

An 845-word flash fiction story for Young Teens

Fly, Skyborn, My Love

Ghostly hoof beats thundered across the strand and reverberated off black basalt cliff walls. They haunted Asta by night in her dreams, and rumbled through her soul as she stood lost in a thirteen-year-old girl's reverie.

An expanse of ebony beach stretched before her. The crystal sea sparkled as lazy waves lapped against the shore. Sunlight reflected off the water and danced across the cliff face like prancing ponies.

The sand butted against a tall, basalt wall that wrapped around the strand in the shape of a crescent moon. The cliff ended in a promontory topped by a stone lighthouse, like the horn of a black unicorn.

Skyborn, Asta's chestnut pony, stamped and snorted with impatience. Before them lay the racetrack, an eight-furlong oval worn deep in the sand. Asta stood in silent contemplation. Her heart raced with a mix of fear and determination.

She considered the traditions of her people. *Prófanir*, the Trials, were held each spring. The origins disappeared back into the mists of the past. So far back that few people of this island of fire and ice still remembered them.

Prófanir drew brave or foolhardy riders and their animals from across the land. Young men proved their manhood, their prowess as horse masters, and the ability to select fine blood and breeding. Since they rode bareback, the riders must also prove their courage, strength, and endurance. To fall beneath pounding hooves meant certain death.

Asta snorted in disgust. *Young men. Boys. Girls are not accepted as horse masters.*

The headstrong youngster brooded on the sting of her father's stern disapproval. "Do not argue," he said. "You are still a child. I forbid you to race. I will take your pony from you if I must. I will not be deprived of my daughter as I was my son."

Her mother pleaded with her. "Please, Asta. Don't be a disobedient child. Listen to your father, for once. The race is fast and dangerous. You will kill your pony or yourself. Remember your brother."

Asta remained lost in a daydream. The pony nuzzled the back of her neck. His hot breath rustled wayfaring wisps of long, auburn hair that escaped from braids. She turned to him, patted his neck and rubbed his nose. "Patience, My Love. The race will start soon. When the horn blows, we will fly. Patience."

The crowd gathered near the finish stones to place their bets. No one paid attention to the girl and pony as the two approached the track outside the fourth turn. The men were too busy admiring the horses and their riders.

"Three pieces of silver on the bay--"

"You know nothing of horse flesh. Five on the long-legged gray--"

"The barrel-chested black gets my money."

Soon, twelve riders mounted their eager, jittery horses. The horn blew and the competitors leaped from the line. But a streak of chestnut red flashed by on the outside.

Startled, several horses shied and threw their riders to the sand. Some horses fell and rolled. Riders scrambled to escape the maelstrom. The black and gray emerged out of the confusion and caught up with the chestnut pony after the first turn. The horses exited the second turn like the wind, neck and neck.

“Foul,” the crowd howled.

“Get the girl off the track—”

“All bets are off!”

“Fly, Skyborn. Fly.” Asta yelled over the thunder of hooves. The girl hugged her pony’s neck and kissed him. She buried her face in his mane while they flew down the backstretch.

The horses approached the third corner and the black had pulled ahead. The gray ran a length behind. The pony, outmatched in both strength and stride, fell two lengths behind the gray.

“Do your best for me, Skyborn. Fly, My Love!”

Entering the fourth turn, the black led by only half a length. The rider of the gray turned to find the nose of the chestnut pony closing in on the inside, against the haunches of his winded mount.

As they exited the fourth turn, Skyborn’s great heart broke for his beloved Asta.

Cliffs.

Water.

Sky.

Sand.

Black.

U U U U

Thirteen-year-old Hekla stands beside her grey pony, Windstorm, overlooking the race track. *Prófanir* will be run again today, as has been the tradition as far back in history as islanders can remember. The girl stands quietly, lost in reverie, dreaming of a race run generations before and of a victory lost; a victory she hopes to reclaim.

With her hair tied up beneath a woollen cap and wearing her brother’s clothing, she steels herself for her illicit part in the men’s event soon to begin. She can hear the ghosts of generations of thundering hooves echoing back from the black cliffs. But one set of hoof beats, louder than the rest, reverberates through her soul. Hekla listens for the voice, a young girl’s plea, from among those phantom hoof beats. It is this voice that urges Hekla on.

“Fly, Skyborn! Fly, My Love.”