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opening extract from

How to Speak Dragonese

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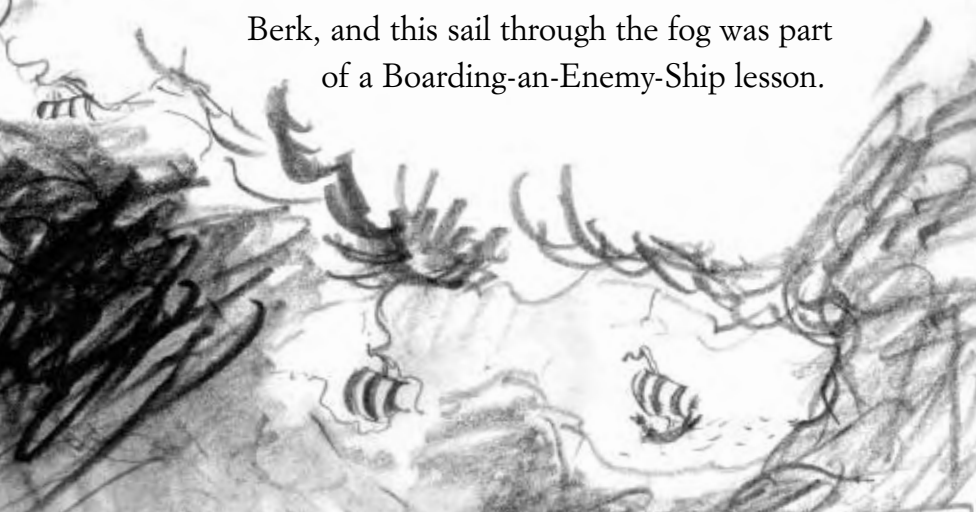
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1. THE BOARDING-AN-ENEMY-SHIP LESSON

Once upon a foggy day in a cold, cold country long, long ago, seven small Viking boats floated through the Sea-Known-as-Woden's-Bathtub. The fog had swallowed up the Peaceable Country to the north, and the Isle of Berk to the west, and, indeed, had swallowed up so much of everything, that it was as if the boats were sky-boats, and had left the earth entirely, and were sailing through cloud banks way, way up in the air.

In the first boat, *The Fat Boar*, sat Gobber the Belch, a six and a half foot giant in teeny-weeny hairy shorts, who had leg muscles so enormous they had muscles of their own, and a beard like a hedgehog struck by lightning. Gobber was the teacher in charge of the Pirate Training Programme on the Isle of Berk, and this sail through the fog was part of a Boarding-an-Enemy-Ship lesson.



The six boy-sized boats that were following *The Fat Boar* each had two boys in them, and these boys were Gobber's pupils, young members of the Tribe of the Hairy Hooligans.

'OK, YOU DISGUSTING GLOBS OF GIRLY SNOT!' yelled Gobber, in a bellow so loud it could be heard several miles away. 'WE ARE NOW GOING TO PRACTISE BOARDING AN ENEMY SHIP ON THE EASY TARGET OF A PEACEABLE FISHING BOAT... CAN ANYONE REMEMBER THE FIRST RULE OF AMBUSH?'

'TAKE THE ENEMY BY SURPRISE, SIR!' shouted out Snotface Snotlout, a tall, unpleasantly smug-looking boy with gigantic nostrils and the beginnings of a small moustache.

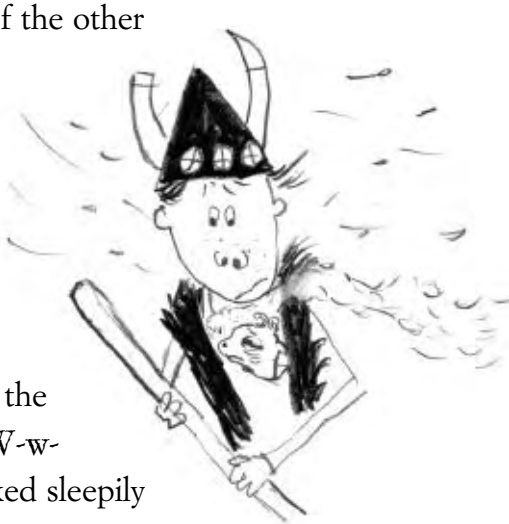
'Very good, Snotlout,' purred Gobber the Belch, and he continued at full volume: 'IN A FOG THIS THICK YOUR VICTIM SHIP WILL NOT HAVE A CHANCE OF SEEING YOU COMING!'

They can hear *us, though*, thought Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third, gloomily trying to peer through the fog, *unless, of course, we have the luck to stumble across some completely* deaf *Peaceable fishermen…*



Hiccup Horrendous Haddock the Third is, rather surprisingly, the Hero of this story. I say surprisingly, because the first thing you noticed about Hiccup was how very, very ordinary he was. He was on the small side, with a slightly freckled, absolutely average face that would always get overlooked in a crowd.

His dragon, Toothless, who was at that moment asleep down the front of Hiccup's shirt, was just as average as his owner. The only truly remarkable thing about Toothless was how remarkably *small* he was. He was at least half the size of the other boys' dragons.



And, as you can imagine, this wasn't something to boast about.

Gobber's shouting woke the little dragon up. He poked his nose out of the neck of Hiccup's tunic. 'W-w-what's happening?' he asked sleepily in Dragonese.*

* Dragons spoke Dragonese. Only Hiccup could understand this fascinating language.

'Oh, nothing unusual,' Hiccup whispered back, scratching Toothless behind the horns. (He loved that.) 'Gobber is shouting, Snotlout is showing off, and we're all out here floating in the fog and the cold when we could be tucked up in front of a roasting fire... you can go back to sleep if you like.'

Toothless chuckled. 'You V-v-vikings are as m-m-mad as mackerel,' he said. 'W-w-wake Toothless up when it's l-l-lunchtime...' And he burrowed back down to the nice warm spot just next to Hiccup's left armpit and closed his eyes again.

Hiccup was sharing his boat with his best friend Fishlegs, who was even skinnier than Hiccup and looked a lot like a daddy-long-legs with asthma and a squint. Fishlegs put his hand up in the air.



'It's all very well that they can't see us coming, sir,' he pointed out logically, 'but how are *we* going to see them so we can board *them* in the first place?'

'Easy-peasy, o plankton-brain,' boomed Gobber, very pleased with himself. 'Peaceable fishing boats are always followed by flocks of Lesser



Blackbacked Seadragons, hoping for a bite. All you have to do is follow the racket they make and you'll have found yourself a boat. You then simply board the boat yelling the Hooligan War Cry: repeat after me… YAAAAAAAAAH!' yelled Gobber the Belch.

'YAAAAAAAAAH!' yelled ten of the boys back at him, brandishing their swords like maniacs.

'Yaaaaah,' repeated Hiccup and Fishlegs, without much enthusiasm.

'The Peaceables are terrified of us Hooligans, Woden only knows why… Right, lads – you steal one of their helmets to prove you have completed the exercise, and report back to me. THIS IS GOING TO BE LIKE BURGLING BERRIES FROM A BABY!' boomed Gobber the Belch.

'Oh, I nearly forgot. Silly me… ' Gobber laughed carelessly. 'The one thing you *do* have to bear in mind is that ON NO ACCOUNT SHOULD YOU LEAVE THIS BAY. This is VERY IMPORTANT because just to the south of here runs the Summer Current, a warm stream of water, and you all know what lives in the Summer Current…'

'Sharkworms,' gulped Fishlegs.

'That's right, Fishlegs,' boomed Gobber. 'I know Hiccup, our natural history expert, can tell us something about Sharkworms.'

'Certainly sir,' replied Hiccup, delighted to be asked a question about his favourite subject, dragons. He took out of his pocket a small scruffy notebook with *How to Speak Dragonese* written in large scrawly letters on the front. In this book Hiccup kept notes on the Dragonese language and descriptions of the various species of dragons and their habits.

'Well,' said Hiccup, having trouble reading his own handwriting, 'Sharkworms are a kind of dragon that look a lot like sharks. The adults can grow to about six metres in length, they have at least five rows of teeth—'

'GET ON WITH IT, BOY!' yelled Gobber.

'They are highly carnivorous and they not only scavenge off ships but climb aboard and attack you there… On land they can easily outrun a man… I would suggest, sir, that if there was even a *chance* we could run into Sharkworms we should leave the area immediately.'

'For Thor's sake, boy,' grinned Gobber the Belch, 'with that kind of attitude you might never leave the house. I'm training you to be *pirates*, not *softies*.'

'What happens if we get lost, sir?' pleaded Fishlegs.

'Lost?' snorted Gobber. 'LOST! Vikings don't get LOST!'

'Honestly, sir,' sneered Snotface Snotlout, 'I don't know why you don't throw Hiccup the Useless and his fishlegged failure of a friend out of the Tribe completely. They're a disgrace to all of us.'

Hiccup and Fishlegs looked miserable.

'I mean look at their *boat*, sir,' continued the sneering Snotlout. 'We're *Vikings*, sir, the greatest shipbuilders the Ancient World has ever known, sir. A raft like that just makes us look ridiculous.'

'You think you're so clever, Snotlout,' retorted Hiccup determinedly, 'but this boat can go a lot faster than you think. Looks aren't everything, you know…'

Unfortunately, Snotlout had a point.

The Hopeful Puffin was more of a floating accident than an actual boat.

She had been built by Hiccup and Fishlegs in Shipbuilding lessons, and they were both hopeless at woodwork. Something kept on going wrong with the design and instead of being long and thin like a Viking ship should be, she had ended up fat and almost completely round. Her mast was too long and leaned lopsidedly to the left, so that in a strong wind she went round in circles.

She also had a leak.

Every half an hour Fishlegs or Hiccup had to remember to bail out the seawater that had collected in the bottom of the boat with Hiccup's helmet (Fishlegs's helmet also had a leak).

Gobber the Belch looked at *The Hopeful Puffin.*

'Mmm,' said Gobber thoughtfully. 'You might have a point, Snotlout. NOW!' he continued briskly.

'At the sound of my horn, the exercise will begin.'

He raised a curly-wurly bugle to his lips.

'Ooooh, jumping jellyfish,' moaned Fishlegs, 'I HATE the Pirate Training Programme! We're going to get lost… we're going to sink… we're going to get eaten slowly by Sharkworms…'

'S-C-R-E-E-E-ECH!' screamed the bugle.




The
Hopeful
Puffin