and a half he does his best to annihilate himself and the rest of you in A SIMPLE MILITARY EXERCISE!'

Snotlout sniggered.

'You find something amusing about that, Snotlout?' asked Gobber, with dangerous softness. 'EVERYBODY IS ON LIMPET RATIONS FOR THE NEXT THREE WEEKS.'

The boys groaned.

'Smart work, Hiccup,' sneered Snotlout. 'I can't wait to see you in action on the battlefield.'

'SILENCE!' yelled Gobber. 'THIS IS YOUR

INITIATION, NOT A DAY OUT IN THE COUNTRY! SILENCE, OR YOU'LL BE LUNCHING ON LUGWORMS FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIVES!'

'Now,' continued Gobber, more calmly, 'although that was an absolute mess, it wasn't a total disaster. I PRESUME that you do all HAVE a dragon after that fiasco...?'

'Yes,' chorused the boys.

Fishlegs took a sideways glance at Hiccup, who was staring straight ahead.

'Lucky for you,' said Gobber, ominously. 'So you have all passed the first part of the Dragon Test. There are, however, still two parts that you have to complete before you can become full members of the Tribe. Your next task will be to train this dragon yourself. This will be a test of the force of your personality. You will assert your will over this wild creature and show it who is Master. Your dragon will be expected to obey simple commands such as "go" and "stay", and hunt fish for you in the way that dragons have hunted for the Sons of Thor since anybody can remember. If you are worried about the training process, you should study a book called *How To Train Your Dragon* by

Professor Yobbish, which you will find in the fireplace of the Great Hall.'

Suddenly Gobber looked very pleased with himself. 'I stole that book from the Meathead Public Library myself,' he said modestly, regarding his very black fingernails. 'From right under the nose of the Hairy Scary Librarian... He never noticed a thing... Now THAT'S burglary for you...'

Wartihog put up his hand. 'What happens if we can't read, sir?'

'No boasting, Wartihog!' boomed Gobber. 'Get some idiot to read it for you. Your dragons will begin to go back to sleep, because this is still their hibernation time' – some of the dragons had, indeed, gone very quiet inside the baskets – 'so take them home and put them in a warm place. They should wake up in the next couple of weeks. You will then have only FOUR MONTHS to prepare for Initiation Day at the Thor'sday Thursday Celebrations, and the final part of your Test. If, on that day, you can prove that you have trained your dragon to the satisfaction of myself and other elders of the Tribe, you can finally call yourself a Hooligan of Berk.'

The boys stood very tall and tried to look like

proper Hooligans.

'HEROES OR EXILE!' yelled Gobber the Belch.

'HEROES OR EXILE!' yelled eight boys fanatically back at him.

*Exile*, thought Hiccup and Fishlegs sadly.

♦♦♦

'I... hate... being... a... Viking,' panted Fishlegs to Hiccup as they stumbled back through the bracken to the Hooligan village.

You didn't really *walk* on the island of Berk, you *waded* – through heather or bracken or mud or snow, that clung on to your legs and made them difficult to lift. It was the sort of country where the sea and the land were always falling into one another and getting mixed up. The island was shot through with holes burrowed by the water, a maze of criss-crossing underground streams. You could put your foot on a solid-looking piece of grass and find yourself disappearing up to your thigh in black, sticky mud. You could be making your way through the ferns and suddenly find yourself fording a river, waist-high and icy-cold.

The boys were already soaked to the skin with sea-water, and now the snow had turned to horizontal

driving rain, blowing in their faces with the strength of one of the gale force winds that were always shrieking across the salty wastelands of Berk.

'A narrow escape from horrible death first thing on Thursday morning,' complained Fishlegs, 'followed by complete rejection by the junior half of the Tribe... Nobody's going to talk to me for YEARS after this – except for you, of course, Hiccup, but then you're just a weirdo like me— '

'Thank you,' said Hiccup.

'And on top of everything,' continued Fishlegs bitterly, 'a two-mile run carrying a deranged dragon on my back' – the basket on Fishlegs's back was plunging wildly from side to side as the dragon inside tried manically to get out – 'and only a dinner of horrible

limpets to look forward to at the end of it.'

Hiccup agreed that it wasn't a delicious prospect.

'You can have this dragon back if you like, Hiccup. I warn you, they're filthy heavy when they're wet and cross,' said Fishlegs, miserably. 'Gobber is going to go off like a typhoon when he finds out you haven't got a dragon.'

'But I HAVE got one,' said Hiccup.

Fishlegs stopped and began to take the basket off his back. 'I know it IS yours REALLY,' he sighed wearily. 'I think I'll just go straight past the village and keep on running till I reach somewhere civilised. Rome perhaps. I've always wanted to go to Rome. And I haven't got a hope in Valhalla of passing Initiation anyway, so—'

'No, I've got *another* one, in my basket,' Hiccup insisted.

Fishlegs's jaw dropped open in disbelief.

'I got it when I went back into the tunnel,' explained Hiccup.

'Well, blister my barnacles,' said Fishlegs. 'How in Thor's name did you know it was there? It was so dark you couldn't see the horns in front of you.'

'It was weird,' said Hiccup. 'I sort of sensed it

when we were running down the tunnel. I couldn't see anything, but as we were passing, I just *knew* there was a dragon there, and that it was meant to be MY dragon. I was going to ignore it, actually, because we were in a bit of a hurry but then you said about not having a dragon and I went back, and... there it was, lying on this shelf in the tunnel, just as I'd imagined it would be.'

'Well, jigger my jellyfish,' said Fishlegs, and the boys started running again.

Hiccup was bruised all over, shaking from shock, and he had a nasty dragon-wound in his calf, which was stinging like crazy from the saltwater. He was freezing cold and there was an irritating bit of seaweed in one of his sandals.

He was also a bit worried because he knew he should not have risked his life trying to get a dragon for Fishlegs. This was not the act of a Viking Hero. A Viking Hero would know not to intervene between Fishlegs and his Fate.

On the other hand, Hiccup had been worrying about Dragon-catching Day for longer than he could remember. He had been sure he would be the only one to come back without a dragon, and shame,

embarrassment and awful exile would follow.

And now, here he was: a Viking warrior WITH a dragon.

So, on the whole, he was feeling fairly pleased with himself.

Things were looking up.

♦♦♦

'You know, Hiccup,' said Fishlegs a little later, as the wooden fortifications of the village appeared on the horizon, 'that sounds like Fate, you sensing the dragon was there like that. This could be Meant-To-Be. You could have some sort of wonder-dragon in there. Something that makes a Monstrous Nightmare look like a flying frog! You are the son and heir of Chief Stoick after all, and it's about time Fate came in with a sign about your destiny.'

The boys stopped, puffing with exhaustion.

'Oh, I'm sure it's just a Common or Garden that wandered away from the rest,' said Hiccup, trying to sound careless but unable to keep the excitement out of his voice. *He could have something marvellous in there!*

Maybe Old Wrinkly was right. Old Wrinkly was Hiccup's grandfather on his mother's side. He had

taken up soothsaying in his old age and he kept on telling Hiccup how he had looked into the future and that Hiccup was destined for great things.

*This amazing dragon could be the beginning of his transformation from ordinary old Hiccup, who wasn't particularly good at anything, into a Hero of the Future!*

Hiccup took the basket off his back and paused before opening it.

'It's very still, isn't it?' said Fishlegs, suddenly less certain of the Fate theory. 'I mean, it isn't moving at all in there. Are you sure it's alive?'

'It's just very deeply asleep,' said Hiccup. 'It was stone-cold when I picked it up.'

Suddenly he had a strong feeling that the gods were on his side. He KNEW that this dragon was alive.

With trembling fingers, Hiccup undid the latch, took off the lid of the basket, and peered in. Fishlegs joined him.

Things weren't looking so good any more.

There, curled up fast asleep in the bottom of the basket in a tangled dragon knot, lay perhaps the most common or garden Common or Garden Dragon Hiccup had ever seen.

was how SMALL it was. The most extraordinary thing about THIS dragon

Absolutely the *only* extraordinary thing about this dragon was how extraordinarily SMALL it was. In this it was *truly* extraordinary.

Most dragons that the Vikings used for hunting purposes were about the size of a Labrador dog. The adolescent dragons the boys were collecting weren't quite that big, but they *were* nearly fully-grown. This dragon was more comparable to a West Highland Terrier.

Hiccup couldn't think how he had overlooked this when he picked the dragon up in the tunnel. He supposed, miserably, that it was rather a pressured moment, what with three thousand dragons trying to kill him at the time. And dragons in a deep Sleep Coma do tend to weigh more than they do when they're awake.

'Well,' said Hiccup at last, 'that's a sign, if you like. You reach for a Deadly Nadder and what do you get? A Basic Brown. I grab a dragon in the dark and what do I get? A Common or Garden. The thing is, the gods are telling us we're Common or Garden folk, Fishlegs. You and I, we're not *meant* to be Heroes.'

'It doesn't matter about ME...' said Fishlegs,

'but you *are* meant to be a Hero. Remember? Son of the Chief and all that? And you *will* be one, I know you will…'

Fishlegs put the basket back on Hiccup's back and they trudged towards the village gates together.

'… At least, I sincerely HOPE you will. I don't want to be following Snotlout into battle. You've got more ideas about military tactics in your little finger than Snotlout has in his whole fat head…'

While that may have been true, not only was Hiccup *not* about to be the future star of Dragon-training – but with this particular dragon it was even going to be difficult for him to take his familiar place fading into the background.

It was so small it was going to make him look ridiculous.

It was so small that Snotlout was going to have some very unpleasant things to say about it.