

## A GOOD DAY FOR DRAGONS

By Rick Hautala

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THE WAVES HISSED and writhed like a nest of snakes as they washed across the sand, leaving behind dirt-flecked foam that bubbled angrily for a moment before it disappeared. The dragon walked along the beach close to the water's edge, leaving huge, round craters wherever he stepped. The holes were soon swept away by the next rush of the rising tide. The dragon's name was Benedict—Benny, for short. The boy who sat confidently astride Benny's back between his large, leathery wings was called Alfie.

The day was just about perfect . . . a good day for dragons. If it hadn't been for a very slight chill that blew in off the water, it would have been beyond compare. But now the sun was dropping low in the western sky, casting Benny and Alfie's shadow across the sand dunes like a wash of deep blue ink. The salty tang in the air was laced with adventure, but so far Benny and Alfie had been disappointed. They had spent the entire afternoon lying on the beach, enjoying the sun and sand, and taking an occasional dip in the ocean; but all day, they had been expecting the pirates to return to Mockingbird Bay. And all day, there hadn't been even the slightest hint of their ship on the horizon.

"Maybe we scared them away for good yesterday," Alfie suggested, leaning close to Benny's ear so the dragon could hear him above the gentle roar of the surf.

"I doubt it," Benny replied in a deep, booming voice that sounded like distant thunder. "They don't scare very easily."

"Neither do we."

Benny paused and turned to look out to sea. The ocean heaved with tall, white-crested swells that rippled like flame in the light of the setting late afternoon sun. Out past South Port Head, the sky and water blazed with a dazzling display of orange and yellow that blended so perfectly that it was all but impossible to tell where one ended and the other began. The setting sun shone warmly on their faces, the last traces of this

near-perfect summer day. Alfie sighed as he wiped a thin sheen of sweat from his forehead with his bare forearm. His other hand rested gently on the hilt of the wooden sword he wore under his belt.

“What if they landed on the other side of the headlands?” Alfie nodded toward the huge, rounded hill that jutted out into the ocean. Waves crashed against the rocks, sending up white plumes of surf. “What if they’re sneaking up behind us right now?”

In spite of the warm afternoon, a shiver rippled like an earth tremor through Benny. He belched. He did that whenever he got nervous. It was usually followed by a brief burst of flame from his nostrils, but thankfully, that didn’t happen this time. Benny realized it would have been all right if it had. He was facing out to sea, and he wouldn’t have burned anything except perhaps a swatch of sand and seaweed, or maybe he would have made the seawater boil and bubble a bit. When he really let loose, his breath was hot enough to turn beach sand into tiny beads of glass, which Alfie simply loved. He told Benny he took those glass beads home to his mother as gifts, and she strung them in her hair and around her neck. But Benny had never seen Alfie’s mother, and he began to wonder if she existed at all.

But glass beads and burned kelp and invisible mothers were the furthest things from either of their minds.

The pirates, led by the vicious captain known as Skipper Black, had come ashore yesterday morning, shortly after sunrise. It had taken all of Benny and Alfie’s bravery and skill as warriors to defend the beach. Only after a hard-fought battle that had lasted for hours and hours, when the sun was at its hottest, did the pirates finally retreat to their ship and sail away. Benny was so exhausted from the fighting that he didn’t have any flames left to burn the pirate ship before it sailed out of the bay. Alfie reminded him to save some of his fiery breath if they showed up later, but yesterday afternoon had passed peacefully, as had today, and evening was drawing on.

“Should we go around the headlands and check?” Benny asked, turning his head, which was the size of a small pony, so he could look back at Alfie.

Alfie cupped his chin with his hand and was silent for a long moment as he stared out across the glittering water. The sunlight was so dazzling that it would be easy not to see the pirate ship heaving over the waves until it was too late. Dark red clouds were closing in fast, looking like the slashes of angry claw marks across the sky. Alfie had a

far-away look in his eyes, and Benny wondered if his friend could see better than he could. Alfie claimed that he could, but Benny wasn't always sure he trusted everything Alfie said. He'd been known to exaggerate on occasion . . . like the time he told Benny about the fairy fruit he had stolen when he surprised a group of fairies having a midnight picnic.

What was a little boy doing out in the woods at midnight? Benny wanted to know. And if he had eaten fairy fruit, he wouldn't be here today to talk about it.

Before Alfie could answer him, they got their answer when a cannon boomed from somewhere far off in the distance. The sound echoed within the small, sheltered cove, so at first neither Benny nor Alfie was sure from which direction it came.

"From the north," Alfie said, pointing in that direction, but Benny shook his scaly green head and said, "No. From the south."

"Are you sure?"

"A dragon's ears are much sharper than his eyes," Benny said knowingly. "And his eyes are sharper than an eagle's."

His shoulders and back grew rigid with tension. His wings, which were tucked up close to his body, began to twitch.

"What say we fly there?" Alfie said, his voice pitched high with excitement. He was never happier than when they were flying together . . . especially if Benny was also breathing flames down on their enemies. Yesterday and—hopefully—today it was pirates, but the day before that—and maybe the day after tomorrow—it would be Indians or aliens from outer space. It didn't matter *who* they were fighting. Whenever they were in the air, Alfie whooped and hollered and waved his arms with delight as Benny soared above the earth and breathed his fiery death upon their mortal foe *du jour*.

"I suppose we could go up and have a look around," Benny said. He knew how much Alfie loved to fly and was teasing him. "Are you sure you want to?"

Alfie nodded with excitement lighting his eyes.

"Hold on tightly, then."

Alfie clung to Benny's neck and dug his knees into the dragon's flanks as, with a few quick hops followed by several powerful strokes of his wings, the dragon became airborne. The ground receded at a rapid, dizzying rate. The higher up into the sky they went, the stronger the wind blew in their faces. Alfie's long, dark hair was pulled straight

back, and he narrowed his eyes to mere slits so he could see better. The patchwork of sand and sea grass and surrounding forest below them and the wide ocean receded, grew smaller and smaller by the second.

“Look!” Alfie called out with delight. “I can see my house from here!”

Benny chuckled. Alfie always said that even though he had never invited Benny to his house, and all he could see for miles around was sand and sea and forest.

“Do you see the pirates?” Benny asked.

Alfie took a moment to look around, and then, raising his arm and pointing—even though everyone knows it is not polite to point—he cried out, “Over there!”

Benny turned in a wide, swooping circle and scanned the bay until he saw the ship. It was anchored close to shore on the lee side of the headlands, almost—but not quite—hidden from sight in the gathering gloom. The ship’s brightly painted spars glowed like fire in the setting sun. On the deck, the pirates were swarming about in a flurry of activity. It didn’t take Benny or Alfie long to figure out what they were doing. They were priming their cannons, getting them ready to shoot.

“Do you think they’re going to shoot at us?” Alfie shouted.

The wind whistled past their ears, making it all but impossible for either of them to hear, but Benny caught the gist. He considered for a moment what to do, and then he nodded sagely.

“Why else would they get their guns ready?”

“Maybe they’re going to attack the town,” Alfie said. From this high up, they couldn’t see the tiny town of South Port, but it was supposed to be just a short distance down the coast.

Alfie and Benny didn’t have long to find out what the pirates intended. Far down below them, they heard one of the pirates shout a command as he pointed up at them with the hook that used to be his left hand. A black tricorner hat with a billowing white ostrich plume that draped down his back identified Skipper Black. Within seconds, several of the pirates rolled the cannon backward, angling it up . . . up . . . up into the sky. One man, a short, squat fellow wearing a red and white striped jersey and canvas pants torn off at the knees, touched the fuse with a torch. A second or two later, a puff of smoke issued from the mouth of the cannon. The cannonball hurled past them with an angry scream, close enough so both boy and dragon felt the wind as it passed. Then,

as though from the bottom of a deep well, there came an echoing boom that was actually more frightening than almost getting hit by a flying cannonball.

“Let’s get out of here! Quick!” Alfie shouted, but Benny ignored him. Swooping first to the left and then to the right, he gave his wings several mighty flaps until he was heading straight toward the pirate ship.

“Are you crazy?” Alfie shouted.

His knees dug into Benny’s back, but Benny ignored him as he stalled in the air and then plummeted straight down, heading toward the pirate ship like an arrow in flight. The wind shrieked in their ears.

On board the ship, there was a flurry of action as the pirates scrambled for their weapons. Guns and swords and knives flashed like flames in the setting sun. The clatter of metal against metal rose into the sky. Alfie clung tightly to Benny’s neck, positive that the pirates would get in a few good shots before they were within range of Benny’s fiery breath.

“We could be hurt!” Alfie screamed. He didn’t say the word “killed” because no one ever died when they fought the pirates . . . except pirates.

Below them, a few muskets smoked, and lead balls whistled past Benny on left and right. The pirates’ upraised swords made the deck of the ship bristle like a silver porcupine. A mighty roar went up from the scurvy crew as Benny swooped down on them, gathering speed as he fell. Benny waited until he was less than fifty feet away from the bow of the ship before unleashing his fire. Flames belched from his nostrils and mouth, roaring like a tornado as they swept across the deck.

Moving as fast as he was and coming almost straight down, the heat of Benny’s breath washed back over them, but both dragon and boy watched, laughing, as the pirates’ shabby clothes caught fire, and they screamed as they dove overboard to extinguish the flames. The deck was set afire, and those few pirates who were still on board tried mightily to put them out, but Benny and Alfie both saw the small line of flame that ran across the wooden planking, heading toward the stack of gunpowder barrels.

“Oh-h-h . . . this is going to be fun,” Benny said, loud enough for Alfie to hear him above the sounds of mayhem on the ship. They swooped to the right, swinging out over the water past the headlands. Benny was braking and just coming about when the

first barrel of gunpowder exploded. A terribly bright flash of orange lit up the sheltered cove just before a thunderous roar shook the earth and sky. Alfie clung tightly to Benny's back, and they were both laughing as they watched one keg of gunpowder after another go off like a string of huge firecrackers.

Pirates howled and wailed, their burning clothes turning them into tiny comets as they flew through the air and then landed with loud sizzling hisses in the ocean. All the while, Skipper Black stood as though rooted to the deck, glaring up at them. He raised his good hand in a fist and shook it at them.

"Come down here!" he shouted. "Come down here 'n fight, if ye be a man!"

Both Alfie and Benny chuckled because, between them, there wasn't anything close to a man . . . They were just a boy and his dragon. . . or a dragon and his boy.

"Shall we oblige him?" Alfie asked in a voice that was too high pitched to sound really brave. But the expression on his face, in his eyes, was one of grim determination.

"Oblige," Benny echoed. "Such a fancy word for what you and I want to do to Skipper Black."

Benny sailed around in a wide arc over the burning pirate ship. A huge column of black smoke spiraled into the darkening sky, bending toward the shore with the breeze. Some men, their hair and clothes singed, their faces smudged with soot, splashed about in the water while others still on deck struggled to extinguish the last of the flames.

"Well, it doesn't seem very sporting just to blast them with fire and not give them a chance, now. Does it?" Alfie said.

"Do you have your sword?" Benny asked.

He knew Alfie always carried his sword strapped to his side, but truth to tell, it was a rather pitiful sword. It was made of two pieces of wood. The "blade" was a flat piece of wood that would better serve as part of a picket fence, while the crossguard was a small piece of a tree branch tied into place with several loops of yellowing string.

Without another word between them, Benny stalled in the air and then dropped lightly onto the heaving deck of the pirate ship. The crew made a collective *oohing* sound as they drew back. The weapons in their hands were all but forgotten as Benny and Alfie eyed Skipper Black.

“Well, so ye be not so cowardly as I thought,” Skipper Black said as he approached them. His good hand dropped to the hilt of his sword. There was a loud rasp of metal as he drew it out. In the gathering gloom of evening, the blade appeared unnaturally bright. Benny and Alfie wondered if there might be some magic in the pirate captain’s blade, but Alfie slid to the deck from Benny’s shoulders and stood up straight, his feet braced widely apart. A faint smile twitched the corners of his mouth as he faced the captain. He was secure with Benny at his back.

“Are you sure you can beat him?” Benny asked, leaning his huge head close to Alfie’s ear and whispering so as not to be heard. “I could shoot flames all across the deck and destroy the entire ship, and we could fly away.”

“No,” Alfie said. “It wouldn’t be sporting. I want to fight him.”

He gripped the hilt of his wooden sword so tightly his knuckles went white. The fire in his eyes was much brighter than the lingering glow of the setting sun in the west.

Without another word, the pirate captain and the boy closed the distance between them. There was a loud *clank* as their swords crossed, and then they set to it. Metal clanged against wood as man and boy fought without mercy. They slashed and parried, lunging and ducking slashing blows. Chips of wood flew from Alfie’s blade at the same time his rapid strikes put deep dents into the metal blade of Skipper Black’s sword. Alfie fought with a grim determination, his arm swinging tirelessly back and forth, his wooden blade whistling as it sliced through the air.

They pressed each other back and forth, moving gingerly across the charred wooden deck. The crew gave way, allowing them plenty of room to fight, but it was clear after a while that Skipper Black was tiring. He began to give ground.

“Go! Go! Finish him!” Benny called out, urging his friend on.

For a moment, Benny was afraid Skipper Black might have an evil trick up his sleeve. What if he was backing up only to lure Alfie into a trap? But the look in the pirate chief’s eyes was gradually changing from angry determination to concern and then to gathering fear.

It was obvious he knew he was losing. . . and to a mere *boy!*

Their blades whooshed and sliced back and forth. The pirate crew was silent as they and Benny watched, captivated by the spectacle. Alfie kept moving forward slowly, steadily pressing his advantage. His bare feet inched across the deck, nimbly avoiding

the charred remains of ropes, weapons, and barrel staves. Skipper Black's eyes widened as he fell back with a look of growing desperation.

"Ye think you can get the better of me, do yah?" Skipper Black said between black and broken teeth.

He may have sounded brave, but his sword arm was dropping lower by the second as fatigue took its toll. Alfie didn't let up. He kept coming at him, his arm swinging back and forth like a harvester, slashing . . . cutting . . .

"I don't *think* I can," Alfie said through clenched teeth. "I *know* I can."

With that, he suddenly lunged forward and swung at Skipper Black with all his might, sweeping the pirate's sword from his hand. It twisted end over end as it flew out over the water and then went *plunk* into the sea, disappearing below the surface with barely a ripple. Skipper Black stopped and looked at Alfie with amazement. Then, without a word, he dropped to the deck on both knees and raised his hands while lowering his head.

"I yield," he said in a low, broken voice. "Curs'd be ye."

A collective gasp went up from the pirate crew. In all their battles, in all their raids, they had never seen Skipper Black bested . . . and by a mere *boy!*

"Do with me what ye will."

Alfie didn't say a word as he approached his victim. Sweat beaded his forehead, glistening like dew. He was breathing fast, but his face looked as fresh as the morning sun compared to the abject defeat etched on Skipper Black's face.

"What I want is—"

"*Yoo-hoo!*"

Everyone looked around as the sound of someone's voice echoed in the stillness that had dropped like a curtain over the deck of the pirate's ship. Alfie and Benny froze where they stood. After a breath, they turned and looked each other straight in the eyes.

"Oh, no," Benny said. "Don't tell me—Is it—?" Alfie's voice choked off.

"*Hello . . . Where are you?*"

The voice—a female voice—sliced through the gathering gloom. Skipper Black stood up and looked at Alfie, his face floating like a pale moon in the deepening darkness.

“What be this?” he asked, his upper lip curling into a sneer that raised his pencil-thin moustache.

“We—uhh, we have to go,” Benny said as he took a cautious step backward. The shifting of his weight made the ship heave from side to side. Seawater sloshed into the scuppers.

Alfie looked at Benny with gathering surprise in his eyes.

“*Yoo-hoo . . . It’s time to come home now!*” the voice called. “*Where are you, child?*”

Benny looked wistfully at Alfie, and then he turned his head, looking over his shoulder at the shore. Night had settled across the land like a heavy blanket.

“I . . . I’m over here,” Benny called out, his voice laced with a low, mournful note.

“But the battle’s not over,” Alfie said. “I haven’t taken my prize yet.”

“I’m sorry. It’s getting late,” Benny said. “I have to go home now. My mom’s calling.”

“If he don’t be acceptin’ my surrender,” Skipper Black said, “then he doesn’t win, says I.”

“I’m really sorry,” Benny said, lowering his head and looking at both Alfie and Skipper Black with the most mournful look possible for a dragon. Then he turned and watched the huge, dark shape that had appeared over the nearest sand dune. The silhouette of a fully grown female dragon towered against the night sky, blocking out the stars.

“Ah-hah . . . there you are,” said the hulking dragon as she walked down the slope toward Benny.

“Hi, Mom,” Benny said, lowering his head until his scaly jaw almost touched the sand.

“Benedict. How many times have I told you that I do *not* want you playing down by the water alone. . . especially once it gets dark?”

“Sorry, Mom. I didn’t—”

“Who were you talking to, by the way?” Benny’s mom asked, looking at him with a strange mixture of worry and anger lighting the golden disks of her eyes. “I thought I heard someone else talking.”

Benny sighed and then jerked his head back when a tiny lick of flame shot out of his nostrils.

“No,” he said. “No, it was just . . . me.”

“Are you sure? If you’ve been playing with that Lambert boy again—you weren’t, were you?” His mother shook her head with a stern look of disapproval.

“No, Mom.”

“I don’t want to be telling tales out of school, as it were, but I know that young boy is the one who put you up to lighting those fires in the woods last spring. We were lucky the entire forest wasn’t destroyed.”

“No, it was just me and . . . and Alfie.”

“Alfie?” The expression in Benny’s mother’s eyes softened, and she moved close enough to him to lean down and nuzzle Benny with her neck. “Darling, how many times have I told you that Alfie is just a—”

“I know. . . I know.” Humiliated, Ben was unable to meet her gaze.

“There *is* no Alfie . . . There’s no such thing as ‘people’ . . . not any more. They’re figments of your imagination. And I say it’s time you grew up a little. I want you to promise me you’ll forget all about Alfie from now on. All right?”

When Benny didn’t answer her right away, she nuzzled him again until he couldn’t help but smile.

“I have . . . I will,” Benny said, and with that, they both turned and started toward home across the sand dunes.

At the crest of the hill overlooking Mockingbird Bay, Benny hesitated for just a moment. When he sighed, he blew out a plume of flame that lit up the deepening night as he looked back at the sea one last time. A piece of driftwood caught fire, blazing with a blue flame from the salt-saturated wood. Benny gazed into the dancing flame, as blue and hot as a midsummer sky. A single tear ran down his scaly green cheek when he considered that his friend might now be lost to him forever. He sighed as he stomped out the fire, and, just before he turned to follow his mother into the forest, he whispered, “Psst . . . Hey . . . Alfie . . . See you tomorrow.”