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opening extract from

How to Cheat a Dragon's Curse

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published by

Hodder Children's Books

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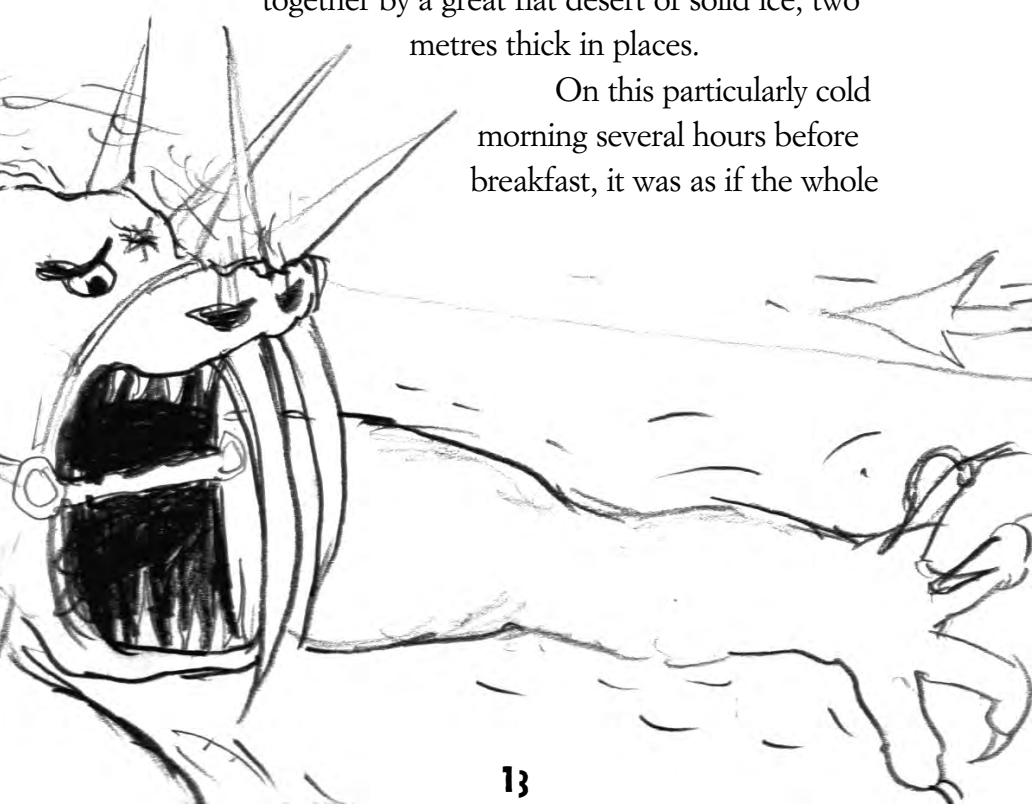
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1. THE HUNTING-WITH-BOWS-AND-ARROWS-ON-SKIS EXPEDITION

Winters were always cold in the Viking Lands.

But this winter was the coldest in a hundred years. It was *so* cold that the Sullen Sea had frozen over, and all the islands in the Inner Isles were now joined together by a great flat desert of solid ice, two metres thick in places.

On this particularly cold morning several hours before breakfast, it was as if the whole





world was holding its breath, frozen in time. The air was as sharp as broken glass, no sound disturbed the pure snowy silence.

No sound, that is, apart from an appalling, mad screaming coming from somewhere out in the middle of the ice.

For a small party of young boys and their teacher from the Hooligan Tribe had set out from the little Isle of Berk where they lived to the Island of Villainy to the south.

Not in a *boat*, of course, for you cannot sail across a frozen sea.

They were speeding far too fast across the ice in an enormous wooden Viking SLEIGH, pulled by six pure white Sabre-Tooth Driver Dragons larger than lions and faster than cheetahs.

The dreadful mad yelling was coming from the man driving the sleigh, Gobber the Belch. Gobber was the teacher in charge of the Pirate Training Programme on Berk, and he was an enormous monster of a man wrapped up in furs who could easily have been mistaken for a grizzly bear with a dirty red beard and an attitude problem.

'GEDDONWITHIT YOU MISERABLE WHITE *WORMS*!' roared Gobber at the Sabre-Tooth Dragons, cracking his whip above their heads. 'I'VE HAD SNAILS THAT HAVE MOVED QUICKER THAN YOU LOT! MY GRANNY COULD SKIP FASTER THAN THIS AND SHE'S A HUNDRED AND FOUR! YEEEEEEHAAH!!'

One gigantic furry arm lashed out with a whip that curled through the air like a great black serpent, the other shook the reins in a lunatic frenzy that sent the Driver Dragons bounding forwards in terrible uncontrolled leaps.

Behind Gobber on the sleigh sat twelve of his pupils.

Ten of these boys were ugly young thugs yelling as loudly in crazy excitement as their teacher.

'YEEEEEEEHAAAAH!' they whooped, as the sleigh hit a snowbank and sailed ten metres through the air and then slammed back down on the ice with stomach-churning violence.

'*YEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEHAAAAAAH!!*'

The last two boys were smaller than the rest and a lot less excited.

'I'm glad,' gasped Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, as the sleigh tipped over wildly on one runner with an awful screech and spray of ice, 'I'm glad I didn't have breakfast because I think it would have come up again…'

Hiccup is, in fact, the Hero of this story, although you would never have guessed it to look at him. He was small, and red-haired, and very, very ordinary.

Hiccup's best friend Fishlegs, a skinny runner-bean of a boy with asthma and a squint, wasn't really listening. He was praying to Thor with his eyes squeezed tight shut.

'Please, Thor,' begged Fishlegs, 'please make it stop…'

Fishlegs's prayer was about to be answered.

The sleigh was approaching the great black cliffs

of the Visithugs Territories far too impossibly fast for it to stop in time…

'Don't open your eyes, Fishlegs,' advised Hiccup.

Gobber the Belch reared up and with a mighty roar of 'WOOOOOOAH!!!' leant back so far pulling on the reins that he was nearly horizontal. The Sabre-Tooths came to a plunging halt so sharply that the sleigh wheeled round in a mad arc… they were going to slam into that cliff at such a speed they would all be smashed to splinters…

'AAAAARGH!' yelled Hiccup, shutting his eyes too.



The sleigh screeched to a quivering halt. Hiccup opened his eyes again. Astonishingly, they were still alive. But the smooth black wall of the cliff was only centimetres away from Hiccup's cheek. Hiccup held on to the rock for a second to help himself stop shaking.

'RIGHT!' bellowed Gobber, clambering out of the sleigh entirely unconcerned. 'WHAT ARE YOU ALL DOING SKULKING IN THERE? GET OUT AND STAND TO ATTENTION YOU PATHETIC DRIBBLES OF EARWIG DROPPINGS!'

Yawning and chattering, all twelve boys unpacked skis from the back of the sleigh, and attached them to the bottom of their furry boots.

For six months of the year the Vikings lived under SNOW… so a Viking Warrior had to be just as good at SKIING as he was at SAILING.

This was a Hunting-with-Bows-and-Arrows-on-Skis Expedition. The boys had to ski down Mount Villainy, the largest mountain in the Inner Isles, shooting with their arrows as many Semi-Spotted Snowpeckers as they could.

'I'm going to get at least FIFTY,' boasted Snotface Snotlout, a tall thug of a boy with huge nostrils and a moustache like a little furry caterpillar squirming on his upper lip.



'SILENCE!' screamed Gobber, cracking his whip.

There was absolute silence immediately. It's a curious fact, but a heavily armed, mad, six-and-a-half-foot teacher holding a whip *tends* to get his class's attention.

'*I* will be staying here to guard the sleigh,' yelled Gobber. 'Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third will be in charge of the Hunting Party when you get to the mountain.'

Ten of the boys groaned and turned round to look furiously at Hiccup.

ALL of them reckoned they would make better leaders than Hiccup.

Snotlout had won the Senseless Violence Cup three years in a row. Wartihog could smash chairs to pieces with his bare fists. Dogsbreath the Duhbrain burped so loud he shattered glass.

Small, skinny and unimportant, only Hiccup looked like he had no leadership skills whatsoever. He stood on one leg apologetically and this made his skis cross and he fell over.

'Why does HICCUP get to be in charge AGAIN?' demanded Snotface Snotlout through gritted teeth.

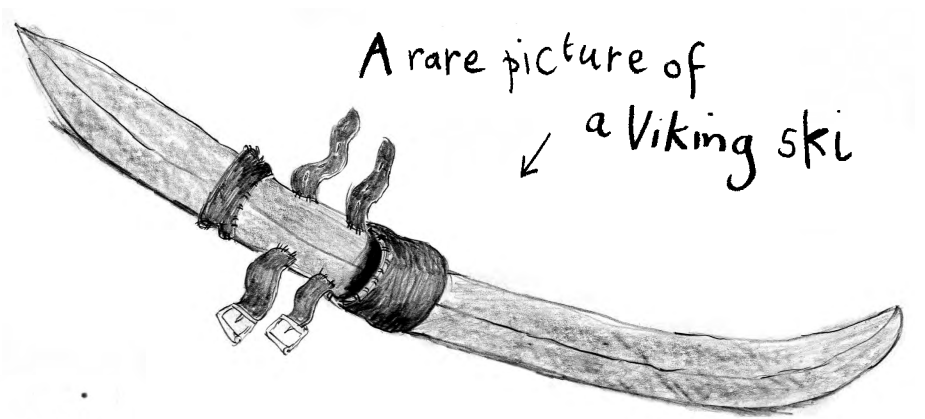
'Because Hiccup is the son of the CHIEF and *one day* he will be in charge PERMANENTLY, Thor help us all…' explained Gobber, helping Hiccup to his feet and dusting the snow off him with one hairy hand.

'Any questions?' boomed Gobber.

Fishlegs put up his hand. 'Just a *small* point, sir,' he said. 'How are we going to climb *up* the mountain in the first place?'

'The Sabre-Tooth Dragons will DRAG you to the top ON your skis,' replied Gobber. 'It shouldn't take more than half an hour.'

Fishlegs and Hiccup looked dubiously at the great white creatures crouching dangerously on the ice, tongues spilling out over teeth as sharp as swords, cat-like eyes gazing at their small human Masters with the purest hatred.



'So that's that, then,' said Gobber. 'I shall wait for you here and see you all in three hours' time… I really need a NAP… way too early for me…'

Gobber settled himself on the furs of the sleigh and gave an enormous yawn. 'Oh, and one more thing… as you know, nobody lives on the island of Villainy, but the island of Hysteria is just next door and I should warn you that at this time of year there *may* be Hysterics about…'



'HYSTERICS???' squeaked Fishlegs, somewhat, well, *hysterically.* 'But the Hysterics are trapped safely in Hysteria, aren't they?'

HYSTERICS, I should explain, were a particularly bloodthirsty and lunatic Tribe of Vikings. Even tough Tribes like the Visithugs were scared of the Hysterics. Hiccup had never actually *met* a Hysteric, but he knew they were renowned for killing you first, and asking questions later.



Normally they didn't trouble the other Tribes, however, because three-quarters of the island ended in dizzyingly high cliffs plunging straight into deep seas, and on the north coast was the Wrath of Thor, where an impossibly huge and monstrous Sea Dragon called the DOOMFANG lived.

The good news about this was that nobody could get into Hysteria, and even more importantly, the Hysterics could not get out.

Except at this time of year…

'Because at *this* time of year,' boomed Gobber happily, 'the Wrath of Thor is all frozen over, and the Doomfang is trapped under two metres solid of ice. So if you *do* happen to come across a Hysteric – and I'm SURE you won't, it's far too early in the morning – I suggest you ski like fury in the opposite direction.'

And just like that, Gobber fell asleep.

A page from one of Hiccup's notebooks from when he was much younger →

Dragon Hibernation

Most dragons hibernate in the winter. Big ones go in a cave but smaller ones dig themselves a hole to sleep in, and the deeper the hole, the colder the winter will be.



← A Common-or-Garden dragon hibernating for the winter.

Some dragons, like Saber-Tooth Driver dragons, do not hibernate at all, and they are called evergreens, and this is a funny name for them because Saber Tooth Driver dragons are always white.

Sabre-Tooth Driver Dragons

Sabre-Tooths are enormous lion-like dragons that do not hibernate, and are therefore very useful to the Vikings for pulling their sleighs, and dragging them up mountains during the winter. They have been known to eat their owners.



~STATISTICS~

COLOURS: *Always white*
ARMED WITH: *Those terrible Sabre-Teeth and super-scary spikes on head... 9*
HUNTING ABILITY: *Terrifying to watch... 9*
SPEED: *Not as quick as some, and their heavy bulk makes them slow to manoeuvre... 6*
FEAR AND FIGHT FACTOR: *Alarming... 9*