

The Scorpio Races

by Maggie Stiefvater

My father gives me the reins so that he can saddle the water horse with the red cloth. I lick my teeth- they taste like salt- and watch my father tie the matching armband around his upper arm. Every year I have watched him, and every year he has tied it with a steady hand, but not this year. His fingers are clumsy, and I know he is afraid of the red stallion.

I have ridden him, this *capall*. On his back, the wind beating me, the ground jarring me, the sea spraying our legs, we never tire.

My father is small and dark on the back of the red stallion. Already, his hands work ceaselessly on the reins to keep the horse in place. The motion twists the bit in the horse's mouth; I watch his head rocking to and fro. It's not how I would have done it, but I'm not up there.

I want to tell my father to mind how the stallion spooks to the right, how I think he sees better out of his left eye, but instead I say, "See you when it's over." We nod to each other like strangers, the good-bye unpracticed and uncomfortable.

I am watching the race from the cliffs when a gray *usice* horse seizes my father by his arm and then his chest.

For one moment, the waves do not attack the shore and the gulls above us do not flap and the gritty air in my lungs doesn't escape.

Then the gray water horse tears my father from his uneasy place on the back of the red stallion.

The gray cannot keep its ragged grip on my father's chest, so my father falls to the sand, already ruined before the hooves get to him. He was in second place, so it takes a long minute before the rest of the horses have passed over the top of his body and I can see it again. By then, he

is a long, black-and-scarlet smear half-submerged in the frothy tide. The red stallion circles, halfway to a hungry creature of the sea, but he does as I asked: He does not eat the thing that was my father. Instead, the stallion climbs back into the water. Nothing is as red as the sea that day.

I don't think often on my father's body strung out through the reddening surf. Instead, I remember him as he was before the race: afraid.

I won't make the same mistake.