

Ragjald had always avoided the livestock chores around the homestead. Animals never appealed to him. His father liked to laugh at his youngest son and slap him on the back and tell him that Mittgard horses could smell cowardice like a dog could smell fear, both of which Ragjald doubted, but never out loud, which he grudgingly accepted did prove his father partially right.

The British word for bad dreams was "nightmare," which always made sense to Ragjald. Had he been in charge of creating the names for such things, would have used a word for "horse," too. The most horrible creature he could ever imagine was his family's old stallion, the snorting beast in the barn called Hoofdragon.

It terrorized him at every turn. Hoofdragon paused at any task to flare its nostrils and yell at Ragjald, much to his father's and brothers' amusement. No punishment was worse than the chore of caring for it. This finally stopped when Hoofdragon had lulled Rag into a false sense of fellowship one evening for the willful intention to bite the youngest Ragjald son when he was not expecting it.

Rag was blamed for that, too.

He was therefore not surprised to see Hoofdragon waiting for him when he opened the stable door. He whickered when he saw Ragjald and shook his beetle-black mane.

"You know what has to happen," said Ragjald.

Hoofdragon looked at him with one eye and stamped his hoof.

"I'm not happy about this, either, but they're in real trouble and I have to do something about it. We have to do something about it. Together. Dad is out there. They're taking him somewhere and nobody else is around to help. You need to work with me. Okay, Hoofdragon?"

Hoofdragon did not agree.

Ragjald had never been taught how to ride a horse that despised its rider, but he guessed that once he got on and kicked it a few times in the ribs, it would at least get furious enough to run fast, which was all he needed it to do. First, that meant getting on the horse, which Ragnroik tried to do, stymied every time by a snap of Hoofdragon's horrible, yellow teeth.

He tried yelling at Hoofdragon like his father would have, but the animal was unmoved.

He wondered for a moment what Jane would do, and then he wondered what Pierpoint would do, and the idea that came to him next was so unwise that he rejected it immediately and then he thought about Orlog and fate and rather than spend any more time thinking, he ran into his family's hastily-evacuated homestead and dug out his old trunk.

Life was good for Hoofdragon. He was a horse with simple needs, all of which were met on a regular basis by the humans who tended to him. His favorite human was the biggest one. He was the heaviest to carry and could be a harsh, expectant rider, but these qualities gave rise in Hoofdragon a sense of pride common to all horses of Mittgard. Yukon's horses were weak but showed promise, as long as Mittgard horses continued to breed with them. Hoofdragon's own

sons and daughters were many, and he lamented that they did not know the sweet taste of the hay from their home or the feeling of the hot, summer-warmed water from a Mittgardian brook.

Hoofdragon was proud of the work he did under command of the big human, just as much as he hated the cowardly incompetence of the youngest and smallest of them. Of all the big one's sons, he had no hair on his face and his body was small and fragile. Even the sight of him around the homestead made Hoofdragon angry that such weakness was tolerated. The weak one had even tried to ride him! That was the height of intolerability, and Hoofdragon had punished him with a bite he wouldn't forget.

The only reason he had cause to think of the child was that after some manner of tussle and bustle on the farm, that weakest runt of the human litter appeared at the stable door and cursed at him.

Hoofdragon cursed back in the language of horses, which the child was too stupid to know. When the human tried to reason with him, he rewarded his impertinence with a bite that sadly missed.

But Hoofdragon was old, and he was cranky and hungry. His joints hurt and his knees throbbed, and his hearing and vision weren't what they used to be. But he was too proud to show his weakness around his humans, because he was a Mittgardian horse, and the horses of Mittgard were as strong and proud as the humans who rode them.

He was relieved when the imp left and tried not to think about how hungry he was. He was Hoofdragon. He was stronger than one night without supper.

When the runt appeared again at the door with a feed bag in his hands, Hoofdragon allowed the human to strap it on. Hoofdragon would tolerate it because, well, he was hungry.

The honey was a pleasant surprise, and as he chewed its deliciousness he thought that the weakling finally understood his place, and providing the superior creature with such tasty morsels of food were—

Hoofdragon's pain disappeared. He shook his mane, and the hair grew thick and strong, like wire. His muscles strengthened and strained against his supple, ink-black skin. His hooves swelled and strengthened and the pathetic shoes spanged off and ricocheted around the barn. He breathed deep through flared, wet nostrils. His lungs could hold an ocean of air. He laughed long and loud, and rose up on only two legs and roared at the world. He wanted to run, run, run. He wanted to fight. He wanted to conquer.

"Wow," said the human, and Hoofdragon understood what it meant. He shook his head hard, and the strap around his head snapped and the empty bag flew into the runt's arms.

"My father's been taken by bad people," said the child, with an edge of deep sadness in his voice. "I don't know why you always hated me, Hoofdragon, and I know you can't understand me now—"

Hoofdragon shook his head, like he had seen humans do, and which he now understood its meaning.

"Oh. You can understand me now?" Hoofdragon nodded and stamped. The runt kept his distance.

"Okay. I didn't expect that to happen. That honey must do something different to people, then? It doesn't matter. You're my only hope, Hoofdragon. You were always the fastest and the strongest, and now you're the only way I'm going to catch up and save my family."

Hoofdragon listened and he understood. If horses had a culture and art and metaphors, they would have a word for the burst of strength a horse felt right before the end of a race, after he thought all strength was gone and he could not go further. This burst was always a surprise to the rider and even to the horse itself. It was the buried strength of necessity. Perhaps this runt — this human — was like that explosion of unexpected power. Pushed to his limit, and at the time it was needed most, this human would find his strength. Hoofdragon would hardly be able to call himself a horse of Mittgard if he did not help him finally grow up and grow strong.

He bowed on his front hooves, and nudged the nearby saddle with his nose.

Today, the reignited fire of Hoofdragon would burn bright, and he would carry a man on his back.

Ragjald wasn't sure Hoofdragon would eat the oats with the Fey honey in them, and he wasn't even sure what to expect if the horse did eat the oats, but whatever it was, it worked so extraordinarily well that he didn't spend long contemplating it. The horse seemed to understand what he was saying, so Ragjald was careful not to pull too hard on the reins and tried yelling at the horse to tell him where to go.

Hoofdragon ignored him. He paused at the entrance to the homestead to sniff the ground, then raised his huge head to sniff the air, and ran off into the forest. Ragjald clenched his knees together as hard as he could and held on to the reins, but no amount of his intervening on Hoofdragon's plans had any effect on where Hoofdragon went.

Rather than follow the road, they crashed through the forest. Hoofdragon leapt over logs, shattered branches. His hooves sent up showers of powdery, icy snow that swept into Ragjald's face and stung his eyes. Ragjald knew the land, but Hoofdragon knew it better. It was not as if Ragjald could do anything about it. He was just a passenger.

They cut through the forest where the road took a long curve around the wide gap of a creek valley, but Hoofdragon was not swayed — he flew down the hill and then burst up through the opposite incline. It was not just as if Hoofdragon had reclaimed his young body, but the best body a young Mittgardian horse could ever have, more than any horse anywhere could have. Hoofdragon had become the most horse-like of any horse. He had become the living apex of horseness.

Though he was smarter now than he had ever been, he was still a horse, and none of this occurred to or mattered to Hoofdragon. All he knew, and all he cared about, was that he felt strong and powerful and that the young boy on his back, a boy who would, if horses had a

language, be called That Burst of Strength When All Strength Has Gone, had a destiny to fulfill, and a family to rescue, and no obstacle would keep them apart.

The transport that carried his people was a simple ladle repurposed for the task of holding a hundred people for as long as it took to do whatever it was they were planning to do with them. The Aerie broadsider loomed low over the forest, the sight of which was so surprising and awe-inspiring that even Hoofdragon slowed a bit before deciding it was where he really wanted to be. He rushed forward and broke from the forest to run on to the hard-packed road where the trucks had just passed. This gave Ragjald a clear view of the soldiers within who hadn't appeared to notice them yet, and he yelled at Hoofdragon to wait a moment, which Hoofdragon did, snorting and huffing and flaring his nostrils. He barely seemed winded.

"Alright, Hoofdragon," he said. "I don't really understand what's been happening here the last half hour or so, but you're, well, I think I finally understand all that Orlog stuff. Maybe it's too late. I don't know. I don't know if the Valkyrie can come all the way over here to Yukon to take me to Valhalla, or if I even believe that stuff in the first place, but that's what everybody talks about in the epic stories. This is the end of my wode story. This is our doom, Hoofdragon. I think you probably already know that, right? Yeah, well. Okay. Thanks. We never got along very well, but now that seems like it's all behind us. Let's go save my—"

A fat, wet snowball struck him in the face, so the last word came out like "fffamalbbbl" and he fell off.

Someone was hissing at him. Hoofdragon galloped back to the woods. Rag got the snow out of his face and sat up in the road to see two people in the tree line, one of which was scrabbling up a tree and the other one pushing the first one up while he jumped up to follow.

"Call off your damn horse!"

Ragjald ran with some difficulty to the edge of the forest and watched Hoofdragon pull Pierpoint off the tree and raise up to pound him into mustard.