

“Mike looked where Sanjay pointed. From somewhere on Hurricane Ridge, a thin line of smoke raced across the valley, headed straight for them. Mike pulled back on the joysticks at the same moment he screamed, ‘Incoming missile!’”

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Mike Danford Adventure Series #7

**RUNE
RIDDLE**

ARNOLD YTREEIDE
with
SILJE YTREEIDE

Jericho Quill Press

RUNE RIDDLE

by Arnold Ytreeide
with
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Dedicated to
Marius Ytreeide
A true Norseman in all the good ways,
who brought our family to America
from Norway
in 1904.

MT. THORIN

Cross Section - Not To Scale



Chapter One

Spin Dry

Seventeen-year-old Mike Danford gasped for breath as he looked up into the face of his best friend, Josh Roberts. Josh was on a boulder about five feet above, partially blocking the sun. Mike was momentarily blinded. “How about a hand?”

Josh grinned, then kneeled down on the rock and reached for his friend. “Sure. Then I can tell everyone you couldn’t make it to the top without my help.”

Mike scowled, then pulled himself up on the boulder without taking Josh’s hand. “Never mind.”

Once on top, Mike turned and reached down to help Jessica Kingston and Cindy Rogers, who also refused the assist and pulled themselves up. Once on top, Jessica elbowed Mike in the ribs. “You think I’m gonna let you say that girls need more help than guys?”

Mike shook his head, laughing. “I would never say such a thing.”

The teens were on an all-day hike to the top of Mount Thorin with their church youth group. Behind them, another twenty teenagers huffed and puffed. They had just hiked the last twenty-five hundred feet of the ten thousand foot mountain in just over three miles, and they were nearing the top. Their youth pastor, Jaydon, had warned them to take deep, slow breaths since the air would get thinner as they climbed higher.

Pastor Jaydon and his wife Emelia arrived at the group several minutes after the last teen. One of Mike’s other friends, Tyler Sanjay, put his arm around the pastor’s shoulders. “Glad you could join us. That’s quite a climb for someone your age.”

Jaydon’s eyes narrowed as he stared at Sanjay. “You know I’m

only eight years older than you, right? But I can still convince the pastor to have *you* be the guest speaker at church next Sunday.”

Sanjay’s face went slack as panic took over. “No no no! No need. I wasn’t saying you’re old, dude, just, you know, old-er.”

The group laughed, then a voice from the top of the hill surprised them all. “Hey, it’s about time you got here.”

Mike looked toward the voice. “Espen! How did you get up here before us?”

Mike’s “brother,” an exchange student from Norway staying with the Danford’s for a year, jumped down the hill from rock to rock like a mountain goat. “I took the long way around.” Mike looked back and forth between Espen and Josh, trying to understand. Espen grinned. “I just took it faster.”

Josh sighed loudly. “Okay, okay, we get it. You Norwegians spend your whole lives climbing mountains.”

The group gathered at the very top of the mountain. Some of them gawked, but Mike just grinned at the view: straight ahead, ten miles to the west, was Mt. Gemma, the site of a previous adventure. To the right lay Stovetop Desert, a place the boys knew intimately. Far below to the left he saw Seacrest Way, winding over the hill and down toward Admiralty Sound and his hometown of Seacrest. The group had driven up that road, then several miles in on a gravel side road, to get to the ranger station at the base of Mt. Thorin.

It was a windy day, but warm sunlight flooded the wide, rocky, and slightly rounded top of the mountain as the group sat on the jagged boulders to eat an early lunch. Afterwards, the teens were allowed to explore a little. Cindy practiced her photography skills on the square corners and blocky chunks of rock that made up the mountain. Two new boys – twins that Mike didn’t know very well – horsed around throwing chunks of rock until Jaydon asked them to stop. But Josh spent the entire time setting up and checking a strange contraption of ropes, clips, straps, and latches as Mike watched wearing a harness of yellow straps.

Jaydon walked over and spoke in a low voice. “You about ready, guys?”

Mike didn't take his eyes off Josh's work. "Yep. Just one more minute."

Jaydon turned and yelled across the mountain top. "People, gather over here please."

The teens wandered over and formed a semicircle around their leader. "I thought since we were climbing all the way up here, I'd ask Mike and Josh to give us a demonstration of rappelling."

One of the girls raised her hand. "What's rap . . . rapel . . ."

Jaydon turned to Mike. "How would you explain it?"

Mike thought for a moment. "Falling off a cliff without dying."

The group laughed, and Jaydon continued. "Obviously they agreed to the demonstration, so Mike here is going to show us how it's done."

As Josh checked all the knots and connections for a fifth time, Mike explained. "So, after you climb a mountain, you usually have to get back down again. The fun way to do that is basically to jump down, but in a *controlled* jump. It's the same thing that police and fire fighters learn to do to get into a building from the roof."

"Yeah, my dad's a cop and he had to learn this," one boy said. "It's really cool."

Jaydon nodded. "So how does it work, Mike?"

"We have this long rope," he held it up, "that's anchored into the rock here, and runs through the gear on my harness. My hands, a special device, and some knots, all provide friction, so I can control how fast I fall."

Josh stood up and brushed his hands on his pants. "Okay, all set."

Mike took the two ends of the long rope and tied a large knot in each. "These are double-overhand knots," he explained to the others, "so I don't fall off the end of the rope."

The group laughed, then Mike turned to yell over the cliff. As he turned, he saw a flash of light on the hill across the valley and wondered what it was. He yelled, "Rope!" over the edge of the cliff. "To warn anyone who might be down there," he explained.

Next he put on a helmet, then turned his back to the cliff. The

teens had climbed up Mt. Thorin on the east side, which rose up at an easy angle over the blocky rocks. But the west side, behind Mike, dropped straight down into a narrow valley below, cut in half by a small river. "I'll just back up to the edge of the cliff . . ." he stepped backward until his heels were hanging over the edge, "then I'll lean back and walk down the side."

"Can we say a prayer first?" It was Jessica, and Mike could see she was really nervous, as were several of the other teens.

Jaydon prayed, then Mike said, "I'll see you back at the cars." He yelled over the edge, "On rappel!" then leaned backward until his legs were horizontal. Just before he started walking down the cliff, Mike heard Jessica suck in her breath, so he flashed her a smile.



Most of the teens all moved to an outcropping of rock to the north so they could watch Mike descend. Slowly and carefully, Mike walked down the wall with his back parallel to the ground. He was feeling a bit nervous, which he thought was strange. *I've done this a hundred times, but never with an audience, I guess.*

By the time he was fifty feet below the top, Mike finally started to relax.

"Mike! Look out!"

Josh's scream from above made Mike look up. A square-ish black rock about the size of a backpack was tumbling down the face of the cliff straight toward him.

Mike had no time to think, and simply reacted. He bent his knees and then pushed out with all his strength. The lip at the edge of the cliff above held his rope out a few inches away from the wall. Now his body swung outward, twisting to the left. The rock missed, and fell directly between him and the wall, right where'd he'd been hanging a split second before.

Mike started swinging back toward the wall, gaining speed as he went. He was still turned away and kicked frantically to turn

back so his legs could act as shock absorbers and keep the rest of his body from smashing into the wall.

In that moment, a shaft of sunlight shone directly into a crack in the wall and Mike saw something strange.

The next second, he slammed against the solid rock wall and everything went black.

Mike couldn't figure it out. It was a strange sensation, and he knew what it was, but he just didn't understand. For some reason he was asleep on his mother's washing machine on "spin" cycle, and the load inside the machine was unbalanced so it was shaking terribly. But everything was dark and cold so he couldn't see what was going on. He just couldn't figure it out.

"Mike! Mike! I need you to wake up now." It was the voice of a young man yelling over the noise of the washing machine, but Mike didn't recognize it. "Mike, open your eyes for me."

Well that's not gonna happen! Mike thought.

"Mike, come on now. Open your eyes." It was a different voice, and this one he recognized – Jessica!

Mike raised his eyelids ever so slightly. Bright light, green walls, Jessica's face.

"That's it, come on now. Open them the rest of the way."

Sharp pains bounced around inside Mike's head. "OW! Oh that *hurts!*" He forced his eyes to open further, but still squinted at the bright lights. "Jessica?" he mumbled. "Why are we on Mom's washing machine?"

Jessica looked surprised for moment, then she smiled. "Uh, this isn't a washing machine, Mike. It's a helicopter."

Mike slowly forced his eyes open and looked around: curved walls covered in some sort of green canvas, tanks and boxes, helmets, and a young man in orange overalls with a stethoscope around his neck looking at Mike intently. *It's a Coast Guard helicopter*, he finally realized.

Mike licked his lips. "What happened? Did Jonah sink or something?" Jonah was the name of the submarine he and his friends had built.

“Jonah?” The voice came from someone new. Only then did Mike see Josh sitting on a bench against the other wall. “Don’t you remember what happened?” he yelled over the noise of the chopper.

Mike thought, then shook his head slightly as the young Coast Guardsman shined a light into his eyes. “Hold still please,” the medic said.

Jessica took Mike’s hand in hers. “You slammed into a mountain while rappelling. Why would you think the Jonah sank?”

Mike looked from Jessica to Josh to the medic and back to Jessica. “Because we’re in a *Coast Guard* helicopter.”

“Ahhhh,” Josh said, nodding, “I get it. We’re not at sea, Mike. The Coast Guard had the only chopper that could fly into the canyon we were in. After you got knocked out, I rappelled down to you, then we all lowered you down to the bottom. These guys,” he nodded toward the crew, “flew in and picked us up.”

Mike looked around the cabin at another “coastie” sitting next to Josh, and the backs of two pilots. “Thanks for the rescue.” The medic nodded, but the others couldn’t possibly hear him. A moment later he threw up into a basin the medic was holding. “Sorry about that.” He rinsed his mouth. “I don’t usually get airsick.”

The medic shook his head. “I don’t think it’s airsickness.”

The chopper landed on the roof of Seacrest Hospital, on a circle with a giant red “H.” A male nurse and a female orderly helped unload Mike, then wheeled him down to the Emergency Room. Josh and Jessica followed. Mike’s parents arrived an hour later, after he’d gone through several scans and tests. Mike thought they seemed concerned, but not worried.

“Josh called us from the helicopter,” Mrs. Danford explained, “and told us you were awake and okay.” The Danfords had been over on the Keyport peninsula visiting their friend Admiral Norton when Josh called.

“Awake, yes,” a female doctor said as she entered the room, “but not okay.”

Mike looked up with a wimpy smile. When he spoke it

sounded like he had a mouth full of marshmallows. “Hi doctor Ganguly.”

“Ahh, you sound like you look, Michael – like you have a concussion. Again.”

Dr. Ganguly was originally from India and an expert in injuries to the brain. She had seen Mike on several previous occasions, and had been called in by the emergency room doctor. She greeted Mike’s parents, then sat next to Mike. “I believe I told you last time, Michael, that you must stop getting knocked out.”

Mike smiled bigger. “Have I ever told you that I love your accent?”

“Don’t try to change the subject. Were you wearing a helmet?”

Mike nodded, then winced at the pain nodding caused.

Dr. Ganguly patted him on the arm. “Good boy. At least the helmet should have helped.”

The doctor talked with Mike and his parents for a long time, going over all the test results. Josh and Jessica sat in the background, listening. Cindy had driven Espen over in Josh’s car, and they were in the waiting room.

“So, Michael,” the doctor concluded, “I think you need to stay here for two days, and after that you listen to your mama and papa and do what they say.”

Mike frowned. “Can’t I just go home now and do what they say?”

The doctor shook her head. “I do not think that wise. Brain injuries are very serious, and you’ve had too many of them. You need to be monitored for two days.”

“Could I do that for him?” The voice coming from the open door made everyone look.

“Ricky!” Mike called out. “How’d you get here so fast?”

Ricky shrugged. “Did you forget there’s a new tunnel from my side of the mountain to yours?”

Mike gave a little laugh. “Nope, didn’t forget. Just not used to it yet.”

Dr. Ganguly reached out to shake Ricky’s hand. “It is most

good to see you, Paramedic Two-Arrows.”

Though he looked fifteen, Ricky was seventeen and a paramedic at the indigenous town of Coyote. He had worked with Dr. Ganguly on some of Mike’s previous injuries. “So, if I stayed with Mike for the next couple days to monitor him, can he go home?”

Dr. Ganguly smiled. “I think that would be a most excellent solution.”

Even though it was full of people, the Danford house was quiet that evening. Mike was up in bed, with the lights off and curtains pulled, but downstairs Mrs. Danford made dinner for Josh, Sanjay, Espen, Ricky, Jessica, and Cindy, as well as Pastor Jaydon and Emelia, who had stopped by to check on Mike. For Mike’s sake, they kept their conversations quiet.

After dinner, Ricky, Sanjay, Espen, and Josh took a bowl of soup up to Mike. He sipped it down, then stared at his friends with a look of dread. “So, are you gonna take turns or what?”

They all looked confused, but it was Ricky who spoke. “Take turns at what?”

“At waking me up every hour. I’ve been through this before, you know.”

Ricky laughed. “That’s old-school medicine. New-school medicine says you should get as much sleep as possible and not be disturbed. Unless I see you’re not breathing or something.”

Mike grinned. “Really? I get to sleep all night?”

“Yep.”

Mike’s grin faded. “Then what are you all doing here?”

Josh looked confused. “Whad’ya mean?”

“I mean, it doesn’t take four of you to bring me one bowl of soup, and you’re all sitting there staring at me like you’ve got some big secret.”

Josh looked nervously at the other three, then back at Mike. “Oh, uh, I guess we’re all just kind of curious.”

“About what?”

Josh licked his lips, looked at the others again, then back at Mike. “Well, we were all just kind of wondering what you saw. Like

last time. And every other time you've been knocked out."

Mike laughed, then held his head and groaned from the pain of laughing. "Ohhh, that hurts." He looked back up at his friends. "Well, I wasn't gonna tell you 'till later –"

Josh's face lit up. "So there *was* something!"

Mike ignored the interruption. "But since you've asked, there *was* something strange up there."

Mike didn't continue, and Espen got impatient. "Like *what?*"

"Well, there was a big crack in the wall, and the sun was hitting it just right so I could see inside."

Several more moments of silence passed so Josh urged him on. "And? What did you see?"

Mike took a deep breath, then let it out as if he'd made some big decision. "I saw a giant eye, staring back at me."