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Oliver's First Dragon

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A Dragon Defence League Prequel

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Oliver's First Dragon



Sun sparkles on the snow and a stiff breeze picks up flakes and sends them into the air like twinkling lights. Oliver adjusts his ski goggles and gives Dad a thumbs-up. Excitement fizzles in his stomach like ginger beer.

"Since this is your first time on the Alta Chutes, I want you to stay with me," Dad says. "We'll go slow until you're more confident."

Slow is exactly the opposite of what Oliver wants. He wants to fly down the mountain like he has wings. What's the point of skiing if it isn't to go *fast*?

"I'm good, Dad. We don't have to go slow."

"Ah. Perhaps I should have reworded that—we'll go slow until *I'm* confident you won't end up in a crumpled heap at the bottom."

Good thing the tinted goggles hide Oliver's eye roll. "Come on. Let's go!"

"Just stay behind me." Dad pushes off and dives down the slope. Oliver whoops and follows.

His skis hum over the snow as he traces Dad's first lazy zig zag. He holds his stance tight and steady. This is too easy. "Faster, Dad!"

Dad glances back with a smile and picks up his pace. He is every bit the speed demon Oliver is. If he hadn't promised Mum to bring

him home in one piece, he'd be flying down the mountain, hitting all the jumps along the way.

It's easy to pick up speed on the steep slope. Snow tumbles down the mountain around him and wind whips at his cheeks. His teeth freeze in the icy air, but he can't suppress his grin.

Dad must have forgotten his promise, because soon they are flying steeply downhill, dodging to the left and right of rock outcrops and arrowing through snowy chutes so narrow he could touch the rocks on either side.

This is skiing! The fizzing in his stomach spreads until he's buzzing all the way to the tips of his fingers and toes. He bounces along, his skis seeming to barely touch the snow.

Would Dad notice if he did a jump? Out in front, it's unlikely. He's choosing the easiest route, for Oliver's sake, but Oliver doesn't want easy. He wants *air*.

He veers from Dad's tracks and cuts straight towards a snowy outcrop. He's good at the groomed jumps on the lower slopes and this looks like the perfect jump. Maybe a little on the steep side, but how hard can it be? He adjusts his stance for the take-off. This is going to be *epic*!

A little crouch, and suddenly the ground falls away from his feet. His stomach swoops as he soars out into the air, skis spraying sparkly bits of snow around him as he seems suspended for a moment in mid-air. Time freezes, and Oliver enjoys that moment of weightlessness he loves. Arcing downward, his stomach clenches. This jump is a *lot* bigger than any he's done before. He's a long way from the ground, and his landing will be on a slope determined to send him hurtling downhill on impact.

He tenses for the landing, scanning the ground below for rocks. He'll have to veer left quickly to avoid crashing into a boulder.

Kathunk! His skis hit the snow. Time unfreezes, and he's moving again, frantically trying to avoid the boulder in front of him. He leans into the turn with a grin. *No problem!*

But as he whips past the boulder, something catches his left ski. Before he knows what's happening, he's flipping head over heels through the air, skis flying off in different directions.

He rolls to a stop half buried in snow. One breath, two breaths. Nothing hurts. The shock and surprise wears off and he sits up laughing. "That. Was. Awesome!" He glances down the slope. Dad is far away—he hasn't seen Oliver's jump. *Yes!*

He stands, brushes snow off himself and cleans his goggles. Then he looks around for his skis. One lies nearby—a bright red slash on the snow. The other is nowhere to be seen.

Oliver trudges in widening circles, scanning for the missing ski. Where could it have gone? *Aha!* Ten metres away he catches sight of a red ski tip peeking out of the snow at the base of a cliff. He wades through the snow into the shadow of the rocks. Only when he's out of the sun's glare does he notice the details of the cliff.

A narrow jagged crack runs vertically up the rock. It's wide enough at the bottom for a person to squeeze through.

"Cool! I wonder if it leads to a cave." After retrieving his ski, Oliver steps over to the crack and peers in. He can't see a thing until he remembers to take his tinted goggles off. Even without the goggles it's dark inside the crack. He steps in and lets his eyes adjust for a moment. Is there something sparkling deep in the crack? Surely there aren't glow-worms up here in the middle of winter, are there?

Something dark shifts deep inside the crack—a rumbling, slithering sound and a ripple of light. Oliver catches a glimpse of dull green and the sparkle vanishes. The faint smell of sulphur prickles his nose. He sucks in a breath. Could it be ...?

He yelps in surprise as someone grabs his elbow and yanks him out of the crack.

“Dad! I think there’s a—”

Dad silences him with a scowl and drags him further from the crack, back into the sunshine. When they’re a good twenty metres from the cliff, his father turns him, gripping his upper arms. Oliver opens his mouth to share his excitement, but the look on Dad’s face squashes every bit of it.

“Oliver. How many times have I told you to *never* go poking around in random caves?”

At least he’s not in trouble for his jump. “I didn’t mean to. My ski fell off and it was over there. But Dad—I think I saw a—”

“Yes. You saw a dragon. That’s exactly why you don’t go poking around caves. You’re lucky I pulled you out when I did. Sandstorm tolerates skiers, but not in her lair.”

“Sandstorm? You *know* this dragon? And you haven’t killed it?”

Dad squirms a little. He’s a dragon slayer. Oliver and Mum know it but everyone else thinks he just owns a book shop. The existence of dragons in New Zealand is a secret, and the dragon slayers’ job is to keep people safe without causing the panic that the existence of dragons would surely cause if it was known they lived all over the country.

But if Dad knows about this dragon and hasn’t killed it ... what’s up with that?

“The Fraternal Order of Dragon Slayers doesn’t know about Sandstorm. She keeps to herself and tends not to eat people or livestock. There’s no need for anyone to be concerned with her unless she causes trouble.”

“So ... she’s friendly?”

Dad’s grip tightens. “No. She’s not friendly and she is dangerous. She leaves people alone because we leave her alone. But nosy boys

poking into her lair will make her angry. And if she starts causing trouble, I *will* be sent out to kill her.”

“Ooh! Could I come with you?” Oliver never stops asking to join Dad on his dragon slaying trips.

“No.” It’s Dad’s unwavering response. “Sandstorm is a New Zealand green dragon. She’s probably twenty metres long and could kill both of us with a breath. You wouldn’t stand a chance against her and even I would struggle.” He sighs and a cloud passes over his eyes. “Some day a dragon may kill me. But I’m not ready for that. I don’t want to leave you and your mum alone. And facing your mum would be worse than facing a dragon if I let anything happen to you. Understand? No mucking around where dragons are concerned.”

Oliver slumps. He doesn’t want Dad to be killed by a dragon either. But knowing dragons are out here in the mountains and he can’t see them or even talk about them is worse than when Mum makes dumplings to take to her book club. The smell fills the house and makes Oliver’s mouth water, but he isn’t allowed to eat any.

Dad ruffles Oliver’s hair and shoots him a sly grin. “You jumped, didn’t you? That’s why your ski flew off.”

Caught! “Well, I ...”

Dad laughs. “I won’t tell Mum if you don’t. Come on. Race you to the bottom.”

Oliver grins. As Dad adjusts his goggles and pushes off, Oliver takes one last glance back at the crack in the cliff.

Some day. Some day he’ll see a dragon, and not just a glimpse through a crack, regardless of what Dad says.

He turns and shoots down the mountain.



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