How to Speak a Foreign Tongue
by afterandalasia

Summary

This is Berk. We sing crude songs, shout simple battle cries, and our distinction between communication and violence is a little on the vague side. Only somehow we've ended up with three languages in my house alone. and real communication gets a whole lot more complicated than that.

As the Riders try to physically recover from the Berserker betrayal which almost cost them so much, Hiccup starts reaching out in search of allies in the battle which he fears is only going to get worse. At this time of year, the only way to reach other islands is going to be on dragonback, and perhaps it is time for Berk to start opening up some of its secrets to the rest of the world.

But Berk still needs chiefing, his family still needs him, and he realises almost too late that he can't look away from what is happening on Berk itself just because he needs to look to other islands as well.
Welcome to the next instalment in this behemoth of a series! This time around, we're going to be getting a backdrop of OCs as we meet some other settlements and islands - although you might recognise a canon character here and there, including from the books. Although the background with Dagur is from Riders of Berk and Defenders of Berk, the foreground is into original plot rather than remix.

Warnings drop off as the violence drops away again. There are some darker themes referenced, though, including the physical and psychological aftermath of the previous fic. Heather's father has a considerable TBI (traumatic brain injury), and though it is background there are references to distressing scenes and incidents.

This fic will be updating **every other Saturday.** (2017 was a bit rough on me, and I got behind in my drafting. I want to keep a solid buffer between drafting and posting.)

A note on **shipping:** Elsa & Hiccup and Elsa & Anna are platonic only. Anna/Hans will make a reappearance in this fic; Gobber/Stoick remains in the background; Astrid/Hiccup has a rockier patch and more development. For endgame ships, see later fics in the series, but be warned that way lie spoilers!
“Is it just me,” said Anna, peering into another barrel before replacing the lid and marking it with a chalk cross, “or does the term ‘Slaughter Day’ sound a little morbid?”

Hiccup looked across blankly. “What?”

“You know. **Slaughter Day.** Focussing on the whole death thing.”

“Maybe if you’re a yak,” said Astrid. She was perched on one of the beams above them, having finished her check of the barrels and crates in the loft area. “What, do you think **Piles of Meat Day** would be better?”

“Well, it would be more cheery, at least. Oh, **parlenks,**” Anna added, looking into the next crate along. “This one’s still got salted meat in it.”

“Seriously?” Giving up on the patterns that he was tapping up and down the fingers of his right hand, Hiccup put aside the slate and chalk he had been ignoring, and got to his feet. “My father gave us this storehouse because it was supposed to be empty.” As Anna produced a wrapped bundle to wave at him, he groaned. “You know, I never thought Berk would be worrying about too much food in the stores. But we’re going to need space for the meat from this year…”

“Why don’t you just slaughter fewer yaks?” said Anna. She started to wheedle the crate out from its place, separating it from the empty ones. “I’m sure the yaks would be happier.”

“They would be until we ran out of fodder for them,” Hiccup replied. He went to give her a hand with the crate, and she swatted his left arm away. “Hey!”

“Yes, I know what fodder is,” said Anna. From above them, Astrid started laughing.

“No, I mean—” Hiccup tried to glare at Astrid, but it was hard to be annoyed when it was so good to hear her laughing again, and he would have been glaring at her feet anyway. Anna finished moving the crate with a grunt, and turned to open the next one as he continued. “I mean that we sort of depend on breeding more yaks than we need, and killing them off in the winter. Dragons don’t exactly steal fodder crops, so we haven’t had as much of an improvement in that…”

She opened the next crate, and pulled a face. Hiccup did not even have to ask to know what that meant.

“All right, I’ll tell my father that we’ve found more. Astrid, want to actually help with this?”

“I’m sure you’ve got it,” she said, leaning over.

Hiccup put his left hand on his hip and gave her a more challenging look, and though her grin did not fade Astrid did swing her legs so that they were both on the same side. She twisted and slid, and despite Hiccup’s wince hung perfectly well from her right arm for a few seconds before dropping down and landing neatly on both feet in front of them.

“I really wish you wouldn’t do that yet,” said Hiccup. He knew full well that once Astrid’s arm was out of its cast, she would be back to swinging axes two-handed and doing her usual acrobatics. But it had been less than a moon and a half since the break.

“I like to consider it extra exercise for my right arm,” she replied idly, taking the opportunity to
punch him lightly in the left shoulder as she passed.

“And the sparring with Heather?”

Astrid shrugged, continuing to face him as she walked backwards and still managed to deftly avoid the crates and barrels. “She’s close to me needing to use two hands, but she’s not there yet.”

He sighed. He was quite sure that offering to teach Heather how to fight properly was Astrid’s way of apologising for everything that had happened between them, and to attempt to build something of a friendship instead. But he rather preferred Elsa’s method, which had been to take over food on a regular basis and help with the inevitable teething issues as the younger Gronckle and the older Nadder from Outcast Island settled down in the woodshed attached to the house.

Apparently, Heather had nicknamed them Hnoss and Gersemi, with no comment on their actual sexes. Hiccup had dug out the mirror that he had made for Garrote Dragonsbane over a year ago – although sometimes it felt like much longer – which had in the end not been handed over. It was the only piece of Gronckle iron that was not currently a weapon or a belt buckle, he had explained, and the pair of them had spent most of an afternoon talking about the qualities of the metal and sketching out ideas for how Heather could test for those qualities. She had started testing the Gronckle iron itself, before moving on to new mixtures.

“I’ve got a whole barrel of fish here,” said Anna, making them both look round. “I’m guessing that this whole layer is probably going to be full…”

“We’re definitely going to need to let Phlegma know about that one. She’s already had Sanguina trying to work out how we’re going to store all of this.”

“Snoggletog’s going to be good this year,” said Astrid. “I guess we could feed what’s left over to the dragons.”

“If we want them too full of food to fly…”

He was trying to count the remaining crates in his head, and work out whether they had managed to find a full tonne of food or not, when a wave of cold air let him know that the door had opened. Expecting it to be the wind, Hiccup turned back, but Elsa was in the doorway with snow glittering in her hair and down her tunic. She wrestled the door closed against the wind, and turned to give them a bright smile, relief written across her features.

Hiccup got as far as stepping out of Anna’s way, expecting her to all but launch herself across the room, before realising that she was calmly replacing the lid of the barrel. Things had settled since their disagreement about Heather, and they had managed to reach a point where they would spend whole days apart but sit together at dinner and seem as close as ever. He wasn’t sure how much was improvement and how much was a problem.

“Everything all right?” said Astrid, apparently the first of them to get her thoughts together. “Thought you were checking on the dragons for Heather.”

“Yes,” Elsa replied. The snow might have stayed in place on her hair, but it was melting on her bare arms at least. Last winter, it had not happened; her skin had been cold to the touch no matter how much time she might have spent beside the fire. Hopefully, this winter would be easier on her. “They are good. But Duskhowl came;” she looked straight to Hiccup, smile lightning up her eyes. “She spoke to Heather. Eirik woke up, and asked for her.”

“By name?”
Elsa nodded.

Hiccup had been there, the first time that Eirik had seemed to wake up for a while. It had been a little less than a moon after the battle on Outcast Island, long enough for everyone to be fearing that he would not come back at all but not so long that they had given up hope. Heather had needed a hand on her shoulder to even be able to enter the room where her father lay, still in his bed, thinner and with more grey about his beard.

He had looked at Heather for a long moment, frowned, then asked who she was.

The colour had drained from Heather’s face, and for a moment Hiccup thought that her knees were going to give way, but then she plastered a fake smile on her face and told him her name, and then Duskhowl had stepped in to pull Eirik’s attention aside for a few minutes until exhaustion seemed to overwhelm him and he slipped back under again. Heather had walked home with stone-hard eyes, closed the door in Hiccup’s face, and spoken to nobody for two days.

Since then, he had seemed to surface a few more times, each one slightly longer and more coherent than the last. But Heather had told Duskhowl that she would not come until her father asked for her – the unless going unspoken – and it had been almost another moon.

“Thank the gods,” Hiccup breathed. He was flooded with the urge to hug somebody, but there was nobody particularly available at that point in time. He settled for beaming, and when Toothless deigned to unfold from the loft and dropped down for scratching him behind the flaps. “She’s gone to Duskhowl’s?”

“Yes.”

“All right. Looks like today is a good day.” He patted Toothless on the shoulder, and looked round to Anna and Astrid again. “Too much food is better than too little food, after all. I’ll let my father know, you guys head home. Have you got Joan?” he added to Anna, already suspecting what the answer would be.

True enough, she looked around. “Shit.”

“And I’ll take that as a no. Good luck finding her before she eats too much dried fish.” Hiccup gave them a wave as he backed up in the direction of the door. “There’s about twenty crates… I think when my father mentioned exact numbers, he expected two or three. I’ll see you later.”

“Joan – Joan!”

Anna dove out of view, presumably in pursuit of the dragon in question, and Astrid laughed. “Do you want a hand catching that one, by any chance?”

Something wooden fell over with a crunching sound, and Hiccup decided that it would probably be a good time to make an escape before he, too, got caught up in hunting a Terrible Terror which seemed to have both more brains and more aptitude to be naughty than even the average member of its species.
Stoick was in the Great Hall, with a list in front of him of people and how many animals they were planning to slaughter, and probably a headache as well. Hiccup had tried to help out as best he could, but with his right hand still barely functioning he was limited in what he could manage. Asking his friends would certainly be out of the question, although he knew that Anna had independently volunteered to help if she was able.

“Let me guess,” said Stoick, as Hiccup brushed snow off himself. “You found more food.”

“I found food.”

“Makes for a different problem, at least,” put in Phlegma.

“If we’d found it earlier in the year I would have suggested fixing up some of the barns to use as storehouses.” Stoick sighed. “We’ve about fixed up the boats after last year. If we look at some of the more sound ones—”

“And keep the dragons out,” said Phlegma. She, at least, sounded vaguely amused by the prospect this year.

“—and keep the dragons out,” repeated Stoick, with a pointed look at Hiccup that managed to indicate that he was somehow supposed to achieve this, “then it should be possible to have at least some storage there, yes?”

“And we could cut down on the boar hunts,” said Hiccup. He perched on the edge of the table, rather than sit down and drop most of the way below their eye-height. “But yes, I found more food, I’m afraid we’re looking at twenty or twenty-five crates of meat and fish.”

Stoick put his hand over his eyes; Phlegma slipped his parchment away from him to add the numbers to the list.

“But in possibly better news, I have thought of what we could do with some of the food…”

Phlegma looked up hopefully, tapping the end of her charcoal stick against the table, even as Stoick shook his head. “He’s going to say wildlings,” said Stoick flatly.

Hiccup beamed as if his father had been the one to come out with the idea. “Yes! Wildlings! Because instead of fighting them, having them steal our food, and potential people on both sides getting injured or killed, I’m voting that we go to them and just offer them some of the blasted food. In return, maybe we get to stop our fighting, maybe we can travel in the Wildlands more safely, and while we’ve got maybe a handful of people who would be willing to go into the Wildlands…”

He trailed off, hoping that Stoick would finish the sentence, but his father just looked at him wearily.

“It would probably be good if Runa Hofferson did not have to supply quite so many of our medicinal herbs,” Phlegma finished, finally. “Well, I can say that our food supplies wouldn’t suffer for it, but you know it’s your father who has the final say.”

With a sigh, Stoick sat back in his chair. Hiccup tried for a hopeful expression at first, then as it did not seem to have any effect he let his eyes harden and aimed for determined instead. That, at least, earned him a response.
“Hiccup, I know that you mean well to make peace, but I am still not quite sure about this. It is not that we have fought in the past,” he added, raising a hand before Hiccup could speak. “This year has made it quite clear how alliances can shift. What still concerns me is whether they will accept Berk as we now are. It is not just a matter of past fighting, for them – we have dragons. And we have Elsa.”

“Elsa, who is offering to go with me to talk to the wildlings,” Hiccup replied. Her offers had only been more determined in the past moon, since everything that had happened on Outcast Island. “Berk feared magic just as much as the wildlings did, and we’ve come around.”

“Elsa killed Red Deaths for us,” said Stoick. “And we did not know her language, had not been sure that magic-users were human. They did. Their fear of magic must go deeper than that.”

In their culture, and not a matter of lack of knowledge, Hiccup supposed. “Either they’ve inherited it from Arendelle, or it’s resentment that the few true magic users have led to a lot of people being banished from Arendelle over the years. Either way, it comes back to the Silver Priests. Look, we haven’t heard from Kristoff, and we don’t know where to start looking for him. We can’t hold back on this any more.

“And worst that happens,” he added, with a shrug, “we get on Toothless’s back, fly away, and this year we know that they’re going to be trying to raid us right after Slaughter Day.”

“Do I even need to point out that is not the worst that could happen?”

The ache in his right hand did rather tell of the issues Hiccup tended to have with plans. “There isn’t going to be a Berserker ambush in the Wildlands,” he said. “Wall of ice, we get on Toothless’s back, we leave. The wildlings can take us or leave us, that’s their choice. But we’re not gaining anything by waiting longer.”

Stoick’s voice softened. “Your hand? Elsa’s shoulder?”

“Mostly healed,” said Hiccup, holding up his hand as evidence. The scars on either side of his hand were still pink and shining, occasionally itchy, but they were just thin lines and had healed cleanly. No matter how many times he tapped the sections of his fingers, they felt just as normal as they ever had. Compared to his leg, the occasional twinges of pain were nothing. Elsa was quiet about her injury, and careful when using her left arm, but she had not complained of any problems even to him, and Anna had not shown any fresh outbursts of protective-ness that would have indicated that Elsa had confided in her. “Yes, I know there might be an advantage in waiting there,” he added, suspecting that he knew where his father was going, “but it’s minimal. And this raid around Snoggletog is such an advantage, we know there will be people nearby. We can’t miss it.”

Stoick sighed, and looked over at Phlegma. “I think he decided that an audience would make this more likely to work.”

“They tend to,” said Phlegma.

Hiccup folded his arms. Usually, Stoick tried this tactic when Gobber was in the room, as a way of diverting everyone’s attention, but Gobber had grown wise to it and no longer tended to respond as Stoick wanted him to. “I’m not asking my father. I’m asking my chief.”

Phlegma folded her hands and sat back in her chair, making it clear with her body language that she was not a part of the conversation. With a look that said he was not impressed with how little help she was being, Stoick turned back to look Hiccup over once more.
Hiccup knew that he didn’t look like much, even if the cuts and bruises from his last round of misadventures were mostly healed. He still had a scar on his hand, and a scratch on one cheek from dealing with the Monstrous Nightmare shortwings where they were getting overly excitable. He was still, well, Hiccup. But at least he was doing better than he would have done a year and a half ago.

“Very well,” said Stoick, though it sounded more than a little begrudging. “But you will wear armour. And if anything happens–”

“We will have a dragon. And ice magic.” If the wildlings knew about things like trollwort or hexenspiegels, he was sure that Elsa would have come across them long before he had met her. “And experience of looking for the warning signs that something is about to go wrong.”

Stoick pressed his lips tightly together, but nodded, and Hiccup refrained from punching the air in delight. No matter how strong the urge, it was not going to help make his point that he was capable of handling this. Instead he smiled, pushed upright again, and tapped the paper with the list of the amount of meat that they needed to store.

“Say… a barrel to show goodwill, and a promise of more to trade?”

“We’ll talk exact numbers after Slaughter Day,” said Stoick, and Hiccup knew that he had finally managed to win the argument. If Stoick was prepared to talk details, the agreement was final. “For which, I hope, you are also prepared.”

“Ready to do another round of talks, including a Thunderdrum,” he replied. The Hobblegrunt was more touch-and-go; her wounds were slowly healing, but she was becoming increasingly sullen and snappish at humans and other dragons alike. “And this year we have hatchlings to talk about, as well.”

The hatchlings were mercifully out of the stage where everyone found them cute enough to want to adopt them on the spot, although there could well still be a few that tried. With the rate at which they were growing, Hiccup estimated it was going to be years before any of them were large enough to carry riders. It probably was about the time to start calling them shortwings, though, as they flew on their own, dove for their own fish in the sea, and generally seemed increasingly independent of their mothers.

“Well, good luck with it,” said Stoick. “I’m not sure the weather will be so much on your side this time around.”

He found Anna and Elsa at home, with Anna trying to teach Joan to stretch up onto her hind legs on command, and Elsa carefully practicing her letters on the slate which had long since become specific to her. She understood perfectly how reading and writing should work, and had been quick enough to pick up the first few words that they showed her, but the spelling system frustrated her when one rune could stand for two or more letters, and the sounds that she had carefully learned did not map neatly onto what she saw. Hiccup had to admit, she had a point sometimes.
“Hiccup!” said Anna, as he managed to close the door again behind him. Toothless shook the snow off his head, and Joan took the opportunity to grab the piece of cheese that Anna had been dangling out of her reach. “Is your father all right?”

“I resisted making cracks about anyone’s weight,” he replied. His cloak felt about twice as heavy as usual with the snow starting to melt into it. “So that probably played to my advantage. But I have permission to visit the wildlings, and to take food to them.”

“So,” said Elsa. She slipped into Marulosen. “Do you want to practice your Marulosen?”

“No,” he replied. “I need to practice my Marulosen.”

The uncertainty on her face slipped to a smile, and she set the slate in her hands aside without even a second glance at it. “That is getting a lot better,” she said. “I cannot be sure they will have the same accent as me, in the wildlands, but…”

“I know how to say, I’m sorry, I need you to speak more slowly, please,” said Hiccup, careful on the vowels as he made his way along the phrase. “That should make for a good start.”

“It’s weird,” Anna said. She moved the larger piece of cheese away just before Joan managed to get hold of it, and tapped her on the nose. “No. Hearing you two speak in… Marulosen?” she looked to Elsa for a quick nod. “It’s almost like hearing Arendellen, but… not. Which I guess makes sense, I guess, if they came from Arendelle…”

“The grammar is very similar,” said Hiccup. “The vowels have kind of changed… I’m not sure how to describe it.” He sat down at the table with them, and gestured to his mouth. “They feel like they’ve moved, in the mouth. And some words are totally different, but others are similar enough that honestly,” he glanced at Elsa, “I apologise in advance if I start using Arendellen by accident. Then again, I guess some of them might speak it still.”

“It will depend how long they have been in the Wildlands,” Elsa said carefully. Her smile had faded, and she tucked her left arm across her chest again. “In the three years I was there, there were no more sent to the Wildlands. At least, none that were found.”

Anna shifted uncomfortably, apparently growing aware of where she had managed to lead the conversation. “The Silver Priests,” she said, voice more quiet and serious, “when they told me about the trials, they said that it hadn’t happened in years. I… don’t know if we can believe that, though.”

“It’ll depend whether they’re adults or not, as well,” said Hiccup. “And how much they use it. But if the wildlings encourage people not to, then it’s likely that nobody has used it in years.”

At that, Elsa nodded. “They encourage you to… forget. What you did, who you were.” Sorrow crept into her gaze as she looked across at Anna. “Your family. They know that they cannot go back, so it is better to be separate from it all.”

“Most of them aren’t even magic users, though,” Anna blurted. She tucked Joan to her chest, placating a squeak with another morsel of cheese. “The Silver Priests said that it was magic that they sent people away for. So… why did they really send them away?”

“Albrekt’s mother was a healer. They viewed that as a sort of magic,” said Hiccup.

Anna frowned. “Albrekt?”

“He…” of course, he had not explained that. Hiccup grimaced, and leant one elbow on the table.
“He was a wildling that we caught last year, trying to raid the stores. We talked to him; well, Elsa did the talking, I couldn’t speak any Marulosen then.”

“What happened?” said Anna. There was a delicacy already in her voice, which told that even if she could not guess, she could tell from his voice that it was not something she would wish to hear.

Elsa looked away, and Hiccup knew that he would have to be the one to answer. “He killed himself. For fear of Berk, I don’t know. But he didn’t make it through one night here.”

Blanching, Anna flinched, and clutched Joan more tightly to her. Hiccup took a deep breath.

“That is… not entirely the Silver Priests doing. But if it is in part Berk’s fault, then it means we can fix it. Elsa came here speaking our language, and it helped, so… I’m hoping that if I go in speaking their language, that will help as well.”

“And I do speak their language,” said Elsa. “As long as they do not remember me….”

A globe of ice spun up between her fingertips, perhaps an inch and a half across, and her eyes lingered on it. After Arendelle, even Hiccup would admit to being a lot more nervous of the idea of Elsa being recognised; her hair had been unusual in Arendelle, was unique in Berk, and would presumably be somewhere in-between in the Wildlands. It was a matter of whether any of the wildlings from Kiirkylla would connect a frightened child of over eight years ago with the young woman sitting opposite him now.

Anna reached across, wrapping her hand over the ice, and it shimmed away as Elsa snapped from her reverie. “You’ll be fine,” she said. “And if they do, well… they can accept it or not. They won’t be able to do anything to you, even if they try.”

Of course, that was the other difference between the child and the adult. Elsa had so much more control over her powers that it would be easy to put up a simple wall of ice, and with Toothless there they could be out of sight in no time at all.

“I’m sure you’ll still be less noticeable than a dragon,” said Hiccup.

Elsa gave a flicker of a smile, weak and momentary but there all the same. “Well, that is usually to my advantage.”

“Do they know about Night Furies? In the Wildlands?”

“Not that I know of,” said Elsa, words careful. “From what I remember, they do not pay much attention to the type of dragon. They hide from them.”

He nodded, and ran a hand over Toothless’s head. “I guess we only really paid attention so we could fight them.” All the same, he remembered the Snow Wraith, a dragon they had never seen in Berk and which he would not particularly want to experience again. Gobber’s stories about strange dragons and stranger monsters had seemed a lot less unbelievable after seeing the Wildlands themselves, and even Runa had admitted that there were things in the Northern Swamp that stayed beneath the surface and which she had never properly seen.

He couldn’t help wondering whether there might be some knowledge among the Wildlings, of dragons that Berk did not even know about. Even just names, or locations; there had to be a power and a knowledge in knowing that something existed at all.

Unsure how Elsa or Anna would feel about such thoughts, though, he kept them to himself once again. “Well, at least we won’t worry about the unholy offspring of lightning and death itself
scaring them away, then.” Toothless, for his part, had curled up on the beams above them, watching with huge green eyes in the gloom. “Yeah, you concentrate on looking non-threatening when we’re there, bud. That’ll help.”

“I’m not sure there is such a thing as a non-threatening-looking Night Fury,” said Anna. She balanced a piece of cheese on the tip of Joan’s nose, and by means of a hovering finger managed to persuade her to refrain from licking it off for all of three seconds. It was an improvement. “I mean, you warned me about him and he still…”

“Landed right in front of you,” Hiccup pointed out. “We’ll be landing further away and walking in, with him a short distance behind us. He looks less threatening when he’s below eye-height and not filling most of your field of view.”

Anna popped a slightly larger piece of cheese into her own mouth. “Astrid told you that,” she mumbled through it. “You don’t use the phrase ‘field of view’ by yourself.”

He tried to come up with a viable retort, managed exactly nothing, and felt his cheeks start to burn as she grinned at him triumphantly. “Yeah, well,” he finally said, “there’s no point in not learning from other people. Speaking of which, the twins are going to be busy with Slaughter Day again, but Runa isn’t available to help us with Stormfly. And obviously, my father…” he made a vague gesture with his hand which he hoped would be understandable despite not being much more than a spiral. “So I’m borrowing Speedifist to help talk about Gronckles, Fishlegs will be covering Zipplebacks this year, and I will be talking about Thunderdrums. Which means that I need someone to talk about Nightmares, and someone to talk about Night Furies.”

“I have little to no idea what you’re talking about,” said Anna, “but I’ll help however I can?”

Perhaps he was getting a little too used to treating Anna and Elsa as if they were merely extensions of the same person. Then again, it was less than half a year since Anna had joined them in Berk, and still managed to feel like she had been here a lot longer. Hiccup gave a guilty laugh, and ran a hand through his hair. “Hah, right. Yeah, all right, new tradition that we started last year. Normally, the kids that are too young to help with Slaughter Day, but old enough to be away from their parents – you know, toddlers, at least – just used to get watched for the day, play in the snow, maybe some of the older ones spar a bit, whatever. But last year, they got a day’s lesson about various dragons instead.”

“And you showed off,” said Elsa.

He tried to give her an unimpressed look. Really tried, but it was difficult when she was far better at keeping a straight face than him, just the faintest hint of mischief glinting in her eyes, and he remembered the thrill of intentionally free-falling beside Toothless for the first time. “Astrid and I got a little competitive;” he relented, opting instead for ignoring Elsa and concentrating on Anna instead, “demonstrating how we were learning to do more flying than simply sitting on the dragon’s back. Though my father hasn’t told me not to demonstrate that move this year. Clueless and Wartihog will both be helping out with the slaughter, neither of them are going to see it and think that it’s a good idea. And Speedifist is… probably smart enough to see what a dumb thing it is to be doing, if I’m honest. It’ll be fine.”

In hindsight, the Slaughter Day talk had been a lot less frantic than the academy, although he was sure that it would be a little different the second time around with some of the children old enough to remember what it had been last year.

“Besides,” he added, “now we know more about dragon poo. That’s bound to go down well.”
Anna looked bewildered. “What?”

“Ohhh, right.” Hiccup winked at Elsa. “I forgot you haven’t spent too much time around kids here.”
Chapter 2

Sure enough, there were plenty of questions about poo, and any attempt to use a slightly more dignified word was summarily ignored by the cluster of children, from four to eight, who clamoured their way from dragon to dragon. It was snowing, but the storm had passed and the wind settled enough for it to be possible to use the green all the same, which was at least better than trying to find somewhere else that they could actually fit the dragons.

Hiccup was rather more surprised to see parents bringing their younger children along; while a child of two or three years could sit in their mother’s or father’s arms and at least watch the dragons when the riders were demonstrating flying, he knew full well that the babies still young enough to be suckling could not be anything more than an excuse for their mother to be present. He silently marked the women involved, and wondered whether next winter he would be able to have more adults learning to fly, and whether they might be among them. Perhaps most surprising was Withera, whose son could have been left with her husband for the day, and who caught Hiccup’s gaze and smiled wryly.

This year, they were at least more prepared, and had bought down some of the wooden target practice figures from the academy to talk about different types of fire. For the children, they kept it simple, talking about colour and fireball size more than anything else, and got a laugh when it was Thornado who managed to destroy one of the targets completely.

Astrid returned from standing the targets back up with someone in her hand, and Hiccup frowned at her and it until she got close enough for him to realise that it was the target’s head, ragged around the neck and with splinters sticking out at enough angles to look like messy hair.

A couple of years ago, it would have been taken as an opportunity to remind the children of how dangerous dragons were, of how it was always important to tell an adult if you saw one, even on the horizon. Now Astrid presented the head to him straight-faced, while giggling erupted around them.

“And as you can see,” said Hiccup, after the shortest pause he could manage, “even after more than a year, dragons can catch us by surprise. Some of you may also have noticed that my family has not had a door on our woodshed since Thornado arrived.” He flicked his hand towards the head as if presenting it. “We felt it would be better not to put him in a closed space”

More laughter. Whether that was because the older children knew that a closed space would be more susceptible to damage than one where an open side would let the air pressure disperse, he did not know. It could well just have been because Astrid was keeping a perfectly serious expression while holding a wooden head.

In hindsight, Hiccup had probably been asking for trouble when he had said that they had lost a few models to fire but, thus far, none to Thornado’s blasts. Perhaps Thornado had seen it as a personal slight.

“And which of the dragons makes the best fire?” said Nobber, who at seven definitely did remember the year before.

“Well, that depends what you mean by best,” said Hiccup, and felt the shift towards boredom in the air as the children anticipated some sort of lecture. Well, then. “If you mean who has the most power in one blast…” he drew up, and pointed one finger into the air. “Toothless! Plasma blast!”
Toothless’s head snapped up from sniffing around Elsa’s ankles; he swung round to the direction in which Hiccup was pointing, and fired, all heartbeat-fast. The sound boomed, a couple of children shrieked, and purple-white fire shattered against the clouds. But he definitely had their attention again.

He caught Astrid’s eye, and she nodded, stooping to pick up a fist-sized stone from beneath the muddy snow. “If you mean hottest…” Hiccup continued.

Astrid whistled, bringing Stormfly’s head sharply in her direction, and threw the stone across her line of sight. Stormfly obliged with a tight flare of fire, blazing white, and Hiccup made sure to point out the glowing splatters of molten rock that came from the other side and fell hissing to the ground.

“The Night Fury has the power to knock down buildings, and the Nadder can melt rock or steel. But the Zippleback…”

This was where he really had to hope that the twins had been training Barf and Belch using hand gestures as they had been supposed to. And that they had used the actual hand gestures, and not attempted to teach them using solely obscene ones as Ruffnut had once talked about.

Taking a deep breath, he turned to face Barf and Belch, and raised both arms in a slow, deliberate sweep. “Up!”

Relief flooded through him when Barf and Belch obliged by taking off, slowly climbing as Hiccup continued to wave them upwards. When he was fairly sure that they were high enough for it to be safe, he made a gesture that bloomed out from his mouth.

“Barf! Gas!”

With a hissing sound, Barf breathed the green gas around them, in no particular direction and just in a green wreath in the air. Hiccup stopped the gesture again quickly, not wanting this explosion to be too large, and made a sharp cutting motion with his right hand.

“Belch! Spark!”

There was a moment’s hesitation, and for a beat he was worried that he was going to be caught out and made to look even more of a fool in front of the crowd. But then Belch sparked, the gas went up in a billow and a fwoom of sound, an entrancingly bright rush just close enough that they could feel the wave of air and a ghost of the heat of it. He felt it ruffle his hair in passing.

Before he could lose the pace, he turned to Hookfang, and gestured with both hands for him to rear onto his feet. Luckily, he did. Hookfang knew the hand movements, but he was picky at best about whether or not he responded to them, and Hiccup made a mental note to feed all of the dragons a little bit more this evening for playing along so well.

“While the Monstrous Nightmare…”

Knew how to play along when all of the other dragons were showing off, Hiccup suspected. Anna backed up just in time as fire flashed along Hookfang’s skin, and he threw his head back to send a jet of flame so high that it felt almost like it reached the clouds. It billowed and swirled above them, catching on the wind and lingering in sooty orange for longer than any of the others had done, and Hiccup took the opportunity to snatch a breath.

“Now, Gronckles don’t have the flashiest fire,” he said, soon enough that it was pulling the kids’ attention away from Hookfang but not so quickly that he would not get it, “but they can do things
that no other dragons can. They can melt rocks, they can make glass, they can make some
gemstones;” that definitely got some of the adults looking interested. Hiccup drew his Gronickle
iron knife, spinning it in his hand so that it caught the light. He was not going to admit how much
practice that had taken him, or that he had destroyed a pair of leather gloves in the process. “And
they can make Gronickle iron. Has anyone seen this?”

A few nods, and a lot of confused looks. Well, he supposed that there was not much of it around
yet, and hoped deeply that Heather would have some luck figuring out just what Meatlug had once
eaten to produce it.

“All right,” he looked to the adults. “Who wants a new axe?”

That, at least, earned some bewildered chuckling. Not the response he had been hoping for, but
he’d take it.

“I’m serious. Who here has an axe with them, and would like a new one for Snoggletog?”

It was Withera who drew one from her belt, putting her son into one arm and gently making her
way around the edge of the small crowd to hand the axe to Hiccup handle-first. “Here. We’ve only
got older axes in our house these days.”

“Thank you. And Astrid, you’ve got a normal steel knife with you, right?”

She made a scoffing sound, but was grinning as she drew one. As if to one-up him, she flicked it
into the air, spinning glittering-fast, and plucked it out by the handle again. He was not going to try
to compete with that one.

“All right, then.” He turned back to the children, who were if nothing else very interested in the
large amount of weaponry suddenly being flashed about. “So, we’ve got a sturdy ash heartwood
handle on this axe. What do you think is going to happen when it gets hit by Astrid’s knife?”

The children looked a little less certain about the idea of being asked questions, instead of asking
them. Finally, it was Rainbug who spoke up, from behind her ever-present and increasingly-grubby
stuffed lamb. “I’ll get cut.”

“All the way through?” said Hiccup.

“I hope not, or I’ll worry about what wood we’ve been using,” said one of the adults. There was
more giggling, even if the children didn’t quite understand what joke had been made.

Hiccup braced the handle of the axe in both hands, as far apart as he could get them, and presented
it to Astrid. She gave him a glance which said that she knew she was going to jar her shoulder
doing this, he tried to look apologetic, but without a word she bought the knife down in a blistering
arc that thudded against the wood.

It took a yank to get it back out again, but sure enough the knife had managed to get barely a
quarter of an inch into the wood.

“So, well-kept steel knife, wielded by Astrid,” he turned the handle to show the children in
particular the mark. “Small cut. Now.” He handed Astrid the axe, and she held it in the same
braced position. “Let’s see Gronickle iron, as wielded by me.”

He wasn’t sure exactly how much force he was going to need for this, but considering he had cut
through dense oak before now he knew it should be possible. Truth be told, he was more worried
about angling the blow so that it had no chance of skipping or sliding and hitting Astrid instead. He
picked a spot that would leave a short but usable handle still, readied himself, and swung the knife like a blacksmith’s hammer.

It might not have been like cutting butter, but it was only about as much as hard cheese. The knife went through in one elegant sweep, the children oohed and even the adults looked impressed, and Hiccup allowed himself a sigh of relief.

“But – but!” he continued, as one of the adults started to clap and he worried that it would carry across the whole crowd. “What do you think would happen if Astrid tried to use her knife against the head of the axe?”

This time, the children were quicker to answer. Someone shouted about chipping, someone suggested nothing, someone opted for sparks and another – probably older – said it would ‘ruin’ both weapons.

“Well, what would probably happen is I’d get punched in the arm for damaging Astrid’s knives, yes,” said Hiccup. More laughter, and even Astrid suppressed a smile. “But yes, it would probably mark both weapons, because they’re made of the same sort of steel. But with Gronckle iron… you ready?”

“How do you want me to hold this?” said Astrid.

“Side on, like you’re cutting wood,” he said, deciding on the spot exactly what he was going to do to show the abilities of the Gronckle iron without endangering one or both of them. She did so.

“Great. With Gronckle iron,” he repeated to the children, “I can do this.”

He lunged forwards, and stabbed the knife straight through the head of the axe. This time he felt the jar of it, but it sank all the way to the hilt, with barely more difficulty than the wood had been. There were a couple of shrieks, and a lot of gasps.

“And then–” he lowered his voice, just for Astrid; “Pull up.”

Astrid raised the axe, Hiccup put his shoulder muscles behind forcing the Gronckle iron blade down, and after a fraction of a second that felt far too worryingly long, the two blades sheared apart with a silken, ringing sound. Feeling strangely triumphant, Hiccup held up the knife to show that it was unscathed, while Astrid turned the axe and held it in front of her, her dark shirt showing as a stripe through the torn-out path of the knife.

This time, there was clapping, and more than a few looks of interest from the adults around the clearing. They, at least, were seeing potential rather than just a way to show off and destroy a perfectly working axe.

“As I said,” Hiccup raised his voice to address Withera again. “I’ll have you a new axe by Snoggletog. Provided Gobber lets me back into the forge again after I went and damaged some of his work like this,” he added, pointing a thumb at the axe. Actually, he vaguely remembered helping to close axeheads for Hoark over the years, although Gobber was always the one who put in the sharper edge. And that was not even mentioning the amount of time Hiccup had spent grinding weapons, a tedious job but one that at least allowed Hiccup to concentrate on getting that perfect edge and which would therefore keep him largely out of trouble.

Besides, now he had an excuse to be caught working with axes, and would no longer have to go scrabbling to hide them any time he heard someone approaching.

“Now, Thunderdrums do have fire, as well as their roars,” he said, “but the flames are quite small,
and they’re blue, which means they’re very hot but also very difficult to see. And since the flames are only visible when the Thunderdrums use all of their power,” he gestured to the severed wooden head, which was now propped almost jauntily in the snow, “and I think we’ve let Thornado do enough damage for one day, we’ll skip that one for now.”

Before they started knocking down buildings in the vicinity, at least.

Stoick did not even have to ask whether it had gone well. Apparently the grin on Hiccup’s face was enough, as they returned to the Great Hall where people were finishing sweeping and mopping the floor, there were whole yaks most of the way to finished roasting, and from the sounds of boisterous laughter at least some of the mead had been broken into.

“Better than last year?” Stoick opted for instead.

“Only one casualty,” said Astrid, close enough behind Hiccup to make him jump. She thrust the wooden head into his hands – he had not even seen her take it from the village green, good gods – and grinned. “But I’ll leave you to explain that one. I should go find my parents.” She gave Stoick a respectful nod. “Chief.”

Stoick looked at the head in consternation, brow furrowing, and Hiccup laughed sheepishly. “Thornado got a little carried away. But the only things that got damaged are this and Withera’s axe. And I promised to replace that.”

“Now that sounds like a story,” said Stoick.

“It was so awesome,” said Anna. Her voice, at least, was not so unexpected as she and Elsa appeared at Hiccup’s side. “And Hiccup was—” she turned to Hiccup “—how are you so good with children? You never said anything about being good with children!”

“Trust me, it’s not me, it’s the dragons. I’m told that having a Night Fury is ‘cool’.” He did not add that it was Astrid who had pointed this out. “Is there any yak yet?”

“No, but Gobber has found us some lamb,” said Stoick. “Come on, before you end up sitting on his lap to eat dinner.”

Hiccup was more than happy enough to let Stoick lead, to open up a gap in the crowds, and for Toothless to form the back of their group. “Come on!” he caught hold of Anna’s arm. “This is your first time at a proper Berkian feast. You’ll see why people get so excited about Slaughter Day.”

For a start, there was the promise of lamb, rather than mutton. The novelty alone was enough to make a difference, never mind the amount of it that was available for the moon or so. Hiccup was just amazed that the mint stocks around Berk had survived. Anna gave Elsa a look of raised-eyebrowed query, but Elsa just smiled as well, and made sure to follow closely behind them.

Sure enough, Anna’s eyes went wide as she saw the size of the platter that Gobber had already
managed to accumulate. They went wider when she realised that the bread, vegetables, and cheese had been relegated to a second platter beside it.

“Is all of that really going to get eaten?”

“There’s a bit of overexcitement this year,” Hiccup admitted, “and there might be leftovers for the dragons. But yes, this will probably all disappear before the night is gone.”

“Mothers and fathers,” she muttered, in Arendellen. “This is more than I ever saw in Arendelle and, I mean…”

She did not need to state aloud the reason for her obvious surprise, and Hiccup grinned. If Berk could turn out a feast that even the Queen of Arendelle looked impressed at, then they could not be doing so badly after all. Even he remembered years when Slaughter Day had barely been more than a communal meal, when they had held back what they had for Snoggletog instead in the hope of bringing in the New Year favourably.

“To be fair to Berk, we do know how to feast,” said Hiccup.

Stoick sighed, pointedly.

“And that wasn’t a crack either! Are we going to do this every Snoggletog now?”

“Wait, what?” said Anna, still allowing herself to be towed along. Elsa began giggling again, even if she hid it behind her right hand, as Anna looked between them both in bewilderment. She even gave Stoick a hopeful look, but Stoick either did not see it or did not want to have to explain.

Rather than risk getting himself into more trouble, Hiccup shook his head. “Let’s grab a seat,” he settled for.

As they got closer to the table, Joan poked her head out of the top of Anna’s shirt. Nowadays she was usually a visible lump rather than a hidden one, and more often chose to sit outside Anna’s clothing altogether. But as the weather had grew colder, under clothing seemed to remain Joan’s bolthole and preferred way of keeping warm. Hiccup could not blame her; humans wore clothes as well, and most of them were considerably larger from a Terrible Terror.

“She’s going to have fun tonight, isn’t she?” said Hiccup, with a nod to Joan as they sat down. Sure enough, Joan fixed her eyes on the platter of meat, and only a quick grab from Anna prevented her from being the first to get into it.

“I think I’m eating one-handed,” Anna replied. Even restrained, Joan stuck out her tongue hopefully in the direction of the lamb. “Maybe you should work on dragon-leashes.”

“For Terrors, maybe. Not so sure that’d work on a Zippleback,” said Gobber, before Hiccup could even attempt to formulate a response. He had a wickedly sharp fork on his left arm, which probably explained why he seemed to have been one of the first people to have managed an entire platter. “Jorgenson won’t be sitting with us this year. Wanted a bit more elbow-room, now that Burplout and Pinebolt are here as well.”

And given that Oaklout was nearing a year, she would probably be getting to try some new foods for the first time as well, which was going to be messy. Nobody was fool enough to think that was the real reason, though, and Hiccup wondered whether Spitelout had bothered coming up with the polite lie, or whether he had left it to Gobber.
In any case, someone had managed it, and it was at least a way to keep a semblance of peace around the table. “It could be worse,” Hiccup said, to Anna. “I could have ended up in Snotlout’s lap to eat dinner.”

Gobber looked at them like they had gone mad, which may not have been all that far from the truth some days. But for now, at least, they could spread out until the tables started getting too full. Even if neither Stoick nor Gobber looked all that impressed when he admitted just what he had done with Withera’s axe that was apparently fast becoming the talk of the hall.

He started flying sweeps of the northern Wildlands shortly after sunset each day, looking for the telltale pinpoints of fires that would indicate that the Wildling raiding party was staring to close in. When he returned home, Elsa was usually explaining something or other about Snoggletog to Anna, although he did once open the front door in time to see Anna make a particularly undignified dive for their bedroom with something in her arms.

It was four days after Slaughter Day that he finally saw it. His heart leapt into his throat, and he watched for a few long seconds, desperate to be sure that it was not just his imagination. It flickered, in the way that a fire might from someone walking in front of it, and with growing surety in his chest he flew back to Berk as fast as Toothless could manage, almost falling out of the saddle as he dismounted almost in the doorway and flung himself into the house.

“Hiccup!” Elsa jumped to her feet.

“It’s fine. I’m fine,” he said quickly, not even bothering with trying to hide his smile. “I found them.”

“The wildlings?” Stoick looked up quickly from sharpening his axe. “How close were you, to see them for certain?”

“All right, so I saw a fire,” Hiccup admitted, “but it can’t be a lightning fire, we’ve had too much rain since the last thunderstorm, so it has to be human. Other than wildlings, the only person who even could be out there is Kristoff, but Kristoff uses the tunnels instead. Therefore, wildings.”

“You’re not going tonight,” said Stoick, flatly.

“I know, but come morning – when the sun is up,” he added, knowing that his father would be having entirely appropriate suspicions about what Hiccup was planning to consider ‘morning’, “and as long as it’s not a howling blizzard, I want to be out there. Which means getting ready tonight.”

“You’re not going tonight,” said Stoick, flatly.

“I know, but come morning – when the sun is up,” he added, knowing that his father would be having entirely appropriate suspicions about what Hiccup was planning to consider ‘morning’, “and as long as it’s not a howling blizzard, I want to be out there. Which means getting ready tonight.”

“Like that block of whetstones and those spare sheaths you’ve been stashing away?”

He hadn’t realised how much his father knew about that, and tried not to look too guilty. It almost certainly failed. “And the fire steels,” he said, before Stoick could complete the list himself, “and iron needles, yes.” He had spent a long time talking to Elsa about just what would be best to take, what would be simple and unambiguous and the sort of things that would be hard to produce in the Wildlands. What they would appreciate. Unfortunately, there had not been enough of an excess of
wheat that Stoick would let Hiccup take bread as well, but he knew that they came every year for the meat, and that they had plenty of this year.

Stoick sighed.

“But I do need to go and find the appropriate crate of meat, so…”

“I will see to that,” said Stoick. He put aside the whetstone he had been using, somewhat more worn than the ones that Hiccup had managed to track down, and stood up. “If you intend to be that early, then you should get some sleep.”

Finally thinking to remove his cloak, Hiccup took his turn to sigh instead. “You know, I figured now that I was actually an adult, I would not get ordered to be quite so often.”

“I’m your father. You will never grow out of being ordered to bed.”

To tell the truth, Hiccup doubted that Gobber would ever let go of that particular mark of parenthood either. Then again, nothing would ever feel quite as bad as his bed-bound period after losing his foot, at least. Anna gave him a sympathetic smile which suggested that some things were not so different between Arendelle and Berk, while Elsa looked on.

“Can I at least give Toothless his supper? I didn’t want to alert the wildlings to our presence by having him vomit fish all over them…”

Even a year ago, with dragons tentatively coming to be accepted on Berk, it still would have been a surprise to think that their various bodily functions would also have to become such a fact of life and matter of conversation. He didn’t quite have the frame of reference for knowing whether it was like a new baby being born in the household, but he did have his suspicions courtesy of a few choice remarks that he had heard over the years. As it was, he gave his father a hopeful smile, and Stoick finally relented and waved him in the direction of the pantry.

“I will go and fetch the crate,” he said. “But I want your word that you will not leave in the morning without letting me know.”

Hiccup held up both hands in a show of innocence, and Stoick responded with raising an eyebrow. “Yeah…” Hiccup admitted “I wouldn’t fully trust me either. But this time, I promise.”

The fact that Stoick simply turned to leave the house was probably about the answer that he deserved. Grinning, Hiccup stripped off his gloves and wet boot, and headed for the pantry. How much sleep he was going to get, he was not sure, but he knew better than to not, at least, try.

Sure enough, he slipped in and out of sleep, never managing to get very deep before he was buoyed back up to the surface by his active mind. Eventually he gave in and lit the candle at his bedside again, sitting up to look at Toothless curled up sound asleep on the far side of the room. Every so often, the dragon would give a rumble that was not quite a snore, and Hiccup smiled fondly.
Elsa cleared her throat from the top of the steps, and he turned to see her like a ghost in the darkness. She was not bothering with her sling, though she still often wore it during the day, and simply held her arm still at her side as she came to sit on the bed, facing him.

“Anna’s asleep?”

She nodded. He had not yet known her to come upstairs to talk to him while Anna was not, even though Anna had seen some disrupted nights as well since the events on Outcast Island. “Snoring. Though she did kick me in the shins a couple of times. Then I saw your light.”

“You have good eyes.”

“It shows in the darkness,” said Elsa, with a shrug.

Hiccup tucked up his right leg so that he could lean his arms across it. “I’m nervous about tomorrow,” he admitted. “Excited… but nervous.”

“Me too.” It was little more than a whisper, and Hiccup would admit that his own confession had been in part because he suspected she would say the same. “Going back.”

“Do you remember them?” said Hiccup. It was the one thing they had not spoken of, not when most of their planning had been done in front of at least one other person — whether that person was Anna, or Stoick, or even Gobber. “Would you recognise them?”

“I am not sure.” Elsa bit her lip.

Hiccup could not guess; the only people that he had not seen in many years were other chiefs or visitors from other islands, and he had met them only once and very faintly remembered them. But on the other hand, he knew that the wildlings had emphasised leaving Arendelle behind when they came to the Wildlands, and was not sure whether Elsa might have followed the same idea when she left Kiirkylla behind her in turn. He took her right hand with his, fingers still moving a little stiffly.

“It was a whirl of faces at first,” she said. “I was young, and scared. They told me to forget Arendelle. But Kiirkylla had more people than I had known in Arendelle — I did not see the servants, not really. I do not remember them. But some of them, I think I would know again.”

“Was there… one adult? Who took you in?”

Elsa nodded. “Hunthiof. He said…” she hesitated for a moment, her hand tightening on his. “It was only once. I should not have remembered it. But he told me that I reminded him of his daughter. I would know him again. But he was older… his beard was grey already. I do not know if he will be alive. How many will, from when I was among them.”

“Were there… a lot of deaths?”

She pursed her lips, eyes lingering on their linked hands rather than daring to move. He had been so focused on her, he supposed, that though he had asked questions about the lives of the wildlings he had never thought to ask about their deaths.

“I think so,” she said. Her fingertip traced small, distracted circles around the tip of his knuckle. “There were not many children born, that I remember… their numbers must have been falling. I do not remember any after me arriving from Arendelle.”

In the years since, their numbers could well have fallen further. Hiccup frowned, and had to admit
that he was intrigued by the idea, wondering what had happened and how the numbers of wildlings may have risen and fallen with time. Before Elsa, Berk had no idea at all of how many there might be, or even that most of them did not have magic at all, feared them as much as anyone else had.

“Then there might not be that many of them,” he said. He wondered whether they would have assumed Elsa dead in the intervening years, if they remembered her at all. Perhaps that would work in their favour. “I’ll give them my name first. We don’t need to offer yours unless they ask.”

“They were all older than me, the ones who had been sent out. The only ones my age had been born there. They would not use a princess’s name.”

Unlike the fashions in Arendelle. “Then we won’t say your name unless they demand it. Or you could even use a false one, if you wish.”

He remembered her talking to Albrekt, calling herself Anna. There had been a Queen named Anna before, wife of one of the kings of Arendelle, though Hiccup could never remember which. It had been a popular name in Arendelle for far longer, even if it had only come to the fore again in their generation.

But Elsa shook her head, and finally – it felt like finally – looked up. There were faint shadows beneath her eyes, but they had been there since Outcast Island, and at least there was not the furrow between her brows or the clouded look to her gaze. “No. I am Elsa, and as you say… they must choose to accept me, or to not.”

He felt the slightest tremble of her hand. The choice that had been made eight years ago hung unspoken between them.

“You gave Berk the gift of helping us in battle,” said Hiccup. “That went a long way. I know that meat and steel won’t be as much, to the wildlings, but… perhaps it will go some distance.”

She squeezed his hand. “I hope it will be so,” she said, keeping her Marulosen slow enough for him to follow the shape of it.

“Tomorrow,” he replied, just as carefully, “we shall find out.”
Hiccup was up in the darkness, dressed before he even heard the beginnings of movement from below, and had the insisted-upon armour under his arm as he made his way downstairs. It had caught on his tongue when he tried to explain to his father that it felt wrong to wear this armour, the same one that he had worn on Outcast Island; he could still feel how it had clung to him, sticky with sweat and other people’s blood. But it was not as if there was other armour to spare, and he knew that it had been Gobber who painstakingly repaired it and put in a second layer at heart-height on it.

All the same, he intended to wait until the last moment to put it on. He reached the bottom of the stairs just in time for Stoick to open the door to the back room, look him over, and sigh. It wasn’t the usual sound of frustration that Hiccup prompted, though, softer and sadder, and Hiccup felt a turn of guilt that within two moons of all the riders almost being killed, he was to be facing another of their enemies.

“We’ll be fine, Dad,” he said. He and Elsa had discussed a dozen contingency plans, a dozen ways that they could get out if it became too dangerous. Most, but not all, had been down to Elsa’s magic. They both hoped not to have to use Toothless, knowing that would risk ending forever what hope of peace they had.

“Aye,” Stoick replied. He didn’t sound all that sure. “Now come on, let’s get some food into you. The crate’s ready, with some strapping for Toothless to carry.”

Elsa emerged not long after, looking fully awake but nervous, while Anna seemed half-asleep and terrified to silence beside her. Gobber was the last to emerge, subdued for him, and it was Stoick who ushered them through breakfast and set about helping Hiccup into his armour.

Elsa was dressed plainly, warmer than she would need so as not to draw attention to herself, with her hair carefully done up in the same crowning braid that Astrid had worn for the hólmganga. Hers might have been a little wonky at the back, but Hiccup still recognised both the shape and the intention. It was Gobber who gently pulled Elsa aside, and asked one more time whether she was sure that she did not want to wear some sort of armour as well.

Elsa clasped Gobber’s hand with both of hers. “I’m sure,” she said, though Hiccup had to strain to catch the words. “I know now what I can do.”

Finally, they were allowed to go, although Hiccup hugged both his father and Gobber, just once each, once he had the bundle of smaller gifts settled over his shoulder. Getting Toothless into the air was the easy bit, but they had not practised picking things up as much as some of the larger dragons had, and Gobber stepped in to help direct Toothless’s limbs around the barrel, as well as lifting some of the strapping so the dragon could grip it in his mouth.
Then they were in the air, no fanfare, just Stoick, Gobber and Anna watching them from the front step as the sun tried to break through the stringy clouds. Anna waved, at least as long as it took for Hiccup to be able to turn his eyes away and head back south over the Wildlands.

For all that he had promised his father that he would wait for sunrise, he knew that he had to be up early to still be able to catch the flickers of fire. He had taken a bearing by the mountains, but knew that he would not have time to linger in the air, even against the clouds. Toothless would stand out too much.

It was Elsa who tightened her hand on his shoulder, and when she pointed down into the deep green of the evergreen forests he followed the line of her arm and caught the flicker of movement.

“I see it.” Looking for a nearby clearing large enough for Toothless to land in, and take off from again if the need be, was easier than it might once have been. They knew each other better now. “All right. Let’s do this.”

There was the occasional faint spot of rain as they landed in a clearing that still had a huge fallen fir at its centre, and hints of thin fog that blurred away distance. But when they landed, Hiccup put a hand on Toothless’s forehead to still him, and held his breath to listen to the cool green-grey world around them.

For a moment, there was nothing, not even birdsong, then he caught a shift of something that he could not define more specifically than movement, and a single, shouted word. His eyes widened, and he looked across to see Elsa was looking sharply in the same direction that the sound had seemed to originate. She was breathing faster, but it slowed and calmed as he watched, and there was only a faint chill in the air around them that could just have been the Wildlands themselves.

He touched her shoulder, barely more than a brush, and she nodded without looking round. Hiccup felt more than a little nauseous as he nodded, but squared his shoulders, and adjusted the pack over his shoulder. Turning back to Toothless, he dropped to a knee for one moment, and stroked the dragon’s nose.

“All right, bud. I need you to stay,” they had been working on that word, “with the crate.” Hiccup pointed to the ground where they stood. “If we shout, you can come, all right? Otherwise we need you to stand guard.”

While the pair of them between them could probably have carried the crate, he did not want to risk Elsa’s shoulder, and it almost certainly would have made enough noise for them to be heard by the wildlings before they got anywhere near close enough to actually talk. And Hiccup neither wanted to be attacked, nor to lose them to the woods again.

Hiccup straightened up, backed up enough to be sure that Toothless would remain sitting, then gestured for him to lie down completely. For a moment Toothless resisted, and Hiccup really did not want to have to do this right now, but then with a huff he curled round beside the box and put his chin on his tail, looking at Hiccup dolefully.
“Soon,” said Hiccup. He had to be upfront with the wildlings, had to let them know the truth so they could make their decision fairly. But that did not mean charging straight in on dragonback.

He straightened up, repeated the gesture for Toothless to stay still, and backed up a few steps to make sure that it had taken. Tried to persuade himself that he was not taking things so slowly because of how nervous he was and, naturally, failed. When he finally turned to face Elsa, he could see the tension in the lines of her shoulders as well, and forced himself to be calm for her sake, if nothing else.

“How you want to take this?” he said, tapping the strap of the pack. Although he was going to do his best to make it clear that the gifts were from Berk, he suspected that whoever had them in their hands would be the one that the wildlings associated them with. He was more than willing for that to be Elsa. But she shook her head, hands tight on the ends of her sleeves, and he let it slip away again. “All right. Let’s move.”

He had landed as close as he dared, but it was still a few minutes of hiking through the damp grey morning, all the while feeling as if his heart pounding in his chest would be enough to give them away. It was a risk, he knew; the wildlings might choose to attack without waiting for an explanation, and he would not blame them for it. All that he could do is hope that they would miss, or that Elsa would be able to protect them, for long enough. Shouting, after all, was just going to guarantee they would leave.

Abruptly, Elsa stiffened, raising her right hand to stop him in his tracks. Her eyes skimmed back and forth in front of them, but the turn of her head suggested that she was listening instead.

“Hello?” she said, in Marulosen. He could hear the tightness of her voice, but knew that her words were still more fast and fluent than he could hope to be. “I know that you are there. Please, allow us to talk to you.”

There was silence. The air around them cooled slightly, so little that Hiccup would not have noticed it were he not all-too-aware of such these days, and Elsa’s fingers grew cold against Hiccup’s sleeve.

Then, finally, a man stood up from among the ferns and ragged bushes in front of them. Green and grey streaks broke up the lines of his face, and his clothes were all muted shades that had let him blend in. A leather sling was readied in one hand, and for all its simplicity Hiccup knew better than to consider it any less dangerous than a crossbow.

“You are not from the Village,” said the man, eyeing them both. Hiccup kept his hands in view, not above his head in a manner that might look guilty but part-raised all the same. “But you are too young to be tuuloveren.”

His accent was thicker than Elsa’s, and Hiccup did not recognise the word that he used to describe them. But he saw the flicker in Elsa’s expression, discomfort that she quickly pushed aside, and she raised her chin again.

“We just want to talk,” he said, knowing that his words were a little too careful, not flowing enough, but still recognisably Marulosen. That alone would hopefully be enough for the man to hesitate, and indeed he did, curiosity shading into his expression. “Is there someone to who…” he felt himself flub the form of the verb, and steadfastly did not curse in Northur. “To whom we can speak?”

“Where are you from?” he said.
Hiccup exchanged a glance with Elsa, who hesitated for a moment before nodding. He took a deep breath.

“I am from Berk. I want to stop the,” the word wouldn’t come. He had learnt the word for fighting, and it would not come to his tongue as the man looked at him sharply. Desperately, Hiccup looked at Elsa again.

“The fighting,” she provided. *Atestaavel*, yes, that would be the word. Hiccup tried to not look too embarrassed. “We want to stop the fighting.”

“Berk?” The man’s arm had twitched upwards again, sling swinging slightly but not yet going for the full turn. He rattled off something else, faster and angrier, something about *Marulosen* but Hiccup could not catch the words properly as he felt the first twinge of fear.

“I taught him,” said Elsa, slower and more careful. Hiccup understood this time, and took a deep breath. “I taught him to speak Marulosen.”

“I only speak a little,” Hiccup said. He did his best to look earnest, which was at least something that he knew he had some skill in. “But I wish to try.”

Elsa had laughed, the first time that he had formed the word *miireetutoolos* from the blocks of words that she had taught him. Not at his accent, she had quickly said, and struggled to explain but had eventually managed to say that it sounded old-fashioned, quaint somehow, like a child imitating the words of a grandparent or great-grandparent. She could not even explain why it sounded so strongly like that to her, just that it was the impression it gave, but neither of them could find another way for him to express quite what he meant. Besides, the effect might only work in their favour, in the end.

Still, the man paused, but his eyes were weighing them up now. Elsa had her cloak pushed back, to make it clear that she carried no weapons at her hips, and her boots were too light to hide knives in. Hiccup had gone without a cloak, although he saw the man’s eyes linger for a long time at the pack he carried.

“What is in there?” he said, finally.

Hiccup raised his hands a little higher, asking for understanding as he moved, then in slow steady motions swung the pack round in front of him and unlaced it. “I have brought things,” he said; he had suggested the word *gifts*, and Elsa had said that they would not take kindly to it. “Repayment, for what Berk has done. Steel,” he said firmly, and saw the flicker of interest no matter how quickly the man forced his expression neutral again, “and whetstones.”

He took a few steps forwards, then knelt and placed the bag on the ground between them, open and with its mouth facing the man. As he backed up, the man stepped out of the ferns completely, revealing the leather wraps about his legs and his sturdy boots. They were not in Viking styles, though; Hiccup only gave them a glance, forced himself not to stare, but saw them all the same. If anything, it reminded him of the boots that Kristoff had worn.

“Repayment?” the man said.

He reached the bag, and looked down briefly into it, then up at them again. A gesture to Elsa, and he rattled off something that sounded like an order but from which Hiccup could not make out enough words. Without a change in expression, Elsa undid her cloak, held it at arm’s length, and turned slowly around. Showing she had no weapons, then. When the man turned to Hiccup, he turned as well, without being told.
With a grunt, the man dropped to one knee, and rooted quickly through the bag with one hand. Hiccup saw him briefly draw out one of the sheathed knives, but he was keeping the sling readied and did not free his second hand to check the blade.

“Why?” he looked up again, eyes on Hiccup. From closer to, Hiccup could see that they were grey-blue, pale against the streaks of dark camouflage. “Why you, why now?”

“Me,” said Hiccup, “because I speak a little Marulosen. Now, because it is winter. I know that you come to Berk for meat in winter,” he added, careful on the phrase to make sure that it was just right. Marulosen had a different feel from Arendellen, the vowels drawn out and the sounds lower in his mouth, but both sounded to him slower than Northur. “I want to speak to you now, so there will be no fighting.”

Gods, this must have been what it was like for Elsa for moons. All careful words and only being able to say a ghost of what she wished to express, and she had not even had someone who could carefully plan certain sentences for her to use. He had been a child when he started learning Arendellen, had barely spoken a few words at six but by the age of nine had been comfortable enough. But Marulosen was not just a case of speaking to Anna, or understanding what the King of Arendelle was saying. He could only guess at what the wildlings might say.

“Berk will give you some of meat,” said Hiccup. The man frowned, and he scanned over the sentence again. “Some meat. It will be more good than fighting.”

He abruptly wished that he had learnt the word both, but it was too late to be asking that now.

“Is there someone to whom we can speak?” he said again.

It had taken more delving into Elsa’s memory for her to speak about those who led the wildlings. They did not have a chief, she had explained, did not have one leader. She remembered a group, who made the decisions together, and when one had been lost – left the Village one day to hunt and never returned – another had been chosen from among the adults to take his place. It made sense, Hiccup supposed. Rather than putting everything in one leader, when life was so dangerous, to have several would mean that there would always be someone no matter how bad the winter.

No matter if Arendelle, or Berk, found and killed several wildlings in one raid.

“Wait,” the man said, with a firm gesture aimed firmly at Hiccup. Well, at least given the circumstances it was probably meant for Hiccup’s benefit, rather than because he knew Hiccup had more of a tendency than most to wander. He whistled, the lilt almost like birdsong but no bird that Hiccup recognised, and after a long pause Hiccup caught a response just audible through the trees.

Heart in his throat, Hiccup glanced over to Elsa. She looked calm still, though the chill in the air gave the lie to that, and kept her eyes on the man with the sling. After a painfully long pause, a woman emerged from the ferns in turn, no camouflage on her cheeks but similarly dressed, an actual shortbow at her back. She looked them over, frowning.

The man waved to them and spoke, too quick for Hiccup to keep up with. He kept his eyes on Elsa instead, and from her steady gaze was fairly sure that the man was explaining roughly what they had said. But the woman shook her head, said something of which Hiccup only caught the word dangerous, and the man’s expression was grim agreement.

Elsa’s hand clenched to a fist, and her posture shifted, as if she were about to reach for a knife. The air turned tense between them, and Hiccup could feel something slipping away, the fragment of trust.
“Please!” he said, louder than before. Both of the wildlings looked at him sharply, the woman with one hand out of sight behind her. He had a worrying feeling she had been partway to drawing her bow. “Berk wants to make good what he has done.” No, he was not right, it should have been it and they were both frowning at him now but at least it was better than reaching for their weapons. “I know about Arendelle. I know about the Silver Priests.”

The woman’s face did not flicker, but the man’s eyes went wide, the effect almost comical against the camouflage.

“I know it that you are not what we thought,” he continued, sure that his grammar was getting worse but hoping that his point, at least, was getting through. “Berk made mistakes. We are sorry.” Meesulliren; that, at least, had been easy to learn. “I know it that you want not this. The Silver Priests they have hurt you. I want to help for you.”

“Berk knows what we are,” said Elsa, and it took Hiccup a moment to hear the we and feel, all over again, as if his breath were being pushed out of his lungs. Her clothing might have been more Berkian, but even in minutes her accent had grown stronger again, and her Marulosen was more fluid than his was ever likely to be. Even slowed down for his benefit. She spoke to them like equals, in the way that she spoke to Hiccup or to Astrid and not in the more careful way that she still addressed even Stoick or Gobber. “Arendelle’s tuuloveren, or their children. Berk sees now that we do not have to be their enemies, that perhaps we can help them, and they us. Instead of fighting and death, they want to make peace, so that at least we will have one less enemy.”

“He is from Berk,” the woman said, with a nod to Hiccup but her eyes never leaving Elsa. “You are not.”

“I was not.”

Finally, the woman’s left hand came into view again, without moving her bow. It got a little easier to breathe. “If you leave now, perhaps… we can let you go,” she said. Even Hiccup heard the can, not the will. “If you do not, if you come with us…”

Elsa said something, soft, words that Hiccup did not know at all. But the woman looked them over one last time, and then nodded.

“I will take them,” she said to the man. “You stay on watch.”

The man picked up Hiccup’s pack, and tossed it back in his direction; Hiccup let it fall to the ground in front of him before stepping forward and scooping it up again. Better than sudden movements, he hoped.

“Come,” the woman said, with a single sharp beckoning movement. “If you wish to talk.”

There was a surreal, dreamlike edge to it all. It had been years since Berk had made any new treaties; some, like Arendelle and Berserker Island, had been made long before even Stoick’s time.
as Chief, while others, like the Meatheads, had been hammered into place in Stoick’s first few years. The closest thing would be the peace with the dragons, and that had been all at once and without even a word being spoken.

But perhaps this was a little like the beginning of the peace with dragons, Hiccup supposed. How it had truly started, with Toothless, sitting in the cove trying to say and to do the right things. Fish and cleaned wounds and body language.

The woman walked where she could keep them in her peripheral vision, and Hiccup kept his hands in view, one on the strap of his pack mostly for something to do with it. Elsa had her hands folded in front of her, oddly regal with her gliding steps, and he wondered whether that was to do with keeping them in sight as well.

It was not far; from the clearing they passed into the scattered trees and patchy ferns, and finally Hiccup caught the low rumble of talk on the edge of his hearing. A shift of the wind, and he smelled woodsmoke, and with hope and worry tight together in his chest he almost wished that he could take Elsa’s hand as they stepped out into a second, smaller, clearing.

It looked like any Viking camp, he saw in a moment, and the thought was so incongruous he was struck by a momentary urge to laugh. Four tents, shabby but sound-looking enough, circled a firepit, and perhaps a dozen men and women were scattered around in twos or threes of conversation. They all fell silent as Hiccup and Elsa came into view, and the air grew tense around them, unspoken fear again.

“Rosa,” the woman who had been leading them said. One of the other wildlings turned, acknowledging more with a tilt of her head than with any actual words. “They wish to speak to you. They say that they come from Berk, and that they want to make peace.”

Ten, Hiccup finally managed to count, plus the woman leading them, the man with the sling, and however many more might be currently out of their sight. Enough to make him think of Outcast Island, and for sweat to prickle cold on the back of his neck, but more as well than he had expected. Even having heard of the Village, it had been hard to shake the image of wildlings in ones and twos, solitary figures in the Wildlands. They all looked to be twice his age or more, several of them with grey-streaked hair, including the woman who had been addressed as Rosa. Their clothes were a mismatched selection of leathers, furs and fabric, all heavily worn and heavily patched, but sensible and sturdy against the weather north of the mountains.

“Peace?” said Rosa. Her accent was a little more Arendellen than the others, to Hiccup’s ear, a little tighter and higher in the throat. There was more grey in her hair than black, he realised, and heavy lines around her mouth and across her brow. The marks of frowning. She did not carry a bow, that he could see, but at her belt was a broad hatchet showing notches, but still shining with care. She folded her arms across her chest as she regarded them. “I’ve not known Berk to be a place for peace.”

“We want to change that,” said Hiccup. Rosa set her gaze on him; it was uncomfortably direct, holding eye contact for too long. “We know it that we were wrong.” He took a deep breath. “My name is Hiccup Haddock of Berk. I am here because I speak a little of Marulosen, and I hope that I can talk to you.

“Berk was afraid.” He had taken great care to put it in the past tense, repeating over and over until he was sure he would not make an error at the crucial moment. “It was afraid because of things which it did not know. Because it was afraid, it fought. And we are sorry.”

Rosa’s expression did not flicker, but he heard murmurs from the other wildlings, and in the
corners of his vision saw them exchanging words with each other. He could not keep eye contact for so long as she could, and had to glance away for an instant, down to the axe at her belt, her folded arms, before he could bring himself to look back up again.

“You speak for all of Berk?”

Well, he could understand the dubious tone in her voice on that one, if he had understood correctly. Even in his leather armour, he did not look like much of a representative. “Yes,” he replied, firmly. “I am come because of the language. I have the agreement of the Chief. The word, in Northur, it is *envoy*.”

He glanced over at Elsa. She had not known if there was a Marulosen word for the same, either, and though he knew it in Arendellen he was not sure that it would be too popular. She explained it, instead, brief but clear, and he saw a few nods of understanding.

“We know it that you are human,” said Hiccup. This, he knew, was more of a risk to say. “We know it that the Silver Priests are to blame. Before, we did not know. And we are sorry that we did not try to find out.”

“You have done something very dangerous,” Rosa said, finally. But there was a note in her voice, one that sounded less as if she were dismissing a pair of children who had somehow wandered in. Her words slowed, though whether it was thoughtful or for his benefit, he could not say. “Dangerous to yourselves. Usually we kill those who find us – Berkian or Arendellen.”

“Because they killed you,” Hiccup acknowledged. “In a circle. It is time to break it.” He pulled off his pack again and proffered it to her. “In apology. I have bought gifts – steel, whetstones. Things which I hope are useful. Berk can trade. Steel, food, fish.”

“And what would Berk want in return?” she said, or at least he was pretty sure that was the gist of it. It was the response he expected, even if the words were fast enough that the meaning slipped through his grasp.

“Furs;” he gestured vaguely towards one of the wildlings, who had a particularly fine white pelt across his shoulders. Fox or hare, perhaps. “Plants that do not live in Berk.” That was the wrong word again, he was sure of it, but hopefully close enough. “But peace. Peace is the most… the most.”

He felt as if he were running out of clear words, like his thoughts were getting clogged up and fewer of them were getting through properly. His heart was still racing and his mouth was dry, and he had bought water but left it in Toothless’s saddlebag because, perhaps, he was an idiot. The seconds stretched out, and he was acutely aware of himself, little more than a boy in armour slightly too large for him, offering a bag of knives to a woman with an axe at her belt and ten hard-eyed fellow wildlings around her.

Instead, though, Rosa looked across to Elsa. “And you? Why have you come here?”

“I taught Hiccup to speak Marulosen,” Elsa replied. “I still speak it better; it is my language. And I want to see peace, as well.”

Pursing her lips just slightly, Rosa looked over to the woman who had escorted them in. With a shrug, the woman said something about speaking a language. Hiccup hoped that it was that it made sense to send the two who did. Then she gave them another once-over, and Hiccup was fairly sure that what she added meant, “And they would be children in Arendelle, but not in Berk.”
“You speak it,” said Rosa. “So I can hear. But how does one of us come to live in Berk?”

“I was hurt,” said Elsa. They wanted something resembling calm first, a time when there was not already a knife-edge to the air, before telling them the whole truth. “My ankle. Hiccup helped me, to walk again, to speak Northur. Berk took me in.”

“When? This last winter, one of us was killed in Berk.”

“His name was Albrekt,” said Hiccup, sharply. This time, Rosa looked truly surprised, as his hands tightened on the strap of the bag. “We talked to him. I think… I think he did not know it was true, he…”

He looked across at Elsa, a little desperately. “He did not believe us,” she supplied, a word that she had used once or twice but which Hiccup had not managed to take in properly. Yes, believe, that was the word. “I saw what Berk did. They gave him food, and blankets, and wanted to help him.”

One of the men said something, snarled it really, with a brutal gesture to his neck. Elsa fired back, the same verb made into a different word and Hiccup knew in his gut what she meant. That he had done it to himself.

Taking a deep breath, Elsa gestured to Hiccup, hand and movement soft again. “Hiccup brought Albrekt back to you. He did not want you to not know what had happened. For Albrekt to disappear.”

“How?” said the man. From the look that Rosa shot him, lips tight, he may have been forgetting some unspoken place or interrupting a conversation which she had been trying to steer. He said something else, waved to Hiccup, added something about Albrekt with a slap of his chest and a flex of his muscles.

Well, that wasn’t too hard to translate either.

“With help,” said Elsa. Her words were slow and controlled again. “It is not just Hiccup. It is Berk who wants to have peace. We know we have taken a risk coming to you this day, but we do it for that peace.”

Less risk than the wildlings knew, so far at least. Hiccup knew that he had to reveal Elsa’s magic before the day was through, reveal Toothless as well. He did not know when he might be able to meet with them again, and did not want secrets lingering in the meantime. But for all that he carried no weapons, he knew he was not in anywhere near as much danger as it appeared.

“Please,” Hiccup said. He gestured with the bag again, mimed throwing it over, and Rosa gave him a curt nod. He all but held his breath as he tossed it across, hoping desperately he would manage a reasonable throw, and was relieved when it landed slightly on one of her feet but mostly presentably.

She hunkered down, looked briefly through the bag, then shrugged off her cape to lay it on the slushy ground. Each item she pulled out carefully, even drawing the knives to look them over, and laid them in neat rows. Four good knives, eight sheathes altogether, six whetstones in varying grades. Twelve iron needles, and eight fire steels. It did not look like very much spread out like that.

“Berk has a difficult year,” said Hiccup. He knew something was wrong about that sentence, but was not sure what. He did not want to risk having to say anything more in Northur, though; it would be suspicious, would be a question. Something that they did not know, which
would all too reasonably put them on edge again. “But in spring, I hope there can be more.”

Rosa did not respond to his words. She looked over the bag, in curt practiced movements, checking its joints and stitching. It was not brand new, but had not seen too much wear. She laid it down on the cape as well, and looked up at Elsa, without rising.

“Henonevedotlotii,” she said, flatly. Elsa hesitated, and Rosa waved to the various iron goods. “How else would Berk know what we need?”

“It is because of Elsa that Berk understands now,” said Hiccup. “Elsa taught me. Elsa showed me. What Maruloet is, what it needs. And we are sorry,” he added, over and over again, a refrain that he knew he could not speak enough. He took a deep breath. “We have meat for you, as well. It is waiting,” a jerk of his thumb towards the woods behind them. “Behind. It is what you need in winter, yes?”

“Why didn’t you bring it here?” said Rosa.

At least, he hoped that was what she said. Otherwise he was about to sound very silly. “It is too heavy, for two,” Hiccup said, pointing between Elsa and himself. Truth be told, they might just about have managed it if Elsa’s shoulder was healed up, but it was still heavily bandaged beneath her tunic. Keeping her hands clasped could have been about keeping that arm still as well, he supposed.

Either he was right, or he was amusing, as a couple of the Wildlings stifled chuckles. It was better than screaming, or weapons.

“Come,” Rosa said. Straightening up, she waved them towards her, and caught the eyes of another of the wildlings to nod to the ground. “Sit at the fire with me. I will hear you out.”

He had been hoping that he would have managed most of the talking by now, but Rosa sat on one of the fallen logs that had been dragged to form a triangle around the fire, and gestured for them to take one of the others. Hiccup sat closer, not just to keep Elsa that little further away but because it put Rosa on his left-hand side, uninjured and faster to react.

Elsa spoke first, with a lot of words that Hiccup did not know, and given her usual still hands when she spoke he was fairly sure that her hand gestures were for his benefit. He caught his name, and a gesture to her ankle that must have been about the injury, and a mention of Northur. Then onwards – her fingertips to her lips had to be food, a sweep down herself must have been clothes, and he caught his father’s name amid it all. As she spoke, her words sped up, until they were too fluid for him to have a chance again, but there was still something wonderful and terrible about watching her speak with such obvious eloquence.

She seemed to catch herself, and took a deep breath, before gesturing to Hiccup. “Then,” she said, the word weighty and deliberate, “I told Hiccup. About what wildlings are. About the Silver Priests.”
Words whose weight she had not comprehended at the time, He could still remember her confusion, the hardening of her eyes when she thought that Stoick was accusing her of lying. For all that she had hidden things, he supposed, she had never lied. The distinction must have meant a lot.

“Berk did not know it,” said Hiccup. “We believed,” his pronunciation of the word might have been slightly off, echoing what he remembered Elsa saying, but she gave a minute nod in the corner of his eye, “what Arendelle told to us. Arendelle told Berk – the Silver Priests told Berk,” he corrected himself, “that they did not know it, why you lived here.”

“How we came to live here,” said Elsa, softly.

“We know now. It is the Silver Priests. They say things. They lie.” Gods, but he had seen that, with what they had made of Anna these last moons. “They make Arendelle fear you, they make Berk fear you. But now we do not believe them.”

“Berk and Arendelle are liitoen,” said Rosa. Again, she probably could not help to see Hiccup glance at Elsa, and for explanation held up her two fingers crossed over each other. “Berk’s Chief. Stoick.” She nodded at Elsa. “And King Agdarr.”

Elsa drew in her breath, sharply, and Hiccup had to tamp down the urge to take her hand.

“King Agdarr is dead,” he said.

“What?” For the first time, Rosa’s voice softened, and she rocked back where she sat. The fog was freezing around them, a damp glitter in her hair, and Hiccup saw the cloud of his breath a little too clearly for his comfort. He wished that he could reach out to Elsa, but knew that he could not, and only hoped that the wildlings would not notice the unnatural cold. “When?”

“Two years,” said Hiccup, and gods help him he could not remember how to say over two years and knew he could not ask Elsa in such a moment. “And some moons. The sea, a storm,” he made a vague gesture from his hand, but it was clear from Rosa’s slow nod that she understood.

She averted her eyes, brow furrowing, and he was not sure what to make of it. He tried again to guess her age, but could not say; perhaps in her late thirties, but early to have her hair turn grey; perhaps nearing sixty but by necessity strong to continue fighting for life. Agdarr had only been young when his daughters had been born, in any case, and there was every chance that Rosa was older than him, and knew it.

“His daughter, then,” said Rosa finally. Her voice had turned weary. She seemed to tear her eyes back upwards again, and though she met Hiccup’s gaze as steadily as before some of the stone had gone from it.

Hiccup nodded. “Queen Anna. But the Silver Priests, they are powerful now. What happens, it is not her.”

“That is the other reason that we have come to you now,” said Elsa. Her voice was shaking, but clear. “The Silver Priests have more power, and we do not know what they might do.”

Rosa snorted, looking aside again as she reached up to rub at her bottom lip with her thumb.

“What?” said Hiccup. “Please. What do you know?”

She stared him down.
“I know about the Four Trials,” he said. “That the Trial of Earth, it is what they did.”

“It’s not the Trial of Earth they’re using now,” said Rosa.

The grim edge to her voice made Hiccup’s stomach turn. Gods, Kristoff, someone who used actual magic and knew of the trolls, who now was spying for the exiled Queen. He clenched his right hand, then regretted it as pain flared through the scarring across his palm, but at least it dragged him back to the moment.

“The Silver Priests lied to Berk,” he said. “We know it is little, to what the Silver Priests did to you all. But we know it that they are the enemy. That you are not. That you might not be.”

“I believe you,” said Rosa, softly.

It made hope flare in his chest, her tone and the way that she sat opposite them, with the rest of the group a few paces back but still easily within earshot. He knew that there was someone behind him, that he was exposing his back, but the edge of danger was gone from the air and he finally dared to admit that it felt like making progress.

Rosa looked Elsa over one more time. “You are young,” she said, statement and not judgement. “And of Maluroet. Too young to be tuuloveren. What is your name? Who were your parents? They may still be alive.”

Though he still did not take her hand, Hiccup shifted, just enough that his right foot rested against Elsa’s left. A cold breeze washed across them, distinct enough for him to feel it ruffle through his hair, then was abruptly gone as Elsa’s left hand clenched to a fist on her knee.


“There hasn’t been one in eleven years, not since…”

Hiccup saw it fall into place, saw Rosa’s eyes go wide and her jaw slack as her words trailed off into nothingness. He was not quite fast enough, though, and Rosa jumped to her feet with a cry, hand going to the hilt of her hatchet, as in a heartbeat the clearing took on the edge of weaponry around them again. Hiccup jumped to his feet as well, hands raised placatingly and glancing about, trying to see all around him at the same time, forgetting Marulosen altogether in his haste and not realising until he heard himself speaking in Northur. “Hey! Hey, hey, hey! No, stop!”

“The ice girl,” Rosa said, her eyes still on Elsa.

Elsa remained in her seat, though Hiccup saw the move of her feet, ready to push up in a heartbeat. Her right hand was loose in her lap, her left clenched, and if he looked closely enough he thought that he saw a tiny glimmer of light in the centre of it.

“Is this where you have been, for seven years?” said Rosa. Her words became faster, but sharper, the vowels cutting closer to Arendellen. Whether it was that or panic that let Hiccup keep up, he did not know. “You froze the houses and ran with the dawn. And they said that we should have known because of your hair…”

She finally seemed to remember that Hiccup was there at all. “You know,” she added, as if in dawning horror. “You know about the magic.”

“All of the hatred, it is made by the Silver Priests,” said Hiccup. “Berk does not follow their hatred. Yes, we know about the magic that Elsa has it. But we do not hate it, we do not hate her.” He took a deep breath. They had not attacked yet; he had to cling to that, that flicker of hope still
amid the bursts of fear darkening around him. “The Silver Priests say that magic is dangerous, it is always dangerous. But it is not always dangerous. It can be good.

“It is no more dangerous than words. The Silver Priests use words like a weapon for their hatred. But we do not hate words.” A tool, such a human tool, one that could not even exist without a human hand to wield it. And one that could be so misused, as well. Hiccup realised that he was shaking, that there was a buzzing in his ears and his heart racing in his chest, but all of it was still shot through with hope. “Berk does not believe what the Silver Priests say about you. We do not believe what they say about people like Elsa.”

“It is because of magic that we were forced from our homes,” said Rosa.

“Because of the Silver Priests,” Hiccup repeated, as forcefully as he dared. He hoped it would not sound like desperation.

“I never forced you from your home,” Elsa said. Force; she had first used that word with bitterness on her tongue. She had been forced to enter the Wildlands, she had said. “I never set the Trial of Earth, and sent a child to die. I never set the Trial of Fire, and burned a person alive. I never took children from their parents, husbands from their wives, grandparents from their families. The Silver Priests have done that, and worse.” Her eyes, the blue of deep ice, were unwavering. “If you ask us to leave now, then we will leave. But I will not let you harm us. And I will return to Berk.”

There was a flicker of a warning there. Send them away, declare that Berk were still their enemies, and the wildlings would make an enemy of Elsa as well.

“You said ‘we’,” said Rosa, simply.

“We were all sent to Maluroet by the Silver Priests because of their fear. How different can we be?”

He saw the momentary, gut response, to declare that they were nothing alike. And in their clothes they did look very different, Elsa with her hair pulled back and her Berkian tunic neat and tidy, Rosa in her patched leather layers with her curls dishevelled in the pinpoint snow beginning to form. But Rosa checked herself, a physical start, and perhaps it was Elsa’s words or perhaps it was the simple and undeniable common tongue they spoke which caught her.

“Rosa?” said one of the wildling women, older, mostly-white hair scraped into a bun and a scar on her right cheek.

Rosa stood for a few seconds, breathing hard. “I will need to talk to the others,” she said finally, and Hiccup knew for sure that she did not intend to kill them then and there. It was morbidly reassuring. “I cannot make this decision alone.”

Elsa shot Hiccup a glance, and knowing the only other thing that they had to share, he nodded. “Then there is something else that you should know,” she said. “About Berk.”

“What about them?” said Rosa.

It was Hiccup who replied. “We have dragons.”

Chapter End Notes
tuulover(en) = noun: a person (people) who were banished to the Wildlands due to the Trial of Earth; exiles
henonevedotlotii = You (/thou, singular) advised him*
liitoen = allies

*Rosa actually says "them", not "him" - "hen" has no gender and is used for any person or any word which is considered animate, like 'family' or 'village'.
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

Oof, sorry this one is so late today, folks. My team at work trying to do a week's worth of work in two days made those two days rather... intense.

There's a handful of Marulosen words. Translations are in mouseover, or at the end.

ETA: And I just realised that this chapter tipped me over the two million words on AO3 mark! Holy shit!

For a moment, there was silence. Perhaps they thought that he had said something wrongly; it was not an unfair idea, given how much he knew he had fumbled already that day. Or perhaps they simply thought that he was referring to the fact that Berk had often been attacked by dragons, that they ‘had dragons’ in the same way that a barn might ‘have rats’. If the words could work that way in Marulosen.

Rosa blinked at him a few times, then shrugged, artificially airy against her stern expression. “It has been… what,” she glanced at a couple of the others. “A year?” Nods, muttered assent. “We have seen fewer dragons in the Wildlands. Are you saying that there are more attacks, in Berk?”

At least, that was what he thought the words meant. His head really was starting to hurt. Hiccup shook his head, but lowered his hands and let himself fall to a more neutral stance again. “No. Berk and the dragons, we have peace. We are not enemies. We are…” trailing off, he raised his hand, and made the simple sign that Rosa had used for Arendelle and Berk. Fingers entwined.

“Liitoen,” said Elsa.

It seemed to take a heartbeat to sink in, then Rosa gave a single sharp exclamation and there were shouts from the other wildlings around them. He heard the whip of wood against the air, like readying a staff or spear, and heard the definite sound of a bow being drawn back. As he spun to his left, he saw the woman who had led them into the clearing, bow at full draw and looking straight and steady down the arrow towards him.

“No!” At least it came out in Marulosen, as he threw up a hand towards her.

But he did not have to, it seemed, not as light sparked on the tip of the woman’s arrow, and as her eyes widened in shock ice crawled along the length of the wood in glittering white. The crack of the breaking wood seemed too loud in the air, then the arrow shattered and fell and the woman was forced to release the string carefully, quick but even, lest she risk injuring herself by allowing the string to snap back empty.

“I said that I will not allow you to harm us,” said Elsa, more warning in her voice.

He risked a glance at her. She was still seated, and he was struck with the bizarre realisation that she looked like the controlled one in this situation, the only civilised being in a clearing full of half-feral squabbling children.
“Berk asked questions,” said Hiccup, carefully. “And we found lies. So we are asking new questions, asking for what is true. Berk and the dragons, we have peace. We understand them, they understand us.”

Rosa’s lips pressed together, so hard that they turned pale, the muscles in her jaw tightening. She still had her right hand on her hatchet, though the touch was looser at least. “Perhaps you are mad,” she said, softly. He barely caught the words, and was only even halfway sure of them because of the sad, pitying tone in her voice. “The mad boy and the ice girl.”

“He can show you,” said Elsa. “There is a dragon, waiting, in the forest. You will not find him,” she added, raising her voice slightly as talk started up again, “if Hiccup does not show you where he is. But… Hiccup can show you. What dragons really are. The truth.”

Rosa’s eyes did not leave Hiccup as she asked another question, something about why, and gods help him he was just too tired to make it all out. It had not even been a long conversation, but his head was pounding, his legs turned to water.

“Because it is the truth,” said Elsa. Her glance at Hiccup had concern in it, but it could have been for any number of things and he knew that he could not even ask which it was. “We will not lie to you.”

Deliberately, it was the same word that they had used to describe the actions of the Silver Priests. Hiccup felt in his gut that his only chance with the wildlings was to set himself up in opposition to them, not just in actions and in acceptance, but in contrasting the words which he used to describe them. It was true, every word was true, but more than that he needed them to understand that it was true and that he did not want to manipulate or deceive them in the way that the Silver Priests had manipulated and deceived Arendelle for so long.

“Itinokestatito dragon?” said Rosa, disbelief at least an improvement on pity. All that he understood was the word dragon.

“Made a friend of,” Elsa replied, slow and deliberate. It had the air of a correction about it, although Hiccup was not sure what was being corrected.

Rosa looked to the other wildlings watching her carefully, then pointed to two of them in turn. They approached warily, the older woman with the scars and a man with ashy blonde hair, who had a short staff in one hand and, at his hip, a wooden baton which had down one side a series of chips of stone, like teeth. Hiccup knew well enough that the right stone could be as sharp as any steel blade, and these ones looked to be made of blue-dark flint. The two came up to Rosa, and she guided them both away a few steps, dropping her voice and speaking in fast, quiet Marulosen to both of them. They replied in kind, both glancing over to Hiccup and Elsa from time to time, frowning and looking agitated.

He looked over to Elsa, and she shook her head. It was apologetic, not regretful, and he hoped that it only meant that she could not make out what was being said. The discussion seemed to become more heated, and once the older woman snapped Rosa’s name, but Rosa hissed something back and they fell to a murmur again.

Hoping that the movement would be small enough to not draw attention to him, Hiccup curled his hand up within his sleeve to where he had hidden a whistle. It was the bone one from the summer, so high-pitched that he could not hear it but apparently within the range of dragons to judge by how it had confused Toothless and wild Terrors alike. Carefully, he slipped it loose of the first set of stitches that he had put into the inside of his sleeve, but did not yet pull it totally free.
Finally, looking begrudging, the older woman nodded, and Rosa strode past them both again. “Iiv,” she said. “Bring the dragon here.”

“He is waiting with the meat,” said Elsa. “It would be better if we were to take you to see him.”

“I will not be taken to a dragon like some neturi,” said Rosa, her tone turning more scornful. There was a snort from one of the wildlings – laughter? Derision? Hiccup was not even sure – that she did not bother commenting on.

Hiccup nodded quickly, before Elsa could press the matter on his behalf. “All right. To…” he gestured to the clear area at the edge of the trees, trampled with footprints and half-frozen mud. The clear area, he was trying to say, but he was not sure how clearly his meaning got across. Certainly Rosa was still half-frowning at him.

He sighed. Well, when all else failed, sometimes the only option left was to just do things. He walked towards the area, and though there was a shout from one of the wildlings Rosa barked something that brought silence again. He stopped as soon as he was beyond the tents, in an area where Toothless would be able to get his wings just open enough to beat even if he had no chance of getting them to their full span.

“Elsa,” he said, with a nod to her.

He had tried to learn this speech, had driven himself to growls of frustration, but it had refused to click even when Anna had written down the sounds phonetically for him. Instead he fell silent as Elsa said the warning words, that they were to lower their weapons, to not shout or scream, to not do anything that might seem like attack. That dragons still remembered what it was like to be hated and hunted, and – he could hear the edge to her voice as she spoke – that they all knew how easy it was to lash out against something that seemed dangerous. There was a dangerous quiet, and then Rosa said something, nodded, and Hiccup allowed himself to breathe deeply again.

His palms were damp as he cupped them around his mouth. This part was, he was quite aware, going to look a lot less impressive.

“Toothless!”

Even with all of his lungpower behind it, the sound seemed to thud damply against the fog, as if it were going to reach no distance at all. Hiccup grimaced, and took what he hoped was a deeper breath.

“Toothless!”

This time he heard it, a low answering dragon’s call that put a smile on his face before he could even think. One or two of the wildlings moved, sharply, and Elsa bit out words that made them fall still again.

The seconds passed painfully slowly, until Hiccup saw the shifting shadow through the fog, the familiar outline that lifted his heart in his chest. “It’s all right, bud,” he said, slipping into Northur and crossing what remained of the clearing to almost the first of the trees. “You can come out.”

Toothless rumbled, a neutral sound that lifted into curiosity as he padded into view. His wings twitched, held proud of his body, but at a wave of Hiccup’s hand he folded them to his sides again and raised his head a little from its low, predator’s slink. Hiccup held out a hand, and Toothless brushed against it just for a moment before turning to pan around the semi-circle of wildlings watching them, the air breathless and hushed.
“Maanehensen Toothless,” he said. It would be too much work to explain the name if they tried to translate that as well. He ran one hand down the centre of Toothless’s brow, slow and tender, and the gesture made him feel more exposed than being in front of them in light armour ever had. It was what he needed, though, a way to show as quickly as possible what they now had, what they now were. Of course, Toothless of all of the dragons, with his saddle and the winking red of his tailfin as his tail swayed back and forth cautiously, showed that the trust went both ways between them. But standing unarmed, with his hand against a dragon’s skin, he knew was an image that would stick with them.

“Toothless,” repeated Rosa, tongue clumsy on the Northur sounds. “He has a name.”

Not a question, at least. “What Berk thought was wrong. This,” keeping his right hand on Toothless’s neck, he waved with his left, “is what dragons can be.”

The wildlings muttered between themselves, while Rosa fell silent and looked… almost curious, he thought, almost confused, a faint frown deepening the line between her brows again. She looked over at Elsa, then jerked her head towards Toothless; Elsa paused, frowning in turn, then Rosa repeated the gesture more forcefully and Hiccup guessed that Rosa wanted to see how Toothless would respond to more, different, people.

Elsa stood up, chin still raised and shoulders steady. She looked short and slight beside the wildlings, but calm, as she swept through and made her way to stand in front of Toothless. Only then was Hiccup able to really face her, and she gave him a true smile even if it had a hint of nervousness about the edge of it. As she drew closer, Toothless perked up, raising his flaps, and when Elsa extended her hand he stepped forwards quickly to nudge against it in turn.

The most telling moment, though, Hiccup knew was yet to come. He caught Rosa’s gaze and waved her over with his right hand, trying to look encouraging without lapsing into over-enthusiasm. Rosa asked Elsa something, voice tight and, even to Hiccup, clearly hiding fear behind annoyance; Elsa gave a simple, one-word reply.

Rosa’s approach was more cautious, and Toothless stiffened up in response, probably to the unwavering intensity of Rosa’s stare or the controlled way she moved, as predatory as anything Hiccup had seen. He made a hushing sound, hoping it would help, but Toothless remained tense.

“Like this,” said Hiccup, holding up one hand, soft and flat. Rosa looked at him in clear confusion.

Mercifully, Elsa took over again, holding her left hand flat and gesturing to it with her right as she spoke, the palm, the turn of the wrist. Rosa stopped, a few feet from Toothless, and stretched out her hand towards him. The shape of her hand was all wrong, still so curled it was almost as if she was about to pluck fruit from a tree, and Elsa added something else that made her flatten it out and spread her fingers instead.

“Yes,” Hiccup said. “Good.” He waved her closer again. She hesitated, then stepped in, until her hand was perhaps only a foot from Toothless’s face. His eyes were not on the hand, though, or even the arm behind it; Toothless met her gaze, pupils narrow black slits in the green, and his tail gave a warning swish across the surface of the ground.

Hiccup looked desperately over at Elsa, and when she glanced round gestured to his own eyes in a manner that might have been a little frantic. Even Anna had needed the same pointer, and she did not have half the stare that Rosa did. Elsa quickly added something else, and Rosa’s lips pinched distrustfully but finally, slowly, she turned her gaze away to the distant sky.

There was a heavy silence, and Hiccup pleaded in his head for Toothless to accept this dangerous
stranger’s proffered hand. Just for now, just an offer of a chance, and just perhaps the wildlings would see how much Berk was willing to change. That if they could be friends with dragons, they were more than capable of finding peace with other humans, no matter their history. Hiccup held his breath, until it just began to ache.

Finally, Toothless stepped forwards, and gave the barest tap of his nose against Rosa’s hand. She jolted, probably shock and not feeling that rush of power but a recognition all the same, and Toothless backed up again quickly as she looked round.

She murmured something, soft and wondering, and when her eyes turned back to Hiccup there was a genuine surprise there, genuine respect.

“Who asked these questions?” she said. He frowned slightly, and cocked his head. “Of the dragons. Who asked the question of what they really were?”

He was not entirely sure of her words, but he caught the shape of her meaning.

“I did,” said Hiccup, softly. It was not a boast, gods, no, he could never think of it as a boast or necessarily some huge accomplishment. But once it had happened, it felt like breathing, like finding answers to questions that had been nagging in his mind all his life.

The respect became more definite in Rosa’s gaze. “And that is why you learned Marulosen.”

For that, he did not have such a good answer, and could only shrug. “Perhaps.”

They accepted the meat, as well, and though Hiccup made a clumsy offer to taste it himself and prove that it was good, it was met with slightly indulgent laughter and a comment that he was fairly sure amounted to the fact that they would be much more capable of working out what was edible than he was. To him, Rosa said that she would speak to the others from the Village; she gave Elsa a longer version, from which Hiccup could catch words and phrases but nowhere near all of the details, and Elsa nodded along with the look in her eyes which meant that she was storing away every word.

“At the solstice,” said Hiccup, “you may come to Berk, if you wish. We will give you more food, we will trade. It is our New Year,” he added, in case that might make more sense of the date. From the way that Rosa nodded, she might have understood what he was doing, for Berk, with the timing. “If you do not come, we will understand that you do not want trade.”

He nodded to Elsa, who took over again and explained more fluently, before answering a few crisp questions from Rosa and one from the man with the flint-toothed club. They could not have been anything too strange, as she did not need to pause or think about them along the way. Finally, Rosa nodded, an air of settling about it, then stepped across to Hiccup and stretched out her hand to him.

In truth, he had not thought of that at all. It caught Hiccup by surprise, and he hoped that it did not look like uncertainty before he caught hold of himself and grasped her hand in return. Her grip was
strong, tight lines of tendons rather than the overwhelming force that could be his father’s hold, but her gaze still had that too-long steadiness that was almost uncomforting.

“Thank you,” he said, meeting that gaze. “Thank you. I know this is much to ask of you.”

“You ask for things, yes,” said Rosa, “but you give them also.” She released his hand, and looked all three of them over again, her eyes lingering longest on Elsa. “When I return to Kiirkylla, they will ask how Berk has learned our language. Will I speak of you?”

“I do not want them to fear Berk because of me.”

Rosa nodded, slow, considering. “You are very different than you were,” she said, after a moment. “What you did today, you meant to. You did not, as a child, did you?”

Elsa shook her head.

“That was what was frightening,” said Rosa bluntly. “What you might do without even meaning to. You could have killed us.”

Hiccup saw Elsa swallow, say the slight tightening of her shoulders, but she held her ground and did not shy away from the tone of accusation that ran beneath it all. “As you said,” she replied. “I am very different than I was.”

Brusquely, Rosa nodded. “Then for now… well. It would be best not to talk about you hetivaal. But in the future, perhaps. Is there…” her tone softened, just a fraction, though she looked more uncomfortable as it did so. “Is there someone, though…”

This time, it was Elsa who hesitated. “There was a man,” she said, only a slight shake in her voice. “Hunthiof. Is he…”

Rosa shook her head. “I’m sorry.”

For a moment, Elsa closed her eyes, and Hiccup caught a glitter at the corner of one that might have been a tear, or ice, or both. But when she opened them again, her expression was calm, and only the way that she swallowed and the twitch at the corner of her mouth gave her away. “Thank you,” she said, quietly.

This time, he allowed himself to touch the back of her arm, albeit briefly. He had seen that hearing about Agdarr had been hard enough; it must have been worse, to talk about the loss of two fathers in one day. Perhaps it was not so strange to think that the wildlings had told her so frequently, so desperately, to forget.

He had not prepared for explaining about Toothless’s tail, but probably should have done, as when the wildlings started pointing and saying things that definitely sounded like questions, and Elsa sounding a little more flustered as she replied to them. Hiccup saw them looking at his left foot more curiously, as well, and for the first time in a year felt awkward about it. At Berk, he knew that people looked at the metal, but here he could not even know what it was that they were saying.

As it was, all that he could do was try not to feel too much like a shop display as Elsa, looking more than a little uncomfortable herself, managed to extract them from the conversation. At least he had prepared an ending and farewells, though, and managed to get through them with a minimum of stumbling. Rosa did not shake Elsa’s hand, and Elsa did not offer, but when Elsa asked people to step back so that Toothless could take off, Rosa made it a sharper, barked order. Rosa, at least, was looking straight at Hiccup’s foot as he clipped it into the stirrup.
Elsa was trembling as she climbed into the saddle behind Hiccup, cold to the touch even through the layers between them. He caught Rosa’s eye, meant to wave but felt it turn halfway to a salute, and when she nodded in return he gave the twitch of his knee that told Toothless to take back to the air once again.

There were shouts of surprise when Toothless sprang upwards, but in a couple of beats of Toothless’s wings they were above the sound and the world faded away into the fog again. Hiccup’s heart lifted in his chest as the cool air surrounded them, and he hung his head and smiled, tired and relieved, as they levelled out.

Elsa’s hand crept over his on the edge of the saddle, and squeezed. Hiccup turned to her, dropping back into Northur with no small relief.

“You all right?”

She nodded, shakily, and he moved to rub her forearm with his left hand.

“You did it. You faced them. And we’re all right.” There was no small part of him that worried that he was about to wake up, and discover that this was one long and optimistic dream. He clasped Elsa’s forearm, and she laced her fingers with his, though when she parted her lips nothing came out and she shut her mouth abruptly again. “Thank you, Elsa. I know I couldn’t have done that without you. And I hope… that this will save lives.” Berkian, wildling, other magic-users like Elsa who might otherwise have had both groups turn against them. She simply nodded, again, and he decided that it would probably be better to let it slide. “It’ll be a month before we have to think about it again. Come on, let’s get home.”

“Yes,” said Elsa finally, breathlessly. “Home.”

They landed in front of the house, just as it began to snow. Anna was the first one out of the door, wide-eyed, and when she saw them back and safe relief flooded her face.

“How did it go?” said Anna. Stoick reached the door behind her, and she finally thought to hurry out so that he could follow. “Are you all right?”

Distance made it easier to feel more confident, and a broad smile spread across his face. “It went well,” he said. He swung out of the saddle as Anna digested the words, and gave a squeak of excitement. “Their leader’s going to relay the message back to the Village. But it went well.”

“You did it!” said Anna. Delight rang in her voice, and with a laugh she flung her arms around Hiccup’s neck, all but spinning around him. Laughter bubbled out of him, and he hugged her in return, at least until Joan gave an offended yelp from the inside of Anna’s shirt. He hastily stepped back, and Joan squirmed upwards and stuck her head out of Anna’s top to glare at him.

“We did it,” Hiccup agreed.
Anna manoeuvred Joan onto her shoulder, then stepped in and hugged Elsa in turn. This time she held on for longer, rocking from foot to foot, and Elsa wrapped her arms more carefully about Anna in return. “I am so glad,” said Anna, the words muffled by Elsa’s shoulder.

“Hiccup?” said Stoick. Hiccup could read cautious hope in his expression, in the way that he was pressing his fingertips together as he held his hands in front of him. The snow in his beard made him look older than his years, although Hiccup was not going to say that part aloud. “It… went well?”

Hiccup nodded. “They took the meat, they took the knives, they listened, I don’t think I said anything to make myself look too stupid…” he glanced over at Elsa, hoping for agreement, but she was still wrapped around Anna. “And they let us explain everything. That we know about the Silver Priests, about Elsa, about the dragons.”

“And they didn’t try to attack you?”

“We… had weapons pointed at us a couple of times,” Hiccup admitted. Stoick snatched in his breath, and Hiccup raised his hands quickly. “But! I’m not really that surprised, considering we pretty much walked up to their campsite. And the second one was when they realised about the magic, and they put them down again then as well.” He did not add that Elsa had destroyed one woman’s arrow to persuade them to do so. “And… it worked, Dad. I really think it worked.”

Stoick stood for a moment longer, breathing hard, then he crossed the gap between them in two huge strides and clutched Hiccup to him. The breath was forced from Hiccup’s lungs, and he was rather enveloped in beard again, but he appreciated the gesture and hugged back.

“You fool boy,” Stoick muttered, bowing his head to the top of Hiccup’s hair. “You beautiful fool boy.”

The words were unsettling, but had an unspoken familiarity about them. As if he had been aware of them all his life, but nobody had dared to say them aloud. Unsure how he was supposed to respond, if he was supposed to respond at all, Hiccup kept his head bowed and waited for his father to be the one to draw back. There was a shine in Stoick’s eyes.

“We know about them,” said Hiccup. “And now, they know about us.”

It had to count for something. It had so far.

“Very well,” Stoick said, albeit with a sigh. He let his hand rest, heavy, on Hiccup’s shoulder. “Come on. Let’s get inside, and you can give me more details.”

Hiccup was about to comply when Gobber rounded the hill, grumbling to himself and clutching something in his right hand. As Hiccup paused, frowning, he realised that it was a prosthetic hand, or what remained of it, the metal mangled and Gobber’s left stump bare in its wake.

“Gobber?”

Although Anna had released Elsa, she was still sticking close, arms looped together, Hiccup realised dimly. He hoped that was a good sign, as well. But he was more preoccupied with Gobber, who was frowning heavily and did not look at all pleased to see them.

“There you are!” said Gobber, waving a greeting with the mess of a prosthetic. “Thought that I saw Toothless coming back in. How’d it go?”

“Good, it, it went good,” said Hiccup, eyes not moving from the metal. “What happened here?”
“Eh?” Gobber paused in his steps, then looked back at the prosthetic himself as if remembering its existence. “Oh, that. Bah, that Hobblegrunt’s getting grumpier the better she gets. Pretty much healed up and ready to fly,” he flourished the metal, “and she decides to try to take a bite out of old Gobber. She’s a few decades late on that one.”

“Oh gods….” Hiccup groaned. It really was too much to ask for everything to go well in one day, apparently. “I’ll go see if she’ll tolerate me being close. Just let me…” he pulled off the empty pack, which he had honestly been somewhat surprised to have Rosa return to him. “I can explain fully afterwards, because everything went well.”

“The dragon can wait,” Stoick began.

Hiccup pointed to Gobber’s wrecked prosthetic. “I think that suggests otherwise.”

“I should come,” said Elsa, catching him by surprise. Though not by as much surprise as Anna, to judge by her look of alarm. “She reacted best to me. Perhaps even if she will not accept you or Gobber…”

She had a point, but he did not want to be dropping the weight of dragon care on her shoulders. “Elsa, you don’t have to—”

“She reacted best to me,” Elsa repeated, more firmly.

Hiccup looked hopefully up at his father, who sighed and raised his hands in what was undoubtedly a surrender. “Did you manage to get close to her at all, today?” he asked Gobber.

“Barely opened the door,” Gobber replied. “So no, I didn’t check on her wounds again, and she hasn’t eaten today. Wounds were fine yesterday, though, good as healed up to be honest.”

“I’ll... go and have a look,” he said. He could not promise anything more certain than that, although in his gut he had a sinking feeling as to what the outcome of this was going to be. “See if I can figure out what’s up with her.”

He saw Stoick give Gobber a look over his head, and steadfastly pretended not to. The tiredness of speaking in Marulosen was waning, and he could feel energy bubbling beneath his skin again, buoying him up. That was a more practical reason for going to the Hobblegrunt now, as well, he supposed; with positive feelings sparking through him. It could only bring out a good response in her, after all.

“Come on.” Before anyone else could raise an objection, he slipped back into the saddle and stretched out a hand to Elsa, who had perhaps a more resigned look on her face as she joined him.

The saddle was still warm.

Around them, the snow grew thicker, fat soft flakes, as they made their way to the academy where the Hobblegrunt had been waiting. As days had turned into a moon and more, Hiccup had hoped that as her pain faded away, she might become more amenable. On the occasions that Hiccup had been able to visit her, she had allowed him into her pen, with only the occasional warning grumble, as long as he had kept good thoughts foremost in his mind. For Elsa, she had even been willing to get to her feet, although even on their last visit she had refused to exit her pen altogether.

Something needed to change, he knew that much. If the Hobblegrunt did not start flying again soon, she would face muscle wastage and worse, especially after the time that she had spent penned beneath Outcast Island not all that long ago. She still ate, and drank, and her wounds were healing to faint scars and places where scales would never grow back. He just worried that the scars that
still remained would be harder to see.

They dismounted outside the academy, where one of the Gronckles that had joined them after the Speed Stinger fight buzzed down to grunt hello. He had a reddish tint to his skin which, combined with lumps on each cheek, gave him a look as if he were blushing all of the time. Already, the nickname Bashful was looking worryingly like it was going to stick.

“Hey there, big guy,” said Hiccup. He held out his hand for Bashful to rub against, then scratched him under the chin for good measure. “Sorry, not here to visit you. No dragon nip, either.”

With another huff, this one sounding disappointed, Bashful turned to nuzzle against Elsa instead. She smiled, stroked his cheeks, and gently coaxed him away once again. The Gronkle sneezed, probably having managed to huff in snow in the process. Finally, Elsa’s smile cracked to a giggle, and she brushed snow off Bashful’s nose where it was threatening to settle.

“Go on,” she said softly, patting him on the cheek. Turning to the academy, she squared her shoulders, then winced and reached up to cup her left shoulder in her right hand.

Hiccup smiled, hoping that he looked sympathetic about it. “Yeah, easy to forget about them. You ready?”

Elsa shrugged, with her right shoulder at least. “One dragon cannot be worse than wildlings,” she said dryly.

There really were any number of moments when he heard his own voice in her words. He picked his way carefully down the slope into the academy, Elsa at his right side, as the male Monstrous Nightmare from Outcast Island looked up, sleepy-eyed, snorted steam into the air, and laid his head back down again.

The pen that had once been Stormfly’s, before all of this, had been given over to the Hobblegrunt. As Hiccup stepped into sight of it, he felt a wave of wariness and anger crash against him, and swayed in place as he felt it, recognised it, and took a deep breath to set it aside. The anger was not his, he knew that; what was his was the accomplishment of the wildlings, and the rush of joy when Anna had thrown her arms around him, and how proud he was of Elsa for facing down what had to have been a terrible fear. Even as his right hand started to throb and the fine scar across his chest to sting, he forced himself to think of them, and though it did not leave much other room in his head for thought it was at least possible to breathe.

Elsa stepped up beside him, and the wave ebbed again, leaving the air feeling cold against his skin in its wake. The Hobblegrunt flickered in purple-blue shades, dim but visible in the darkness of the pen, and her croon echoed off the rock walls.

“Definitely got a favourite,” he murmured to Elsa.

Not dignifying his words with a response, she stepped forwards and raised her hand to the Hobblegrunt. After a moment, the Hobblegrunt got to her feet, grunting and moving slowly as if she were stiff from the inaction. All the same, she nuzzled into Elsa’s hand, then licked her cheek, Elsa grimacing as saliva got everywhere.

Elsa stroked the Hobblegrunt’s cheek carefully with her left hand, and wiped away the spit with her right. She staggered sideways a step as the Hobblegrunt tried to lean against her, then managed to stand firmly in place.

“Hiccup…” Elsa’s hand fell still on the Hobblegrunt’s cheek. Sadness, regret, rang in her tone, and
he suspected that he knew what was coming. He crossed his arms over his chest. “I know that you wished to keep the dragons here, and even the Scauldron is not causing trouble for the fishermen, but perhaps… perhaps Berk is not right for her.”

It had dawned on him somewhere along the way, in drips and drops which it had probably taken too long for him to put together. When she snapped or snarled in pain, the other dragons around had growled, or even flown away; at first he had assumed that it was merely in response to her anger, but then he had thought of the waves of anger crashing against his mind the first time that he had met her. If she could affect humans, he could only imagine it being easier to affect dragons, her own kind. And if good thoughts made it easier to approach her, it seemed as if she was sensitive to the feelings of those around her – human, and probably dragon as well.

Surrounded by dragons, most of whom had their own histories of pain, and in a place that still carried the scars of fighting and death. He wondered if it were like being shouted at, all the time, about the worst things in the world.

Or at least, that had been the thought that had finally jolted him from sleep, in a cold sweat.

“Yeah,” he admitted aloud. “I was starting to worry about that as well. With this latest thing with Gobber…”

Thank the gods it had been Gobber, wily to the ways of dragons, and that it had been his prosthetic that had been closer. Too many people would probably not have just come home grumbling.

“There’s nothing about them in any of the Books of Dragons that Fishlegs and I have checked,” he added, “and only a few notes in Bork’s papers. Saying that he once sighted one, from a distance;” Hiccup made a vague gesture with his hand, and leant against the wall. “Another about, well… about a group of hunters that had worked out how to capture them. But what is there does suggest that they’re solitary. Maybe the other dragons, or the village… are just too much for her.”

“If it is better for her,” Elsa said, the words slow again and with the same carefully-chosen sound she had used when speaking Marulosen, “then you should let her go.”

It felt like failing, he wanted to say, and barely stilled his tongue. In his gut, he had suspected for a while now that the Hobblegrunt would not adapt to life on Berk, but it still felt like he was failing in some duty to her if he could not find a way to make it work.

He had not been sure who he could raise it with. Gobber knew dragons, but had known them for a long time as monsters and killers, and while fond of them seemed sometimes quietly baffled by how intensely Hiccup felt about Toothless and the others. Stoick struggled even more. Fishlegs had the same problem that Hiccup did, wanting to keep the dragons close and protect them from the world that still seemed to hate them so much, Snotlout pretended that he did not feel as strongly as he did, and the gods only knew what the twins would come out with at any given moment. He had been thinking of asking Astrid, who always seemed to be capable of being a voice of reason to him, but in his heart had not even wanted to risk clashing with her again.

But Elsa had been better, at times, at understanding the dragons. Whether it was seeing that Toothless was hurt, or pointing out to him that sending the dragons out to fish for their own dinner was looking a lot like just sending them away, she could read them.

Or maybe it was just communicating without words.

“I want what’s best for her,” he said, finally. “We needed to keep her here to make sure that her wounds were healed up. But she’s getting to the point where…”
He trailed off, looking at her wings, now strong enough to fly again. It was getting close to Snoggletog as well, and though he had not seen any Hobblegrunts on the island where the hatching had been taking place, he had at least seen evidence that multiple species laid and hatched their eggs at around the same time.

Groaning, Hiccup rested his head back against the wall. The Hobblegrunt swung to face him for a moment, knocking Elsa sideways, then murmured apologetically and nudged Elsa’s shoulder. Mercifully, it was not the left one.

“Some people stay on their home island,” said Elsa. “Some leave. But at least,” she ran her hand along the bottom of the dragon’s jaw, “you know that she will not attack people now, if she sees them.”

It still felt a little like losing some unspoken battle. But Hiccup nodded. “And we got her off Outcast Island. That… that has to be the main part.”

“You still saved her,” said Elsa.

And even if there was only one human that she really seemed to like, perhaps she would be able to tolerate some others all the same. “I suppose so.”

Chapter End Notes

Liitoen = allies
Iitnokestatito = thou hast tamed [it/inanimate object]
Iiv = very well, so
Neturi = sacrifice [once a generic word, but now outdated in the wake of the Silver Priests, so has the strong implication of virgin sacrifice]
Chapter 5

Chapter Notes

First half of the chapter, Hiccstrid finally manage to earn themselves a T rating. They're not the quickest on the uptake, sometimes.

Second half of the chapter, Gobber is my favourite. End of.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stormfly’s shriek from outside the academy brought him snapping back to the moment, and he pushed upright as he heard Stormfly land, Astrid dismount with a light thud, and footsteps crunching on the snow just starting to settle on the ramp. Astrid stopped at the bottom, eyeing the open door to the Hobblegrunt’s pen warily, and stayed out of the direct line of it.

“Hang on, I’m coming,” said Hiccup. He backed away from the Hobblegrunt carefully, and sped up once he got properly outside and into the arena. “Everything all right?”

“That’s what I headed over to ask,” Astrid replied. “Saw you head back, but I didn’t even make it to land before you took off over here instead.”

He waved back towards the pen. “The Hobblegrunt’s getting… well, testier, I guess. Snapped at Gobber. Elsa and I came to see what’s getting her so worked up.”

“Any ideas?” Astrid folded her arms over her chest, a little awkward with the cast but more fluid than it had been a moon ago. She was wearing a full leather tunic, fastened across the front, and thick leggings against the cold, gloves hanging from her belt. The shift of her feet, though, and the glance again in the Hobblegrunt’s direction, made Hiccup wonder whether she could feel the uncomfortable edge to the air, like ripples of anger almost tangible against his thoughts.

All he could really do was sigh. “We think it might be just too much for her. Berk, everything.”

“Time to let her head off and get some space?”

Hiccup wasn’t sure whether to be galled or relieved that Astrid came to the same conclusion not just more quickly, but apparently with a lot less worrying along the way. He settled for looking at her in disbelief, at least until he realised how much confusion that was causing and shook his head. “Sorry, sorry. I’ve been fretting about whether to say that myself. Well, I guess that means three of us have independently come to the same conclusion, at least.”

He aimed a sigh at the Hobblegrunt, even as Elsa emerged from the pen, picked up the bucket of fish that had never made it into the pen in the first place, and finally took it inside. She emerged a moment later, grimacing and trying to wipe her cheek and part of her hair free of the dragon’s spit.

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“Being adopted by a dragon has advantages and disadvantages, huh?” said Astrid.

Elsa simply nodded, expression long-suffering. “At least Anna does not drool on me when she brings me food.” She rearranged her cloak about her shoulders, brushing some of the snow off. “I will see you at home, yes?”
“Uh – wait, what?” he blinked foolishly in her direction. “We can fly home. Unless you’re getting saddlesore, I guess,” he added; Elsa did spend a lot less time flying than the rest of them, and would not be used to the saddle in the same way. “But the path back is going to be pretty icy in this weather.”

“I am not going to slip on ice, Hiccup,” said Elsa, with so much teasing in her tone that, for her, it came dangerously close to mocking. Certainly it was enough for worry to curl in his chest, and perhaps she realised it as she raised a hand to rub her forehead, averting her eyes. Frost was starting to form on her shoulders, glittering points on the cloak. “I am sorry. I think that I need some time… alone.”

“Just be careful, all right?” said Hiccup, letting his voice soften. He could still feel himself buoyed up by the success of the morning, but could easily understand that Elsa’s feelings on everything would be more conflicted. “And yes. I’ll see you at home.”

Elsa nodded, looking tired, and Hiccup considered patting her shoulder or her arm again as she left but was not sure that she would appreciate the physical contact. He felt more subdued in her absence, and as she left there was a rumble from the Hobblegrunt behind him that sounded almost like a warning. The male Nightmare looked up from his pen, snorted, and then shook himself off and hurried out altogether, leaving Astrid and Hiccup ducking under his wing on the way through.

“You sure that everything went all right?” said Astrid, as she watched the Nightmare go.

He nodded towards the exit, away from the Hobblegrunt and the incipient press of a headache which he suspected had more than a little bit to do with her. It throbbed at the base of his skull, nowhere near the usual place behind his eye where he had become used to pain the previous winter. Astrid did not even hesitate to join him, as the Nightmare padded around outside the academy, swishing his tail through the grass. He sniffed at Toothless, who gave a chirp of greeting and perked up his flaps.

“It did go well,” he said, as they made it outside the academy. Elsa was already out of sight, though whether it was to the first turn of the path or the snow that was still swirling it was hard to say. “We found them with no problem, they listened to us, and I’m pretty sure that they believed what we had to say.”

He did not suggest, even flippantly, that if it had not gone so well he would not be standing before her now. It was a tempting joke, but he knew that even if things had gone wrong, turned violent, he and Elsa would have fought their way out and escaped. He would have returned earlier, and far more saddened, but he still would have returned whole.

“That’s good,” said Astrid. She reached out and straightened the front of his fur vest. “Not the one with Toothless, I see.”

“Yeah, I figured that might be pushing it, straight off.”

“You ought to make the Night Fury Berk’s new symbol,” she said, with a smile. “Then nobody would question you wearing it.”

“I don’t know. I think the Monstrous Nightmare is a pretty good fit for Berk,” he said. Astrid raised an eyebrow. “Likes to get into fights, affinity with fire, doesn’t always think things through….”

It earnt him a punch on the arm, but only a light one, and Astrid’s other hand stayed on the front of his vest. The smile on her face softened, just a fraction, but by now he recognised the expression and met her halfway as she reached in to kiss him.
Her lips were cold, and then suddenly very warm, and he caught his breath at the sensation. Astrid’s hand tightened on his vest, tugging him closer, and by now when he raised his hands to catch hold of her waist he did not have to think so carefully about where he would need to place them. Her tongue traced his lips, and he felt as if his chest were aching in some strange, pleasant way as he felt the shape of a smile. Then he tried to breathe in, got a snowflake up his nose, and had to pull away abruptly so that he could turn and sneeze.

“Sorry,” he gasped out, then sneezed again. Astrid gave a less-than-sympathetic snort of laughter, but when he looked round again there was still that fondness about her eyes, a tilt of her head that he rarely saw her soften to around other people.

She released his vest. “Come on. There’s a cave I’ve been meaning to show you – it makes a good lookout post over the Wildlands.”

“Not that this is the best weather to discuss lookout posts,” Hiccup pointed out, rubbing his nose with the back of his hand. The air was getting just cold enough to sting. He gamely followed Astrid, though, as she wove her way into and through the trees of the area behind the academy. Training had largely been over the sea, and he had not been out that way since spring, and the upwelling of Elsa’s fear when faced with a reminder of her past.

Chocolate, gods. How many people in Arendelle would know what chocolate tasted like? Strange, how even months down the line a wave of guilt could hit him again that he had not seen what felt so obvious now.

He had to push the memories aside as he followed Astrid through the trees, and to the edge of the cliff that overlooked the Wildlands. It was higher than all but a few trees, and those were far enough from the edge to make it a safe, secure barrier. The clouds were heavy and low, steel-grey and stretching from horizon to horizon, and the snow falling blurred the sky until even the mountains to the south were only faint suggestions. He hoped that they were not facing a long storm just yet, then caught himself and wondered whether it might be good if the same large storm were able to capture Berk and Outcast Island both.

Astrid walked straight up to the edge of the cliff and glanced along it, then looked up and checked the position of a couple of the tallest trees. She waved for Hiccup to join her, and he did so a little more cautiously; even though the cliff was high enough that Toothless would probably be able to catch him before he hit the bottom, he did not particularly want to risk finding out.

“I’m gonna take a wild guess that the cave is underneath us,” he said, keeping a pace back from her.

She grinned, then dropped to sit on the edge of the cliff with her legs dangling. Hiccup almost lunged to pull her back, but there was a challenge in her eyes as well, and then she swung round and dropped down just as she had in the barn, and after a second her hands released the stone as well and he heard the soft pad of her landing.

Shaking his head, Hiccup turned to Toothless instead, and climbed into his saddle. He would need to do more of a loop to see the cave, if it was wide enough for Toothless to land, but it would not mean trusting his weight to his hands when he had a dragon who was more than capable of helping him. With one sweep of his wings, Toothless carried them out into the air, and they performed a tight roll together to face back against the cliff wall again.

The cliffs were dark stone, part of the granite outcrop that trailed down from the northernmost mountains and not part of the softer, limestone slopes further west and south. The dark stone made it hard to see what was a cave and what was just a shallow depression in the rocks, but Astrid was
standing with her arms spread as if to ask what he was doing. All the same, he watched her back up, indicating how deep the cave was, and knew that Toothless would be able to land there.

He brought them in to land and hopped out of the saddle, almost at Astrid’s feet. She put her good hand on her hip, shaking her head.

“I did just show you that it’s possible to get down here by yourself,” she said.

He brushed himself down. “And I just showed you that a dragon can land in here.”

“So,” Astrid nodded to the Wildlands. “What do you think?”

Obediently, he turned to look out across the Wildlands, while Toothless took to sniffing around the walls and back corners. The view was much the same as it had been from the top of the cliff, but sheltered from the northerly winds and slightly clearer as a result. Better was that it was a little warmer, without the cold cut of the wind, and he did not have to squint to see.

“Pretty good,” he said. “If you wore dark colours, you’d be pretty much hidden from anyone heading this way. It shouldn’t be as important now that we’re talking peace with the Wildlings, but…”

“But even Wildlings have their own Outcasts,” Astrid pointed out.

He did not reply that Elsa had been among them. Some of the people that the Wildlings sent away were criminals, certainly, but perhaps, just perhaps, there were other magic-users out there as well. He wondered how they would be able to tell the difference.

His thoughts were interrupted as Astrid’s hand came to rest in the small of his back, and he turned to see a particularly knowing smile on her face. “It’s good,” said Hiccup, mouth feeling abruptly dry.

“It’s also a little bit more sheltered,” said Astrid, a breathy murmur.

The sound of her voice, like that, made his heart speed up in his chest. She slid her hands beneath his cloak just as he kissed her, a faint pleased sound in her throat. A thrill ran down his spine. Astrid’s hands slipped beneath his vest as well, down to press his shirt against his skin, still cold from the snow outside but warming up quickly against him. He felt her hair sticking to her cheek and his both, and brushed it away without breaking the contact of the kiss.

“Your hands are cold,” Astrid whispered.

“Sure, that’s just me,” he scoffed. She laughed, a soft ripple against his lips, then deepened the kiss in turn. Her tongue was hot in his mouth, breath warm on his cheek, and at the slightest pressure of her hands he allowed himself to be pushed back against the wall of the cave. It was easier, anyway, while his knees still felt so weak.

The thick leather of her tunic felt stiff beneath his hands, even as she arched into him. He brushed the fingers of one hand against her neck, aching to feel the warmth and the give of her skin, missing the way that he had felt the muscles of her back shifting beneath his hands. Astrid gasped, and drew back slightly, far enough that he could see her uncertain expression.

“Sorry,” he said. “I just…” With his other hand, he brushed her side. “Not used to seeing you wrapped up like this.”

“Thank Berk’s winter,” said Astrid, with a flicker of a smile.
She withdrew her hands from beneath his clothes, and he spluttered a protest as she undid the toggles across the front, letting the layers of leather shift apart. Nothing resembling a coherent word managed to come out, though, as she caught his wrists and guided his hands back to her hips, enfolding them in the layer of warm air around her. He pressed his fingers against her skin, without thinking, as she ran her hands back up his arms and then slipped them down to his shirt again.

“Some of us just think to put fastenings on our clothes,” she added.

She kissed him again, while he was still speechless and standing with his mouth open gormlessly. It did not exactly make it easier to think, but it did offer him something else to think about, and with a faint grunt he kissed her back. He could feel the shift of her muscles as she breathed, and could not have said whether it was his own racing heartbeat that he was aware of, or hers. Her hands ran up his chest, and he stifled a gasp as they brushed over his nipples because they were just nipples, for Thor’s sake, they were just there, but it was like something clenched in his gut when her touch passed over them.

Only as she pressed her whole body into him did he realise, dimly, that she was not wearing her usual spiked skirt. Her hips pressed right against his, pinning him to the wall as much as her hands on his shoulders, as much as the muscle of her thighs pressing against his. One of her hands pulled away for a moment, and then she cupped his jaw, teeth dragging over his lower lip as she drew back a fraction. Hiccup was about to open his eyes when she tilted her head and pressed her lips to the top of his jaw, the place just in front of his ear that spun his head and made his hands slip against her as if he was clutching for support.

“That’s cheating,” he breathed, breathless though he knew he had no real reason to be so, palms growing damp with sweat as he managed to still them, one against her ribs, one on her hip just where he could feel the arch of the bone beneath.

He wasn’t sure what exactly it was cheating at, but it definitely felt like cheating, because all that he was aware of was her lips on his skin, the softness of lips that gave way to the firm hot press of her tongue, and it was like there was nothing else in the world but the two of them. He gasped, tilting his head back as her teeth grazed over his skin, only to knock his head and be abruptly reminded that there was, indeed, a rest of the world. A hiss, more annoyance than pain, escaped him, and Astrid looked up for a moment.

No small part of him wanted to ask her to continue. Beg her to, gods, he probably would have begged just in that moment. But instead she wrapped a hand into his hair and pulled him forwards into a kiss again, and he wasn’t sure which one of them made a sound or whether it was both of them together. Then Astrid tugged him away from the wall, and he stumbled upright, only for her to turn and push back against it herself, pulling him to her.

He caught the wall to keep his balance, panting, and looked at her in shock. Her eyes seemed the bluest that he’d ever seen them, she had one hand on his shoulder and the other on his waist, and he had absolutely no idea what she wanted him to do. There was a yearning in the air between them, he was sure that he saw it in her eyes as well, the ache to feel the warm press of skin. But he felt absurdly exposed, thin air at his back and his weight, now, pressing their bodies together.

“Astrid…” he breathed.

Her eyes skipped down to his lips, then back up again, fingers brushing through his hair. He was desperate to kiss her, lips tingling as if he could still feel her there, and it was hard to string together a coherent thought in response as he drowned in her gaze.

The slightest tilt of her chin seemed to offer her lips to him. His hands were shaking, not with fear
but with how badly he wanted to touch her skin, and he felt his cheeks growing hot as realisation of
that desire finally dawned on him. It had been lurking on the edge of his awareness, of course, the
yearning to run his fingertips down her bare arm, wondering what it would be like to touch her
thigh, feeling the shift of her shoulder muscles through her shirt and feeling the twitch of curiosity
as to what it would feel like without the fabric in between. It was the sort of thought that he had not
allowed to linger, though, still caught up in the wonder that she would even want to kiss him.

“I don’t…” he admitted. “I don’t know what you want me to do…”

Astrid sighed, the ghost of a laugh in it, but her eyes were fond. “To kiss me,” she said. “Like I
kissed you.”

Pushed up against the wall, and until he had almost forgotten how to breathe. At least his cheeks
were already burning. Hiccup slid one hand up to cup Astrid’s jaw, just as there was a flicker of
uncertainty in her eyes, a flicker of something that was on the edge of vulnerability, and before it
could make his chest ache harder by lingering there he kissed her lips again.

She made a muffled sound against his mouth, another of those noises that tightened down his spine
and lodged in his heart, indistinct and wordless and sweet. He pressed into her, feeling her fingers
tighten on his hip until they were almost painful, sweeping his tongue past her lips. He shifted his
right arm against the wall, to a place where he could rest his palm without the rock jabbing against
his scar, and let his left hand slip back beneath her tunic to her side.

Astrid shifted, arching into him, and his hand slipped against her until it was at the level of her
breasts, still on her ribs but close enough that he could feel the curve of them at the heel of his
hand. He let his teeth brush over her lip, and felt her nails against his scalp in return, and her breath
as fast and ragged as his. Her lower lip, the hard line of her jaw, and she lifted her chin as his lips
met her throat. He could feel the pounding of her heart beneath her skin, and could not help the
hitch in his breath, feeling the closeness of her. His cloak seemed to drape over them both,
enfolding them in the same warmth.

There was only the faintest sheen of sweat on her skin, a barely-there taste of salt on his tongue. He
could still remember how it had been to first kiss her lips, to chase the shape of them and learn
their form, and as he kissed her throat again he felt the rising urge to explore it in the same way.
And not just her throat, gods, with a tremor that seemed to run down to his bones he knew that he
wanted to learn the shape of every inch of her, the muscle of her arms, the line of her hip beneath
her skin, the curve of her breasts. It was strange and daunting to admit to himself, and he felt his
lips shaking as he traced them across her neck, the line of her tendon, down until he met the sharp
demarcation of her collarbone. She shifted, breathing deeply in, and warm air rolled across him
from beneath her tunic, smelling of her. His head spun.

“Hiccup,” Astrid breathed, and he could feel the shift in her throat as much as hear the word
against his hair. He followed along her collarbone to the dip in the very centre, damp with sweat,
leather brushing against his cheek.

The hand in his hair moved, and he looked up again, a sudden fear stabbing through him that this
was not what Astrid had meant at all, that he had overstepped some line. But Astrid’s eyes were
dark and fixed on him in the dim light of the cave, her lips shining, and as he straightened up she
guided him back to kiss his mouth once again. And despite the absurdity of it all, this unreal idea
that Astrid would want him, let alone could want him the way that he ached, down to his bones, for
her, even he had to admit that it seemed to be true. If nothing else, he would trust Astrid’s word on
Astrid’s mind, and as her hand ran up his side again it spelled out words without having to speak
them at all. And as he lost himself on her lips, and to her warmth, the rest of the world faded away
to leave something simple behind.

It was still snowing when they pulled apart, realising with equal looks of embarrassment and shock that they had lost track of time. With the thick clouds and still-falling snow, it was hard to tell, but Hiccup had a sinking feeling that it had ticked past midday, Toothless curled up asleep at the back of the cave while they had been as far away from on the lookout and aware of their surroundings as was possible to be.

Snatching a final kiss from Hiccup’s lips, Astrid whistled for Stormfly, and as the Nadder swooped below jumped straight from the mouth of the cave to land on her back in a move that still made Hiccup wince. He got into Toothless’s saddle more calmly, and did his best to straighten his rumpled shirt and ruffled hair as they headed straight home again.

He had almost made it to the front door when he was dragged up short by the familiar sensation of a hook in the back of his collar. With an undignified hurking sound, Hiccup was pulled back again, and spun around on the spot to find himself face-to-face with Gobber.

“And where have you been?”

At least the guilt that crossed his face was completely genuine. “I lost track of time,” Hiccup admitted.

“Uh-huh.” Gobber did unhook him, which allowed Hiccup to see that he had retrieved his spare hook from the smithy, but did not change his straight-faced, dubious-eyed expression.

“Astrid came to the academy, and we got talking about the Hobblegrunt,” he said, which was true, “and then about the academy,” which was maybe not so true, “and then there was this point that she thought would make a good lookout position over the Wildlands…”

Gobber raised an eyebrow. Hiccup felt himself turning red, but held his ground.

“You know what I’m like for talking.”

“Aye, that I do. But while Elsa’s good enough at keeping a straight face that I don’t know what she realise about leaving you and Astrid alone up there, and your father might not have put two and two together,” said Gobber, and Hiccup was actually going to die of embarrassment right now, he was sure of it; “I watched you moon over the lass from the forge for years now.”

“Gobber!” he hissed. There was just a ghost of a triumphant smile at the corner of Gobber’s mouth, and Hiccup wagged a finger at him and tried to look stern. “What – what you saw was me always having to talk to Astrid, because you made me, whenever she came to the forge!”

“Exactly. Figured you’d either get over it or say something.” Now, finally, Gobber grinned. “And I can guess which it was.”
“Astrid is very important to me when it comes to the running of the academy,” Hiccup said. Even to his own ears, it sounded both a little desperate and a little pompous. “I value her opinion on dragons, including issues like the Hobblegrunt.”

“Well, the lovebite on your neck isn’t helping, either,” said Gobber, pointing to the left side of Hiccup’s throat.

Hiccup slapped his hand to his neck, alarming flashing through him; when in the name of Frigg had Astrid’s mouth even been near–

He realised that Gobber was wearing that triumphant grin again. And that there was, almost certainly, no mark, since Astrid had not at any point that day even kissed his throat. Narrowing his eyes, Hiccup lowered his hand again. “I don’t like you sometimes.”

“That’s my job,” said Gobber cheerfully. “Because you’re better off facing me than facing your father.” Hiccup groaned. “You’re fifteen, lad. And an idiot, which comes with the territory of being fifteen. But at least now you haven’t got that half-daydreaming look on your face, which means your brain is over here and not back with her. Now go on, get inside, before your father wonders how I got lost between here and the smithy.”

There really was no arguing with Gobber some days. With as much poise as he could muster, Hiccup turned to the door, then hesitated with his hand just inches from the wood and turned back again.

“I don’t really have a mark on my neck, do I?” Because even if Astrid’s mouth hadn’t been there, her hands had, and he definitely remembered–

“Nope, just a look of guilt on your face,” said Gobber. He hooked the door open and shoved Hiccup inside, drawing a yelp from him. “Stoick! Look what I found outside the house!”

Hiccup stumbled in, nearly tripped over his cloak, and dragged himself upright with an attempt at affronted dignity that probably did not work in the slightest. Elsa was beside the fire, shoulders still damp with melted snow, and sewing with her right hand in the extra-careful and slightly clumsy way that she had done since Outcast Island. Anna appeared from behind the table, looking ruffled and clutching a pleased-looking Joan, which explained a lot. But Stoick strode across the room to grab Hiccup by the shoulders, relief and annoyance blending together on his face.

“Hiccup! Thank Thor… you can’t just go vanishing off like that!”

“Astrid and I got talking about a possible lookout point over the Wildlands,” he began, which was at least easy to say because it was true. It got easier when Stoick interrupted him again, and did not leave him the risk of trailing off unconvincingly.

“Aye, Elsa said that she left you talking, but it could have waited.” With a sigh and a final, half-irritated, pat on Hiccup’s shoulders, Stoick set about undoing his cloak instead. Hiccup tried to protest being undressed like a child, but only succeeded in having his batting hands completely ignored. “Odin’s ghost, you do something as big as this… I only let you go because the Hobblegrunt had the air of a crisis about it. Talking about lookout points is not an emergency, son.”

On the bright side, it did indeed seem that Gobber was right, and that Stoick was not reading any further into the words that Hiccup was speaking. But that did not exactly help the knowledge that, buoyed up with triumph and happiness, Hiccup had lost track of time in Astrid’s arms. It was not as if he could honestly claim that he had been doing anything useful with himself, either.
“I’m sorry, Dad,” he said. His cloak was removed, and Stoick went to hang it up by the door. “I… the winter, it doesn’t help.” That was a terrible excuse, and he knew it. “I just lost track of time. I’m sorry.”

“Well, you’re back now,” said Stoick, “and that’s the important thing. Come on, sit down and tell me about what happened out in the Wildlands.”

Hiccup obediently took the chair opposite his father’s, and waited for Stoick to sit down opposite him. Bringing her sewing with her, Elsa joined him, although he could see a slight tremble of her hands as she folded them in her lap.

It was more than a little for her sake that he did most of the talking, outlining everything that had happened and not holding anything back. Even when he spoke about the weapons that had been pointed at them, and Stoick’s posture stiffened at the words, he pressed on firmly. Only when it came to the end, when Rosa’s words had been increasingly beyond his grasp and must have been at their most important, did he look across. Elsa’s eyes had been on her lap since he had told his father that the wildlings had not known about Agdarr’s death even after two years, but now she drew herself up to face Stoick.

“Rosa said that she would take back the news to Kiirkylla, to discuss with the other leaders. There are five, at the moment, and she is only one of them. With the…” she glanced at Hiccup, almost apologetically, “long history between Berk and Kiirkylla, she is not sure what they will think, but they are practical people. They will not turn away something that could benefit them, as they will not cling to something that pained them. They are worried about Berk’s alliance with Arendelle, and they may ask questions about it if they do come, at Snoggletog.”

“And you told them when Snoggletog was?” Stoick asked Hiccup.

He nodded. “I told them to come the next day, the day after the solstice. I think Rosa understood when I called it the New Year.”

“They asked how long Berk and the dragons have had peace,” said Elsa. “They did not seem too surprised at the answer. They had noticed that there were fewer attacks, this last year, but they thought it was just a variation. Natural. They also asked how long I have been here, and I told them a year, as well. That… they seemed more surprised by.”

“They presumed we had rescued you as a child?” said Stoick. “When you were eleven?”

Elsa nodded.

“I am not sure,” said Stoick, “how they think that we could have had you among us and yet been fighting them. Unless they thought that we blamed them for your abandonment.”

“Or they thought that I did not tell you,” said Elsa. With her right hand, she rubbed at her left knuckles, almost scrubbing, so hard that it looked painful. But she did not turn her eyes down towards her hands. “In the Wildlands, to lie, if you must… it is expected. It is a way to survive. They may have thought that I let you believe that I was not a wildling.”

To leave other wildlings to be killed. Hiccup swallowed, remembering how Berk had celebrated when the news had come that another wildling had been caught and killed, how they had thought that they were somehow protecting themselves from an inhuman danger. How many had even had magic, it was impossible to say. He knew that he could not have lied about himself and watched other Vikings die just to stay alive, even at the age of eleven. But he could only imagine the fear of knowing that to say what he was would lead to his death.
“It does not matter,” said Stoick firmly. “We can, we will, explain whatever they want to know about. With the possible exception,” he acknowledged, with a glance to Anna still standing beside the table, “of who Anna and Elsa truly are.”

“Yeah, I don’t think they need to know that part.” Hiccup grimaced. He had no way of knowing how the wildlings might react, from apathy to sympathy to fury, at the thought of an exiled princess and a queen in hiding. “For now, the idea that we’re carefully keeping peace with Arendelle, but not actively supporting them, will probably be the important part. I guess they can understand that point of view?”

It came out more of a question than he had really intended, but even as the words had left him he had realised that he was reconstructing the thoughts. He cocked his head at Elsa, who nodded.

“It is about survival,” she said quietly.

Survival. Selfishness. Forgetting. He could see how they wound together out of necessity, the only way to hope to live in the Wildlands, but at the same time how only one of them had ever really been in Elsa’s nature. She had formed herself into something else to be a wildling, to survive, and he thanked the gods that Anna had not suffered the same fate in her own flight from Arendelle.

“Well,” said Stoick, “Berk knows a thing or two about survival as well.” He glanced over at Toothless, now sitting beside the fire and cleaning one of his front feet. “And we’ve done some ugly things for the sake of it. Let us try to make something less ugly out of this.”

Chapter End Notes

From next update, I’ll be moving to a Saturday rather than a Friday, thanks to a new work schedule which is taking it out of me on Fridays. My apologies for the extra day!
Barely had Hiccup managed to get some lunch down when Gobber announced that he would be borrowed to help tidy up something or other that had happened down at the smithy. Hiccup held up his hands, tried to protest that it was not his mess this time, but Gobber gave him a pointed look, used the words “winter project”, and Hiccup remembered exactly what he had left at the smithy and why he needed to get it finished. He just about saw his father’s bemused look as he scrambled to follow Gobber out of the house.

It did not help his dignity that once they were out of the house, Gobber pulled him into a headlock and ruffled his hair, laughing all the while.

“It’s supposed to be secret,” he grumbled as he was released, only to slip on the snow and nearly fall on his backside to complete the embarrassment that was the day.

“Aye, which is why I didn’t tell everyone what it is,” Gobber pointed out. “And why I’ll be sending Nightchase home once she’s got the fire built up and everything swept. And don’t worry, I’ve told her not to sweep that corner of yours, said that there was academy stuff there and that knowing you it could spring out at any moment.”

“Very funny.”

“The bola-thrower?”

For that, Hiccup did not have a good response. Instead he followed Gobber to the forge, alternately picking his steps carefully on the settling snow and slipping on hidden patches of ice just beneath it. It wasn’t even as if he could rest the blame on his prosthetic, either, as his boot slipped more than once as well.

He caught the last slip on the doorframe of the smithy, having foolishly assumed that the slab outside would provide something resembling grip. Nightchase jumped and yelped at the sound, whirling to face Hiccup and raising the broom as if she were expecting to have to chase someone out. Or possibly had taken too seriously Gobber’s warnings about Hiccup’s projects.

“Sorry!” he said. She looked sheepish, and lowered the broom.

Gobber casually cuffed him on the back of the head as he brushed past, snow melting off his arms in seconds from the warmth of the forge. Actually having bothered with his cloak, Hiccup shrugged it off and hung it by the door as Gobber looked around the smithy and then put his hand on his knee to peer into the fire.

“Looks good,” he said approvingly. Nightchase beamed. “Nice stable shape to it. Careful with the back, though;” he pointed, and she edged closer to follow the line of his hook. To judge by how much she was squinting, she hadn’t developed the knack of looking at just the angle which let you
judge the colours of the flames, and the heat, without staring straight into the fire. “I’m not
working on any swords today,” said Gobber, “but if I were I’d need that deeper bit, all right?”

“Got it.”

“Good lass.” He straightened up and patted her on the shoulder, and Hiccup didn’t bother hiding a
smile at memories of not-dissimilar conversations. “Now come on, Hiccup, you said that you were
going to replace Withera’s axe, so you’re going to be putting the edge in.”

“What?” He froze, staring almost guiltily in Gobber’s direction, halfway along the workbench to
the corner where his current work was covered up. “Me?”

Edging an axe was the make or break of the weapon, and getting it wrong could lead to making a
mess of the two steels that had to be used to make best use of it. Trying to smoothly join the softer,
stronger steel of the body of the blade with the harder, sharper edge was a skill that Gobber had
honored for years, and Hiccup had watched with interest and no small jealousy.

Gobber nodded.

“Really?” said Hiccup.

This time the nod was a little more irritated.

“Well, uh, all right then…” Although it would mean not actually working on what he had thought
he was going to be working on, it was still work that needed doing. Hiccup set about looking for
his apron, and was not wholly surprised to find that it had ended up dangling in a completely
different corner than that in which he should have left it. Whether that had been him, someone else,
or even a Terrible Terror at this point, he honestly had no idea.

As he retrieved it and pulled it on, he saw Gobber ushering Nightchase out again. The broom was
as tall as her, and he had to stop and think in order to remember that she would be nine by now.
Well, he supposed, it was older than he had been when he had started apprenticing.

“How’s she doing?” he tied his apron and grabbed his gloves.

Withera’s axe was hanging on the wall, all but finished by now. fullering and flatting the cheeks
had taken longer than usual, Hiccup determined to get it perfectly balanced even if he had no idea
whether Withera intended to use it much at all, and he had been more precise than ever as he closed
the eye and sealed the seams on it. It had been Gobber who had selected and readied the steel to be
used for the bit, and Hiccup had assumed that he would finish off the axe as well, before Hiccup
sharpened it.

“Eh, we’re off to a good start. Only been a moon,” said Gobber pointedly, swapping out his hook
for tongs.

“I know!”

“Aye, and what were you doing after a moon?”

Hiccup grimaced. “Probably setting my clothes on fire, at seven.”

“About fits my memory. You did have a knack with the fire, though. Still, she’s getting there, and
it’s enough for an axe. Come on, let’s get going.”

It was strange to realize that he was nervous about actually fixing the bit for the axe himself. A
The axe went better than he had expected. It got his hair ruffled again, but this time Gobber’s grin was proud and Hiccup couldn’t help smiling as well. It was strange to be able to hold a weapon in his hand again without feeling dread at the weight of it, to be able to see the bright-shining steel and think first of wood, and not of flesh, cleaving beneath it. But suddenly a tool seemed like it could be a tool again, and he managed to breathe a little easier.

“Now,” said Gobber, “go sharpen it up.”

Hiccup groaned.

“No, it’s important that you do it. And you know why?”

“Because I promised Withera that I would make the axe,” he set it down and pulled off his gloves, shaking his hands to try to leave them feeling less sweaty, “and because it means that I have seen this through from beginning to end.”

“Nope,” said Gobber, swapping tongs for poker. He poked Hiccup in the centre of the chest with it. “Because I hate sharpening weapons. Off you trot.”

Hiccup threw the gloves in Gobber’s direction, and missed utterly, but it still wasn’t enough to wipe the smile off his face. He got the whetstone turning smoothly and set to sharpening the steel, feeling the familiar work of his muscles as he controlled the angle and the pressure on the axe. It was easy, albeit a different sort of easy than the word would usually mean. Easy in the way that flying was, perhaps.

He settled into the rhythm of it, watching the blade and the whetstone. It had taken some practice to swap feet; before the Red Death, he had stood on his left leg and used his right to pedal, but that had been asking for trouble afterwards and standing on the leg which had an actual ankle sounded like a better idea.

“Oh, afternoon, Astrid,” Gobber said, and Hiccup hastily lifted the axe away from the whetstone before he ruined either the edge or his fingers. “Looking for Hiccup?”

Hiccup looked up, and tried not to make it appear too panicked, but Astrid looked honestly surprised to see him as well. “Er… no, actually. Have you seen my mother’s axe?”
Keeping a carefully straight face, Hiccup went back to his sharpening.

“Not recently,” said Gobber, who mercifully was a much better liar than Hiccup was. Hiccup stole a glance upwards to see that Astrid was scowling. “I can keep an eye out for you, though. I’m sure it’ll turn up, Berk isn’t that big.”

Astrid actually growled, and Hiccup made very sure that he looked busy. “I just can’t believe I can’t find it,” she said, voice growing more agitated. If he knew Astrid, she was also deliberately avoiding using the word lost.

“Don’t worry, lass. I’m sure it’ll turn up. This one always did, every time we lost track of him,” added Gobber, with a gesture in Hiccup’s direction that was ridiculously exaggerated by being with the poker. Hiccup tried to glare at him, and was quite aware that he failed.

“If the shortwings have stolen it…,” Astrid drummed her fingers on the wooden counter as her voice descended to something of a mutter, even if there was not as much bite to it as there might have been. “Thank the gods my mother’s not angry about it.”

Even Hiccup knew that Runa was not angry about it, but on the other hand he also knew why. Astrid sighed.

“Fine. I’ll go…” she trailed off, looking at something out of Hiccup’s line of sight outside the smithy windows. “Snotlout. Hey. Didn’t expect to see you here.”

If the twins crashed through the ceiling, Hiccup was going to give up and go home. Withera’s axe was as good as done – she would probably want to put the final edge to it herself, depending on what she intended to use it for – and if Snotlout was also making an appearance then it was probably worth actually heading over to the counter.

The black patch over Snotlout’s right eye was at least stopped from looking quite so stark by the line of his hair over it, but there was still something of a challenge every time he met someone’s gaze. Now he slammed three throwing axes down onto the counter, just as Hiccup was about to go and lean on it.

“My Dad sent me to get these sharpened,” he said.

“Good afternoon to you too,” said Gobber, who at least could get away with things like that. He picked up one of the axes and grimaced at the state of the edge. “What happened to these, then?”

“S’posed to be learning how to throw them again,” said Snotlout. His voice dropped, but remained more of a challenge than an admission. “Can’t get the aim right.”

Dropping her own annoyed tone and body language, Astrid gave an airy shrug. “You’ve still got the muscle memory. It’s just going to be learning to gauge distance again.”

That, at least, seemed to perk Snotlout up a little. “You think?”

“Pretty sure you could still beat me in the axe-throwing, anyway,” said Hiccup. He stacked the axes in the crook of his right arm. “Well, don’t know if I’m doing Thawfest still this year. Hey, Gobber, what happened about dragon events?”

Gobber looked at him blankly.

Hiccup trawled through his memory, and realised that Gobber had not been present for that conversation. He was still used to the majority of his conversations from life in general having
been with Gobber, but the last more and more had seemed to involve an awful lot of talking.

“Oh, sorry. Idea we had last year. Thawfest events involving dragons.”

“So you and your friends can show off in front of everyone?” said Gobber.

“Well, my apologies for trying to include all residents of Berk. Especially since,” Hiccup pointed in Snotlout’s direction, “Hookfang was the one who successfully brought that log.”

“Well, it’s been a while since I’ve watched your father try to wrestle a Monstrous Nightmare. Not sure how they’d take to the melee, though.”

“Depends on the dragon,” said Astrid.

“So, what were you thinking?” Gobber said, leaning on the counter as Hiccup carried the axes back over to beside the whetstone. “Races? Strength contests?”

“Oh, come on,” Snotlout said. At least it sounded more like his usual level of annoyance, rather than being related to his eye specifically. “Like anyone is going to have a chance against a Night Fury.”

“Hiccup did say he might not be doing Thawfest again,” said Astrid, daring him with a smile.

Snotlout looked at her flatly. “Or your freakish chicken-fuelled Nadder.”

Well, that was definitely Snotlout sounding more like himself again. “We could add a setting-yourself-on-fire event,” said Astrid. “I’m sure both of you would do great.”

“Hah, you’re hilarious.”

“Well, the obvious answer is to get more people on dragons, so that then we can arrange the events by dragon species,” said Hiccup.

“Obvious to you, maybe,” Gobber retorted, “but in case you haven’t noticed, that academy of yours is already overflowing.”

“Which is why we are going to be fixing up those barns which weren’t good enough to be used as storage!”

Snotlout groaned and leant against the windowframe. “You know, I remember when visiting the forge didn’t involve listening to Hiccup talking about dragons. Actually, I remember when my life didn’t involve listening to Hiccup talking about dragons.”

It was even harder than usual to look stern when he could feel the soot smudged on his cheek and the sweat in his hair. Having seen the way that Snotlout talked to Hookfang, however, Hiccup knew better than to take it too seriously. “Well, then I’m sorry to say that we’re starting work on those barns tomorrow, Snotlout. We need them ready for Snoggletog.”

“Maybe you can get the twins that extra Zippleback they wanted,” said Astrid.

Right now, he would take whatever dragons he could get. He was still not comfortable with the idea that whatever dragons came with him might end up fighting, but he could hold firm that they were only going to ask that the dragons be willing to transport warriors. Whether they chose to fight or not would be their own decision. In any case, it had to be better than what Dagur would do to them given half a chance; he remembered the sound, the feel, of metal sliding into flesh.
He swallowed, throat feeling tight, and blinked as he pushed the thought aside. “You know that if I do, they’ll start asking for a Changewing again,” he said. It hurt to say, and for all that he knew there was no real reason for it, it was impossible to ignore. Hiccup rubbed his throat with his right hand, then swapped as his scar twinged.

Astrid snorted. “At least they aren’t asking you to bring back more Scauldrons.”

“Yeah, I think one of those is enough.” What they were going to do when spring rolled around, and other boats – not least Johann’s – started wanting to enter Berk’s waters, Hiccup had no idea. “And when we head off to that training island again, hopefully we’ll get a bit more of a mix of dragons this time.”

“You’re going to encourage the dragons to come back with us?” said Astrid.

He shrugged. “Well, it’s not between here and Outcast Island at least, so it should be fairly safe. But I still want to check in on any islands that are, if we can.”

Better force the dragons off the island altogether than leave them to face Dagur, but Hiccup would at least attempt to relocate them to Berk instead.

“Say, how’s the Gronkle iron going?” said Gobber, as Hiccup started to get the whetstone up to speed again and picked up the first axe. Beyond him, Astrid and Snotlout seemed to have descended into bickering about something, punctuated with hand gestures and pulled faces, but Gobber knew more than well enough that it was best to just leave them to it.

Hiccup shrugged. “Heather was making a good start on getting the steel samples but… well, she’s been with her father most of the time the last few days.”

“Aye, can’t blame her for that. Oi, you two,” he rounded on Astrid and Snotlout again, who both fell still and looked round guiltily. “Take your fighting elsewhere! I’ve got a smithy to run.”

“Barns, tomorrow,” Hiccup fired after them, as they both turned to leave. Astrid acknowledged him with a wave; Snotlout, with a rude gesture. “Well, it’s so nice to be treated with the respect that my position deserves…”

“Welcome to my world, lad.”

Their attempt to turn one of the more ramshackle barns into something that might be described as dragon stables attracted more of an audience than Hiccup expected. To be precise, they ended up with Girl Hookfang, two Gronckles, a dozen or so people who were pretending to be sparring and training but whom Hiccup regularly caught sneaking glances in their direction, and Nightmane Holsen with more than a vague air of trying to prevent anything from going too badly wrong.

Once buildings progressed beyond being easily fixable, they tended to turn into scavenging grounds instead, and it took less than half an hour for a section of loft to crash down where
someone must have taken some of the curved supports from underneath.

Hiccup, naturally, was underneath it and trying to replace a section of rotted floor when he heard the first warning creaks. He looked up in alarm, tried to launch himself aside, and the next thing that he knew a messy spiderweb of ice was scattered all around him, lacing from wall to floor and floor to ceiling.

“Thanks, Elsa,” he called, and flopped onto his back, putting a hand over his eyes.

“Wow,” said Tuffnut. “I thought for a moment there we were going to have a Hiccup pancake.”

“I was expecting Toothless to just blow everything up,” Ruffnut offered.

Hiccup removed his hand again to glare upwards, to where Barf and Belch were helping to support the new central beam of the roof while Astrid and Snotlout were seeing to securing both ends of it. Even with the wood in their mouths, they looked like they were grinning just as much as the twins did.

Fishlegs hurried over and helped Hiccup upright. Or at least, that was probably what he was intending to do; having caught Hiccup by surprised, he rather pulled him upright, and Hiccup hastily tried to get his feet underneath him so that he didn’t immediately fall over again. He picked his way out of the tangled grove of ice and back onto solid wood.

Embarrassment on her face and one hand over her mouth, Elsa was still surveying the scene. “I am so sorry,” she said, as Hiccup brushed himself off and turned to face her. “I meant…” she waved at the ice. “I meant for one pillar.”

“Honestly? I’m not going to complain,” said Hiccup, flapping his hands at it in return. He sighed. “Although it might need paring down a bit if I’m going to be able to finish that floor. It can always wait, though, probably not the best idea to have been doing it already…”

Having eight of them crawling all over the building was probably not helping, considering it meant that he was trying to find more things than usual for them to do at once. Fixing barns was always more annoying than building them in the first place, and not for the first time Hiccup wondered whether they should have just built the stables from scratch. But he did not want potential grumbling about why the dragons were getting new buildings while older ones were still available.

“If I get rid of…” Elsa trailed off, tilting her head, and pressed her lips together. She stepped carefully closer to the webs of ice, her fingers tracing through the air in the ghosts of the various lines. “I do not want it to collapse.”

“Pretty sure it’s just the loft, not the whole building,” said Hiccup. Elsa gave him a pointed look, and he bowed his head to acknowledge that he had not really caught the issue with the loft either. “Fair point.”

She stepped right into the ice, and Hiccup felt the momentary urge to call her back out again even though Elsa, of all people, would be fine. The faint blue light of the ice caught the planes of her face and glowed in her hair, and then she drew a single line with her finger and a beam coalesced, running the length of the loft in the very centre. A wave of her hand, and most of the pillars and strings about her vanished, leaving just a few running from the walls to the ceiling.

“If you even out the angles, it’ll make it stronger,” said Holsen, behind them. Elsa jumped, and whipped round with wide eyes, as he pointed out some of the bars of ice. “For a permanent structure, you’d calculate the weight bearing, but for something temporary it’s best to just keep it
even. You’ve not got a bad eye for them, though,” he said, sounding vaguely approving.


tree branches. Or the angle of a tent.”

Holsen nodded, and Hiccup thought of the great vaulting arches that had made up the icy building

that had stood, for a brief precarious time, at the top of the North Mountain. For all that it had

fallen with her heartbreak, it had been remarkable while it stood. He wondered how permanent it

could have been. “Good way to think of it,” said Holsen. “Nature knows what she’s doing.”

“Are you done rolling on the floor down there?” shouted Snotlout, from somewhere on the far side

of the roof. “Because some of us have actually done our share of the work up here.”

“Thank you, Snotlout,” Hiccup shouted back. He rubbed his forehead. “I had better go up and

check on that. Fishlegs, can you–”

“I can look at that floor for you,” said Nightmane, catching Hiccup completely by surprise. Hiccup

tried not to look too bewildered. “Go on. I came down to keep an eye on the overall structure, but it

looks like you’re doing fine. There’s just that one cruck needs patching, but you’ll need the right
curve of the wood for that. Brace it for now, look at it later. You need to lay down the framework

for the roof today, though, some of this isn’t fully sealed.”

“Well, actually, that we might be able to get at least a little protection from,” said Hiccup. He

glanced round to Elsa, who nodded, knowing what he meant this time. “But you’re right, we do

need a structure on this thing. If we’re going to have to redo the loft anyway then I guess we could

look to make it strong enough that it might be able to handle Gronckles, instead of Nadders –

Fishlegs?”

“Yes?”

“Do you think Gronckles are going to want to go into the loft area? Or would they be happier on

the floor?”

“Well, from what I’ve seen, as soon as the shortwings started gaining weight they stopped perching

so much, and in the wild we’ve mostly found them in lower-level caves… I wouldn’t rule out the

possibility of one of them liking the loft area,” said Fishlegs, warming to his topic rather more than

even Hiccup had been expecting, “but in general they’ll probably be satisfied with the lower

storey.”

Hiccup blinked. “Right. Nadders upstairs, then. Got it.”

Considering that he knew that Toothless would sleep just about anywhere, up to and including

hanging from the beams of the house by his tail, he should not have been surprised that Fishlegs

could give him such a detailed answer. But this day still felt like it was utterly out of control.

He rubbed his forehead. “I’ll check on Snotlout, and then get back to you.”

It was much less of a headache when they were flying. Part of him, though, was just happy that

they were back to working with him at all – both that they were still there to work, and that they

were still somehow willing to trust him after everything that had come to pass.
After two days of getting the barn ready, Hiccup was about ready to give up on the academy altogether, Astrid was finally out of her cast and had already attempted to punch Snotlout in the face with her left hand, and once they got two Gronckles from the academy island into the lower pens and the younger Nadder from Outcast Island into the loft all that he wanted to do was lie down on a pile of hay and go to sleep.

Unfortunately, there was no way that was going to be an option. “Right,” said Hiccup, putting another tick on his mental checklist. “Fishlegs, you ready to go talk Gronickle iron?”

He had seen the door to Heather’s house – finally, he was starting to think of it as hers, not just the place where she was staying – open that morning, and light inside, for the first time in a few days. It seemed like as appropriate a time as any to see how she was doing, and how the Gronickle iron was going as well. If perhaps not in that order.

“Uh, sure,” said Fishlegs. “I mean, I still haven’t come across anything in any of the Bork notes that could even potentially reference it, but…”

“But you know Gronckles,” Hiccup said, firmly. “All right, Elsa,” he added, glancing over to where she was murmuring nothings to a Gronckle and finding just the space on the dragon’s flank to scratch to make her toes twitch, “we’re heading to talk to Heather. You want to meet me at home, or come with?”

Anna had been only half-awake as they left the house, and Elsa had said something about Snoggletog gifts in a conciliatory sort of tone. Though he knew that Anna still mistrusted Heather, probably more than any of the riders or Elsa did, Hiccup had refused to be drawn into an argument on the matter. It was still Elsa’s choice who she made friends with.

“I will come with you,” said Elsa. She stopped her scratching, to a huff of disappointment from the Gronckle, and slipped out of the pen again.

“Glad to hear it.”

It had also not escaped his attention that Heather seemed to talk more freely to Elsa than anyone else when it came to her family. When Hiccup had turned the conversation in that direction, more often by accident than deliberately, Heather would quickly dance their words away again, but even in front of him or others Elsa would be more likely to get an answer, and occasionally a soft tone of voice or expression to go with it. And that did not even touch those time when Elsa visited Heather alone, which Hiccup knew about but was not sure to what extent Anna was aware. Anna never seemed to outright ask, and so Elsa never lied, but occasionally Hiccup would see sadness in Elsa’s eyes when she told Anna that she was going out for a while.

“I’ve been looking at the size of the next barn, and I think we can comfortably fit three pens in downstairs, and two in the loft,” Fishlegs said.

He barely had to raise his voice as they stepped out of the barn, which worried Hiccup. The breeze was light, and the worst of the snow seemed to have fallen overnight to leave it almost, for winter, pleasant. “Yeah,” said Hiccup, distractedly, “unless we’re talking Nightmares. That would be two maximum, and they’ve shown no signs of liking the lofts that much…”
Hopefully the sea would be more treacherous than the air looked; the only reason that Hiccup would worry about flying in this weather was in case it turned. But he frowned at the clouds all the same as they trudged through the calf-deep snow.

Not every house in Berk had the luxury of facing away from the wind, but Heather’s did, and that had been the only reason that Hiccup could think of that he had seen her door open on several mornings. That was, until he stepped up to rap on the frame, and was struck by a positive wall of heat.

“Hiccup!”

Heather pulled the door the rest of the way open a moment later. Her hair was scraped back from her face, apart from one lock by her left ear that seemed to be making a spirited attempt at disobedience, and the shirt she was wearing, sleeves rolled up, was all but soaked with sweat. The wider the door opened, the more that Hiccup was aware of the heat, and he just stared for a moment rather than coming up with anything that resembled a greeting.

“Sorry,” continued Heather, breathlessly, pushing back the stray hair. “It’s kind of a sauna in here.”

“Are you… all right?” he managed.

She stepped back, and waved them in; Hiccup hurriedly stripped off his cloak as he did so, but still felt sweat prickling all over his skin the moment that he set foot inside. Fishlegs copied him, and even Elsa, in only her usual light shirt, looked surprised.

Although, to be fair, that could have been at the room itself.

The door of the house had already been wide enough for Hnoss and Gersemi to get inside, but Heather had flat-out admitted that if she was going to be working with molten rock and metal she was going to need something smarter than a wooden floor to dump it onto. Two large slabs of slate, each the size of the one that Toothless slept on, now sat edge-to-edge in the middle of the floor, dominating the front room. Apart from the old water trough beside it, all of the other furniture was pushed against the walls. That, of course, had been the state every time that any of them had been there, but with both dragons in the room, the air full of steam, and one wooden wall covered in chalk writing and symbols, it hardly looked like it had any time that Hiccup had been here before.

“You caught me working, sorry,” said Heather. She shrugged apologetically. “Molten metal and water.”

“Well, the smithy can certainly get this hot,” Hiccup admitted. “We normally don’t have this much steam, though.”

“Sorry,” said Elsa. She was rolling up her long sleeves, cheeks already flushing in the heat. “Sauna? I have not heard this word before.”

“I’ll let you take that one,” said Hiccup, with a pointed look at Heather.

She gave a sheepish huff of laughter, putting a hand on her hip and running her tongue over her teeth as, he presumed, she searched for words. “It’s, ah, something more from the south or the east of here. I’m not sure if they have them in Arendelle.”

Hiccup looked over the chalk writing on the wall. The top row said ‘Gronckle iron’, and columns were marked with labels like ‘melt’ and ‘cut steel’, but most of them were filled with symbols that were not runes and he did not recognise. At least ‘cut steel’, marked with ‘y’ and ‘n’, was understandable.
“It’s a room or building which you get hot, fill with steam,” Heather continued, “and then take your clothes off and sit in for a while. Makes you sweat. Some healers use them, I think, but it’s certainly a good way to get your skin clean as well.”

Toothless padded over to chirrup a greeting to Hnoss and Gersemi, and received a grunt and soft squawk in response. It put warmth in Hiccup’s chest to see them both looking so much better.

“I hope you aren’t expecting us to take our clothes off,” Elsa replied.

Though her tone was quite level, and perfectly polite, he recognised the lilt of teasing and almost choked on thin air. Heather laughed, while Fishlegs looked alarmed at the suggestion.

“I’ll leave that to your discretion,” said Heather.

“Well, I was more hoping to talk Gronckle iron than take my clothes off,” said Hiccup, before Fishlegs could flee the scene as he looked to be considering. “The, uh…” he found himself trailing off again as he looked back to the wall with its chalk markings.

Heather followed his gaze. “Oh! Right, yes. The top row, with the first few columns empty, that’s the Gronckle iron that you gave me. Then you’ve got how long it takes for Nadder fire to get it to melting point, the weight, well, density, I suppose, a few other things. Then the other rows are different combinations of rocks, the weight of each rock that went into the mix, and the same information about melting point, density and the like.”

“Those are the numbers that they use down south, aren’t they?” said Fishlegs, peering at the wall.

She nodded. “My mother used them.” The stumble was barely there, if you didn’t already know. Hiccup did not draw attention to it. “They can be easier to compare than runes.”

“I’m sorry, I’m kind of lost,” said Hiccup. “Southern numbers?”

“It’s the way of writing them, really,” said Heather. She crossed to the wall, picked up the chalk, and drew a line of symbols on the wall. “Zero, one, two, all the way up to nine. Then instead of adding them like runes, in tens and fives and ones, you just write how many tens and how many ones you have. Like this,” she drew two of them, “is forty-seven. Four tens,” she pointed to the first symbol, then to the second, “and seven ones. This,” she changed the second symbol so that it was the same as the first. “Is forty-four.”

Hiccup blinked at the symbols. “I… think I get the idea,” he said. It sounded like a lot of multiplication for the sake of just writing numbers, though.

“It sounds easier than letters,” said Elsa, a wry twist to her voice. She joined Heather, looking across the row of ten symbols, then reached out and put a finger to the first one. “This was the zero, yes? So this,” she pointed to one of the numbers in the large grid on the wall, “is… six and one. Sixty-one?”

“Have you seen them before?” Heather said, sounding surprised.

Elsa pursed her lips, looking thoughtfully at the symbols.

“They don’t use that system in Arendelle,” Hiccup offered. “So…”

“No, then,” said Elsa. “But I see it. This many tens, and this many ones. It is much shorter than runes.”
“And if you want to write in hundreds,” Heather added another symbol in front of the two that she said were fours, “then it’s just one extra symbol.”

Elsa glanced between the line of ten and back, lips twitching as she seemed to count. “Two hundred, and forty, and four?”

“Well, that’s quicker than I got it,” said Heather, sounding impressed. She reached out to offer the chalk to Elsa, whose expression turned almost shy as she accepted it. “You sure you haven’t seen these before?”

Elsa giggled, averting her eyes for a moment before looking up to Heather once again. “I am sure. They are just… a lot easier than letters.”

“Well, unfortunately I couldn’t keep all of this in my head, so…” Heather turned back to face Hiccup and Fishlegs once again. “I’m trying to get something with the numbers as close to Gronckle iron as possible, but I don’t know how many different rocks were involved, or what they were. So at the moment I’ve been working with iron, limestone and various other rocks as a third option, to see how it varies. I can’t get anything close to being as tough, though. I got the Gronckle iron as close to a quarter-inch as I could, and had Hnoss,” she pointed to the Gronckle, “bite into it to see how much it deformed. I must say, I’d never seen a dragon bite through solid steel before.”

“It’s that third rock that’s causing problems, isn’t it?” said Hiccup. He rubbed the back of his neck, partially because the sweat beading there was making his hair itch against his skin. “But she produced the Gronckle iron when she was newly caught, she…”

Pieces began to click into place in his mind, and he closed his eyes, narrowly resisting the urge to groan aloud. Of course.

“I’m an idiot,” he said.

“What?” said Heather.

Hiccup swung round to Fishlegs. “Meatlug was caught from one of the raids sent by the Red Death. She had to have flown in a direct line from there to here, and given the length of time that it was between her capture and her producing the Gronckle iron—”

“—she must have eaten the rocks on the way here!” Fishlegs finished. “Oh, how did we miss that?”

“Now I’m missing something,” said Heather, looking between them.

“There’s only a limited number of islands and outcrops between here and Dragon Island,” said Hiccup, partially to her but still mostly to Fishlegs, the only other one of them in the room that had been living in Berk when Meatlug had first been captured. “And most of those are the same igneous rocks. There can only be a limited number of rocks that we would need to sample to represent them all.”

They might have only flown it a few times, but it had still been enough. And Berk had been trying to sail it for a lot longer, and part of the very reason that it had been so hard was not just that their compasses went haywire and the fog was thick enough to choke even their sunstones, but that the islands were almost identical in appearance and makeup. It had been near impossible to tell them apart.

“Plus you’d only have to get those rocks which aren’t represented on Berk,” said Fishlegs, “and since the northernmost end of the island is already an igneous outcrop we must have already covered most of them.”
“This is normal,” Hiccup heard Elsa say, somewhere off to his right. He chose not to acknowledge it.

“I mean, we could probably do that in less than a day,” said Hiccup. As soon as the words had left his mouth, they settled into place in his head, and he felt as if he had been emboldened by them. He shrugged. “We could do that today.”

Fishlegs went back to looking surprised again. “Like… now?”

“Why not? We both thought that getting the dragons settled in would take more time than it did. Do you have anything else planned for today?”

“Uh, no, I guess not.”

“Right. The weather’s fine, let’s take advantage of it.” At least that might make it feel a little more bearable to be watching the clear skies above.

“Do you mean… the whole academy?”

He considered it for a fraction of a second, remembering very distinctly how much they had argued over the construction of the barns. “How about just you and I take care of this one?”

Fishlegs did not even bother to hide the look of relief that crossed his face.
Chapter 7

Chapter Notes

Okay, but apparently I've decided y'all are here to see me nerd out about geology on a semi-regular basis.

More seriously, Heather calls out the elephant in the room about how many parents Hiccup has. The theme of adopted family has obviously been in this fic since pretty early on, but in this fic and particularly the next it's gonna get more explicit. While I've taken from RTTE that Heather is adopted, I haven't picked up the rest of her backstory/who her biological family is revealed to be.

Elsa being good with numbers is something I have based almost entirely on how happy she looks to be doing her geometry in A Sister More Like Me. (It does make sense of the beautiful geometric shapes of her canon Ice Palace, though!) But also on the fact that numbers do what they're supposed to, while spelling is a minefield in what we see of the written Book of Dragons in canon.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He waited until Fishlegs had hurried home to fetch Meatlug’s saddle before letting his expression and his thoughts grow more serious. Heather had been looking between them in vague but amused confusion as they ticked off islands on their fingers and decided whether or not to take a second Gronckle with them, but whether she saw or sensed him becoming more serious, her smile faded away as well. She wrapped one arm over her chest, and took a single deep breath.

“I’m sorry to have to ask,” said Hiccup. “But how is your father doing? I know it’s the first day that I’ve seen you back here.”

“I’ve been coming back to sleep,” she replied.

There was a defensive edge to the words, and Hiccup let his body language stay soft and non-threatening. One of those times at which his appearance was an advantage, he supposed.

Finally, Heather sighed, averting her eyes. “Duskhowl said that I probably shouldn’t go up every day,” she said. “He’s improving, but it’s slow going, and... she said that it’s upsetting him that I’m seeing him struggle.” She pressed her lips together, and without the smile and the bright attitude it was easier to see the shadows beneath her eyes, the tension in her shoulders. “I just want to help.”

“I know,” said Hiccup. But he thought, as well, of the hours he had spent just trying to walk again with his prosthetic, and of how embarrassing it had been every time he had missed a step. It had taken plenty of falls before he had felt comfortable with the idea of others seeing them, and missing limbs were something that all of Berk understood. “But sometimes you feel like you’re disappointing someone even when you know that you aren’t. Let me guess, Duskhowl suggested that you drop in every couple of days?”

She nodded.

“He’ll probably appreciate having something new to show you each time,” said Hiccup, hoping
that it sounded reassuring and hoping, rather more desperately, that he was right. He had not
spoken to Eirik himself, did not know how fast he was recovering or even quite how bad he might
have been when he first started to wake up again. But from the slight softening of Heather’s
shoulders, he guessed that it was at least a reasonable response.

“Thank you,” said Heather. She looked back up again, and Hiccup had less of a feeling that her
eyes were cutting into him. “For everything.”

“Well, for my next trick I’ll try to bring you some rock samples that might actually let you figure
out this Gronckle iron that’s been annoying us for the past year.”

He wasn’t sure how much of her smile was real, but he could hope, he supposed. Though Heather
swallowed and nodded, rather than speaking, Hiccup reached out to rub her shoulder. It ended up
being rather damper than he expected, although he wasn’t sure whether that was his palm or her
shoulder, and Heather laughed as he gave his hand a look of annoyance.

“Yeah, I probably need to air out some of the steam. I think the dragons are enjoying it, though.”

“Well, if the younger Nadder was still wheezing, I probably would have brought him up here as
well,” said Hiccup. Mercifully, he was not only breathing fine but had gained back most of the
weight he was missing, the muscles of his chest and thighs filling out again beneath his skin.

“Maybe I should keep that in mind. Saunas for dragons.”

“I’ve probably suggested weirder things. Hey, bud,” he said, peering over at Toothless on the far
side of the room. “Quit drinking their water! Come on, let’s tighten up your straps and go find
some sacks and a pickaxe. Gods only know what my father’s going to think I’m up to this time.”

“Didn’t he show you the Gronckle iron in the first place?” Heather frowned.

“Huh?” It took Hiccup a moment, and then he laughed sheepishly. “Ah, no. Well, yes. But I mean,
Stoick will wonder what I’m doing with a pickaxe. Probably worry what I’m doing with a pickaxe,
let’s be honest. Gobber would just want a good view of the chaos.”

Her eyes scanned his face, and she tilted her head just slightly, regarding him. Hiccup was aware of
Elsa doing her best to be unobtrusive a few paces away, the chalk still in her hands as she glanced
between them and the numbers that Heather had written across the wall.

After a moment, something seemed to click, and Heather smiled apologetically. “Sorry. You don’t
call Gobber your father, do you? I’d just assumed…”

Oh, gods. At least this didn’t sound like it was going to be the awkward conversation with Anna all
over again. “Oh, no, I mean, it’s fine.” Hiccup rubbed sweat from the back of his neck once again.
“He… well, yeah, he basically is, I guess that was obvious as soon as you met him. But I just don’t
tend to use the word, I guess. Sorry.”

“It’s fine. I shouldn’t have assumed,” said Heather. There was still something in her voice that
Hiccup could not quite grasp, as she shifted the arm across her chest but did not relax it altogether.
“I’m not paying the best of attention, I guess.”

“Stoick is… the chief,” Hiccup said. The number of islands that Heather had travelled to, he was
not all that surprised when she nodded in something that looked like understanding. “I got used to
watching my words about Gobber at a young age. But at least I could always say that I was
Gobber’s apprentice.”
Some places were more strict about apprenticeships, only children learning from their parents. Even if Berk was far from that – could not afford to be – and Hiccup had been only one of Gobber’s apprentices over the years, it still let him have a title that linked them together. That and, now, the Book of Dragons.

Heather’s arm finally unwrapped from across her chest, but it was to drop her hand to the horn that still sat at her hip. It was the same one that she had taken from Alvin’s quarters, and Hiccup realised that he had never seen it away from her since.

“My parents adopted me when I was very young,” she said, voice softening. It had the air of a confession about it… but no, that was not quite right. An intimation, perhaps, something that made Hiccup feel almost privileged to hear it. “I don’t really remember… anything, from before. I’ve got this,” she patted the horn on her hip, “which they say was with me, but… not much else. It’s only been them.”

“Gobber’s been there for as long as I can remember, as well,” said Hiccup. He could feel the shape of her words; he knew, as well, that in a life not very much different he would have called Gobber his father. “But it makes things less confusing when I yell ‘Dad’.”

That, at least, made Heather giggle. Her fingers traced the mouth of the horn, very slowly, then she dropped her hand away.

“I don’t know what I’d do if something happened to him,” Hiccup added.

Heather’s next breath was so deep that it was almost a gasp, and for a heartbeat he feared that he had said the wrong thing altogether. She reached up, brushing her eyes with finger and thumb to the bridge of her nose, then her next breath shuddered slightly before she turned a smile on him that somehow felt the most genuine that he had seen.

“Thank you,” she whispered.

“Fishlegs and I can go and look for the rocks tomorrow, it’s not like the islands are going to go anywhere—”

“No,” said Heather, voice becoming firmer again. “You should go. Otherwise we’ll run out of rocks, and then gods only know what Hnoss will decide to eat instead.”

“All right. We’ll be sure to be back before sunset, so prepare for a rockfall somewhere in the vicinity.”

“I’ll clear some space.”

Elsa cleared her throat, just loudly enough to make Heather look round, and carefully set the chalk down on the table in a spot that it would not roll away. “I should go, as well. Not… rocks,” she added, as Hiccup cocked his head at her. “Unless you think you will need me there.”

“Nah, we’ll be fine.” He patted Toothless’s side, as the Night Fury drew up beside him. “We’ve got dragons if the rock does decide to attack us.”

“As long as you do not find Changewings again,” Elsa said pointedly.

Another reminder with which he could not argue. He settled for looking as innocent as possible, but to judge by Elsa’s raised eyebrow that had long since stopped working on her. “Yeah,” he said, with a huff of breath. “I’ll try to avoid them this time.”
“You... don’t have to leave, if you don’t want to,” said Heather. Knowing to whom she spoke, Hiccup crouched down and set about checking Toothless’s straps instead, and tried to think of who would be able to lend him a pickaxe. “I could show you more of those numbers.”

“I thought you said that you only needed the ten.” Again, the edge of teasing in Elsa’s voice; Hiccup glanced from the corner of his eye to see her smiling, leaning her hip against the table and looking up at Heather from behind the shadow of her fringe. How much of the flirting was deliberate, Hiccup had absolutely no idea, but he was torn between being glad that she felt able to and wishing that he was not stuck as witness to it.

“True,” Heather said. “But there’s a lot that you can do with them.”

“I’ll let you figure that out,” said Hiccup, straightening up again. Elsa’s cheeks looked pink, though the temperature of the room alone could easily have been to blame for that. “Just make sure Anna doesn’t panic, all right?”

He felt a little guilty for saying it, or at least for the way that a flicker of discomfort passed across Elsa’s face. But she nodded, and with a wave Hiccup took his leave, just hoping that the outside world would not feel too ridiculously cold in the wake of Heather’s house.

Unsurprisingly, it felt significantly colder having been in the heat and steam, and Hiccup would have sworn that ice formed in his hair from the sweat that had been beading there. Equally unsurprisingly, Gobber turned out to be able to lend him a pickaxe, and once he was appropriately bundled against the cold Hiccup managed to get to Fishlegs’s house just in time for them to be ready to go as well.

From the ground, the air had seemed still, but before they got at all high up it became gusty and unpredictable. Meatlug’s small, fast-moving wings were fine in such weather, but Toothless had to keep his wings tucked in like a ship furled her sails in order to fly smoothly, let alone to restrain himself to Meatlug’s speed.

All the same, they landed safely, on a ragged spit of an island whose banded rocks were visible from the sky and would hopefully contain something that Berk did not. Toothless grumbled as they landed, and Hiccup stroked his head apologetically before promptly almost falling over, his legs cramping from staying in the saddle.

“What’s wrong now?” said Fishlegs, quickly.

“I’m good.” Hiccup tried to flex the muscles in his legs without falling over again. “Might need to tweak the saddle a little.”

More like tweak how he was sitting, but at least it was something approximating the truth. He gave Fishlegs a smile and turned to look up at the rocks around them, relieved when he saw from the corner of his eye that Fishlegs was doing the same.
“Do you think that it depends on the type of granite?” said Fishlegs finally. “We can’t use red granite on Berk because it doesn’t hold up to the rain… could that matter?”

“Can’t hurt to check,” said Hiccup. “But didn’t Snotlout bring back a batch of red granite that one time?”

“Yes, but we didn’t give it to Heather.”

Hiccup had to admit, they had fed a lot of different things to Meatlug and other Gronckles over the last year or so. Although Fishlegs had done his best to keep track of it, Hiccup knew that a lot of it had been simply for fun, and not even approaching well-documented. “True, I guess it can’t hurt. Say,” he grinned, “how did Frog enjoy her first village meeting?”

“I think she was disappointed at how much of it was arguing about fodder for the winter,” Fishlegs replied. The good humour in his voice was a relief to hear again. “She was probably hoping for something a bit more exciting.”

“On Berk?” Hiccup did his best to vault over a waist-high boulder to see what rocks might have fallen into the gully on the other side. It might have gone better without the combination of sore legs and slippery rocks under his prosthetic, and he ended up grabbing at the boulder to keep himself even vaguely upright, and wondering why he even bothered. “Thor!” He cleared his throat and straightened up again before Fishlegs could look too alarmed. “I’m good, I’m good. But – really, she expected excitement, on Berk? She’s been here twelve years, she knows our sources of excitement are usually runaway sheep and the occasional visit from the Bog Burglars to show us up at our own Thawfest events.”

“The last year has been a little more eventful,” Fishlegs said. Hiccup supposed that he had to accept that one, but for the most part would be happy to see Berk go back to uneventful once again. At least for a few moons, until spring began to come and they would be forced to face Dagur.

“How many awkward questions do you think there are going to be once she hears the first fight about whose rams are servicing whose sheep?” said Hiccup, grin becoming a bit more mischievous.

“I am not going to be around for that conversation,” Fishlegs said, with a nervous laugh.

Taking pity on him, Hiccup swapped to scooping up a fractured piece of orange-pink rock. “Felsite?” he offered.

“Oooh,” Fishlegs hurried over to look. “We don’t get that on Berk.”

“Well, anything that breaks that easily, I’m not surprised,” said Hiccup. He placed the lump on top of the boulder over which he had climbed, and bent to pick up the next-largest piece instead. “But you never know what it might do to an alloy.”

“I… guess it can’t hurt to try.”

Hiccup had a suspicion that Fishlegs was following his lead just for his being the blacksmith’s apprentice. Or former apprentice, perhaps, but Hiccup had a suspicion that in practice it was a label that would never truly leave him. He hadn’t really the heart to explain to Fishlegs that he only really knew how to gauge and work with the resultant metals, and that they were probably both as clueless about the source rocks themselves as each other.

They picked their way over one small island, then a second, talking about nothing in particular or about the rocks in front of them. Skyfire and Silversnap seemed to be going through another phase
of gaining weight, such that even Fishlegs could now only move about one of them at a time, but notably seemed to have all but stopped vomiting up rocks again.

“Huh,” said Hiccup, perched on a narrow ledge where they had spotted a narrow band of very pale rock. He wasn’t entirely sure what it was, but he was certainly going to collect a sample. “You think it’s certain rocks that they’re throwing up?”

“That’s what I was wondering!” said Fishlegs, face lighting up for a moment before he went back to looking concerned about where Hiccup was currently manoeuvring himself about. “I mean, I don’t think it’s chance, though, do you? They’re getting smarter now, certainly way better at hiding if Pig and Frog want to bathe them…”

“But then why would Meatlug keep doing it?” Hiccup shrugged, gesturing with the pickaxe, then turned back to the right again. “All right, it’ll probably be easier to just let this drop to the ground, so step back a bit.” He waited for Fishlegs to do so before continuing, speaking between his blows with the pickaxe. “I mean, she’s – at least as smart – as they are – but you said – she still throws up–” finally, a chunk of rock came loose and tumbled to the ground “–regularly.”

“I was… kind of wondering whether it was a battle thing,” said Fishlegs, and Hiccup’s hand stilled. He turned where he sat, so that he could look down more easily to Fishlegs’s earnest expression and careful movements as he picked up not just the largest chunk of rock but the smaller pieces that had come off it. “You think so?”

“Well, we don’t know how old Meatlug is, but to judge by her teeth and her scars…” Fishlegs shrugged. “She’s probably been fighting for as long as we’ve been alive. And you know how hard it’s been to get some people to stop fighting.”

“Maybe it feels like a precaution, to her,” agreed Hiccup, with a pang in his chest. “She can hold the rock down for a few hours, so… maybe it feels like she’s got something else in reserve for that time.”

Fishlegs gave him a sad, careful sort of smile, which Hiccup could read easily enough. Relief that Hiccup thought it was a reasonable idea, but the sadness as well that Meatlug still felt like it was necessary.

“But, hey, it’s only been a bit over a year.” Hiccup said, trying to sound more upbeat again. “Five years, ten… maybe it’ll decrease with her, as well.”

He had to admit, it was making Stoick’s habit, when things were more strained than usual, of sleeping with a knife in his hand seem at the very least a lot tidier. And less likely to set the house on fire.

As Fishlegs had said, they did not know how old Meatlug was, let alone how old dragons might live to. Sheep or goats or pigs on farms lived longer than their wild counterparts – unless they were slaughtered young for meat, of course – and Hiccup wondered whether it might turn out to be the same with dragons. Before that, though, they would have to begin by seeing how long it would even take them to grow to their adult size.

Fishlegs had clearly had more sense about preparing than Hiccup did, and when the winds grew particularly gusty for a while they found something of a cave on the fourth – or perhaps fifth, Hiccup had lost track somewhere along the line – island and picked at the softest bits of the bread first before attempting the staler patches.
Having extricated Toothless from what had to be the only puddle of mud on the island – with a few choice invectives borrowed from Gobber along the way – Hiccup managed to get him into the sea for long enough that he was passably clean by the time that he got out again. He could not help giving Meatlug, who had spent the entire time lying serenely beside them, a slightly envious glance.

All the same, the weather held out just enough, light flurries of snow starting up around them as the day wound on into the afternoon. Both of their saddlebags bulged with rock samples, and both Meatlug and Toothless became noticeably more careful about taking off even if it did not seem to affect them too much once they were actually in the air.

“Do you want to go all the way to Dragon Island today?” said Fishlegs, as they dismounted on the last of the large islands before Dragon Island and its scraggly outlying rocks.

There was a tremble of nervousness in his voice, and Hiccup could not blame him. “I think we’ve got enough,” he said, aloud, but did not try to pretend to himself that it was not about the Red Death’s bones, and about Dagur with a crossbow in his hands howling fury at the sky. The former, at least, would still be there, and he wanted anybody who set foot upon the island again properly warned before they did so. “We’ll – we’ll call it a day after this one.”

It looked like they were mostly going to find more of the same, Hiccup had to admit, and the thought of a gentle search and finishing the discussion they had started on the previous island about the possibility of drying out dragon nip in the way that farmers dried hay for fodder was much more appealing than many of the ways he could have been spending the afternoon. He stretched his back and shoulders, rolling his left where he had been using the pickaxe not quite properly, but not quite like a hammer either.

“How’s your hand doing?” said Fishlegs, as they ducked through a gap between two rock formations that had been too narrow for them to fly through.

“How’s your hand doing?” said Fishlegs, as they ducked through a gap between two rock formations that had been too narrow for them to fly through.

“Hmm?” Hiccup glanced at his left hand before realising what Fishlegs probably meant and looking at his right instead. “Oh, yeah.” He curled his fingers in and out again in a fluid, rolling movement. “Motion’s pretty much back, and my grip strength is… well, I can pick up buckets of water. Just hurts if I try to carry them too far.

“It’s kind of weird,” he added, admitted, as they scanned over the revealed rockface inside, “having it all come back in this one. I guess in my head, I was almost expecting it to be like my foot, in a way? I just started swapping to doing everything with my left before my father pointed out that I need to keep using my right as well.” He reached up and scratched the back of his neck; Heather’s sauna of a house had definitely done a number on him. He didn’t care how cold the water was going to be, he was going to have to wash his hair tonight. “You still got bruises coming out?”

“I think they’re mostly done,” said Fishlegs.

All of them had seen those, for most of the first moon after the fight. Tuffnut’s had been the most spectacular, all shades of brown and purple and green covering most of his left side some days, and it had been all that they could do to stop him from taking his clothes completely off to show them the full effect. But the bruising on Heather’s cheek had seemed to come in waves, Elsa’s chest and shoulder had gone from more stiff to less to more again unpredictably, and Hiccup had woken up some mornings to find bruises in completely new and unexpected places.

Of all of them, Fishlegs and Ruffnut had the least injured. Physically, at least. Sometimes Hiccup looked over and saw a haunted edge to Fishlegs’s eyes, and a couple of times he’d caught Fishlegs staring at his hands as if he were not even sure to whom they belonged. Lifting up a part-grown
Gronckle was one thing; throwing aside a full-grown man in the depths of a red-hazed fight had to be quite another. Hopefully with time Fishlegs, too, would heal.

“I’m glad to hear it,” said Hiccup. “And I am also glad to say that one more island, and we should be done. If nothing from this seems to help, then we can look at Dragon Island. I guess since it’s closer to the volcano, there could be rocks specific to it, but…”

But, to be honest, he was really hoping that those would not be the rocks which they needed to find. He knew that if they went back to Dragon Island again, he would have no good justification to avoid going into the volcanic chamber itself in search of rock samples, even to the depths where Toothless had first shown him the Red Death and her eggs. And that, of all things, he feared might overwhelm him.

“Hiccup?” said Fishlegs, drawing him from his reverie. “Do you see that band of rock down there?”

He was pointing down into a fissure in the granite on which they had been walking, and Hiccup backed up a few paces to join him once again. The fissure was quite deep, enough to turn to shadow; perhaps in the midday of summer the sun might have been able to pierce it, but not now. Hiccup clicked his tongue, waved Toothless over, then gestured for light and made sure to point with his palm, not his fingers, into the depths of the joint.

Toothless obliged with the piercing-bright light from the back of his throat, glaring off the rocks for a moment before Hiccup managed to blink and his eyes to adjust.

“Uh,” said Hiccup, “is it going to sound really strange if I say that it looks like it’s glittering?”

“No,” said Fishlegs, sounding more than a little relieved. “It definitely looks like it’s glittering.”

“All right.” For a moment, he wasn’t sure what else he could suggest. The rock was not shining in the way that obsidian did, all smooth lights and lines, or even like finely-knapped obsidian with all of its small facets. It was truly glittering, like the stars at night or like sparks against a dark wall, and Hiccup was not sure he had ever seen a rock that did that. “Well, I guess we’d better try to…” he couldn’t help his voice trailing off as he eyed the foot of granite which separated them from the rock itself. “Get a sample.”

“I know we’ve been keeping Meatlug away from most of the samples,” said Fishlegs, “since we didn’t want her possibly eating them, but I think this might be an opportune time to make use of a Gronckle.”

Hiccup pulled the pickaxe from his belt, looked at it for a few seconds, but could not honestly bring himself to object to the idea this late in the day and with his shoulder already sore. In any case, looking along the length of the fissure, there seemed to be plenty of the rock there. As long as the layer was not too shallow, and even if it were they should be able to spot it quickly enough to stop it from being broken up too much.

“Yeah,” he said, putting the pickaxe down again. “I think that sounds like a good idea. Let’s go for it.”
The weather turned, chasing them back to Berk with the threat of a storm in the howling of the wind. But even Meatlug managed to outfly it, and Hiccup felt almost more rested in the evening than he had that morning, the roiling in his gut that was so often there calmed.

“Let’s land by Heather’s,” he shouted to Fishlegs over the wind; there was open land behind her house, rocky and too uneven to grow anything on even by Berk’s standards. But Meatlug could land just about anywhere, and Hiccup trusted Toothless to be able to manage something of a landing as well.

As it was, he almost fell out of Toothless’s saddle, and when he grabbed at the dragon’s shoulders to stay on it earned him a grumble in response.

“Yes, yes, I know,” he said, easing out of the saddle again. This time he was prepared for the stiffness in his legs, and managed not to immediately fall over. “Heavy saddlebags, bad landing spot, and I didn’t give you my lunch. Awful dragon rider, obviously.”

They moved out of the way for Fishlegs to come in for a neat landing behind them and drop out of the saddle much more smoothly. The wind was growing in both speed and noise, buffeting around them even at ground level, and rather than bother with shouting again Hiccup just pointed and waited for a nod in response.

This time, he was prepared for the heat and the lingering steam, but not so much for the laughter that greeted him as he reached Heather’s front door. Some of the steam had cleared, enough that it was more bearable to step in, and Hnoss and Gersemi were asleep, leaning on each other, at the foot of the stairs. Heather was sitting on one of the tables, legs dangling and with half a sandwich apparently forgotten in one hand as she waved over what Elsa was drawing on the wall beside them.

“No, no,” Heather was saying. “Squared. It’s when you times it by itself. Twice is around the circle, squared is the whole of it.”

“It is the same number!” protested Elsa, pointing at what Hiccup presumed was the offending drawing. Her sleeves were rolled up above her elbows, feet bare, her hair curled up and held in place with one stick.

“Yes, but it’s written differently,” said Heather. She plucked the chalk out of Elsa’s hands again, and curved her arm and hand awkwardly to write on the wall between them. “Look, with this symbol, and this size, it means times two. Up here, it means squared.”

Elsa huffed something that Hiccup could not hear, and Heather laughed again.

“Hey, you understood the numbers part, it’s just the notation that – oh!” Finally, Heather seemed to notice Hiccup, and he became aware that he was standing awkwardly in her doorway. “Hiccup, Fishlegs! You’re back already!”

“It’s been most of a day,” Hiccup pointed out, shrugging off his cloak immediately as he stepped inside and following it with his vest without a second’s pause. “Well, not sunset yet, I guess. But the weather’s closing in, so we headed back. You’ve… been busy?”

Although the biggest block of words and numbers on the wall still looked the same as it had that morning, the part by which Elsa was standing, and Heather sitting, had been rubbed clean and was
covered with new, slightly less even, writings instead. There was also a circle with a line through
the middle, and another spoke from the centre to the edge, with a couple of runes written around
here and there.

Heather exchanged a glance with Elsa. “Yeah. Turns out Elsa’s got an eye for numbers.” As Elsa
smiled, and looked away shyly, she gestured with her sandwich. “Also reminded me that I should
get something to eat.”

“Well,” he couldn’t resist the opportunity, “finding food is one of Elsa’s talents.”

He did not anticipate quite how alarmed or offended Elsa would look. Her eyes went comically
wide, her expression schooled perfectly still, and she stared at him as if he had suddenly announced
some grand secret and not a fact that pretty much everyone was aware of by now.

Mercifully, either Heather did not notice, or she pretended not to do so. “My pantry is still half
pantry and half storage cupboard, so round here it is impressive. And after Outcast Island, I’m not
going to complain.”

“And speaking of storage,” Hiccup continued, before Elsa managed to stare a hole right through
his head, “we have brought back a wide selection of rocks for you, which I would describe as less
interesting than food but, to Gronckles, it’s food all the same. Lots of igneous rocks. A few
metamorphics. One that we can’t actually identify,” he added, and Heather cocked her head
curiously. “So, where do you want them?”

“Let’s… start with somewhere that the dragons aren’t currently sleeping,” Heather suggested,
putting the sandwich aside and dropping down to her feet again.

“Probably a good idea, yeah.”

Chapter End Notes

Appropriate to this chapter, but just vaguely somewhere in this first arc of the book, I
have an outtake of a quiet evening meeting between Heather and Elsa: Second
Impressions.
A knock at the door interrupted just as Fishlegs was explaining to Heather where they had found the strange black rock, and Heather hurried away immediately at the sound. Frowning, Hiccup followed her out of the pantry, knowing that there were very few who would call on her and worrying whether it might be his father or even Duskhowl or Gothi come calling. It was no small surprise to see Anna on the doorstep, looking more than a little nervous and rocking back and forth on her heels.

“Oh, hi,” said Heather. “If you’re looking for Elsa, or Hiccup—”

“Yes, Hiccup, actually,” Anna replied. She quickly latched her gaze onto Hiccup, as Heather backed out of their line of sight. “Gobber said that you were out searching islands, but then I saw Toothless coming into land, so…”

“One of the disadvantages of having a Night Fury,” said Hiccup. “I can’t pretend to be someone else.”

Anna snorted, and he had to admit that the tailfin and the stirrup probably would have put paid to that as well, but at least it wore down the awkwardness in the air a little.

“What is it?” he added.

“Um,” Anna went back to looking uncomfortable again, although at least this time it didn’t seem to be aimed at Heather.

She fumbled off her gloves, then fished down her bodice in a way that made Fishlegs, just exiting the pantry, look away hastily. Hiccup remembered their joking about saunas just earlier that morning, and for all the seriousness of Anna’s expression had to bite down on the inside of his lip to keep a straight face.

“Right,” she continued, “so, I was down at the wharves, Gobber had sent me down there to see if there was any catch that Stoick could claim a portion of, only suddenly the wind moved round so that it was from the north and,” she finally managed to slip her crystal pendant out from around her neck and beneath her cloak, and dabbed it at arm’s length, “I felt this sort of… shimmer? It felt shimmery.”

What shimmery felt like, Hiccup had no idea, but the idea of the troll pendant doing anything at all concerned him. Amusement draining in a heartbeat, he crossed to Anna’s side, looking closely at the pendant but not quite daring to touch it. Outside, there was another gust of wind, hard enough to rattle the shutters at the windows, and in the depths of the crystal was a momentary flicker of opal-fire lights.

“Like that!” said Anna. Hiccup caught his breath at the sight, and straightened up.

Before he had even really managed a thought, he looked over at Elsa, vaguely aware that he looked desperate and questioning both at once. She shook her head, hands clasped over her chest again, and did not say a word.

“All right,” said Hiccup. “This… ideally we would ask Kristoff about this, but I guess that Gothi is
our next best bet.”

He was careful with his words, knowing that Fishlegs and Heather had not been there to know that Anna’s crystal came from the trolls, or that Gothi had one among her possessions as well. Although she had not said how long she had owned it, it was clear that it was many years, long enough that she had been able to connect it with a warning of Arvindell’s Fire.

He could have put his head in his hands. Arvindell’s Fire, of course. It had been over ten years since it had last been seen on Berk, a longer than average period of time.

The reminder of Arvindell’s Fire, of course, brought on its heels a worrying second thought.

“The Flightmare,” he said aloud. All four of them looked at him in confusion, which he almost certainly deserved given the number of steps he had taken in his head to reach that point. “I can’t be sure, we need to check with Gothi, but it might mean that Arvindell’s Fire is coming.”

“It would be about time,” said Fishlegs, rubbing his cheek and looking nervous just at the words. Hiccup grimaced. “And Astrid’s out of her cast. Great timing.”

“All right, I am totally confused right now,” said Anna flatly. “What is a Flightmare? What is Arendelle’s Fire?”

“Arvindell’s,” Hiccup corrected, offhand but emphasising the ‘v’. “It’s a particularly bright and southerly sighting of the Northern Lights. Reaches Berk every eight to ten years; we don’t see the aurora much otherwise. Last one would have been… when we were kids, I guess.”

“I remember seeing the Northern Lights,” said Anna. Her voice had gone abruptly soft, and it was enough to make Hiccup look up with concern stinging in his throat. But she looked more thoughtful than anything else, fingers twisting the twine of the crystal and eyes lingering on it before she looked sharply round to Elsa. “When we were children. I thought the sky was awake.”

“You said it the last night,” Elsa replied, words almost lost. Her expression had turned sad again, and she set down the chalk that she had been holding with a delicate touch. Averting her gaze, she began to unroll her sleeves, in slightly over-sharp movements. “The sky’s awake.”

This time, Hiccup was not the only one to catch his breath. Though Elsa’s accent thickened them, the words were recognisably Arendellen. Whether Fishlegs recognised the full significance was hard to say, but he looked quizzical at the other tongue that had slipped from Elsa’s lips, even if he did not speak.

“Well,” Hiccup tried to haul the conversation on again, before Heather could voice the quite understandable confusion that he could see building in her expression. “In Berk’s case, Arvindell’s fire also brings with it a dragon called the Flightmare.”

“Something tells me to not like the sound of that,” said Anna.

“It…” Hiccup glanced at Fishlegs, who could offer him nothing more than a grim look and a half-shrug. “It paralyses people with fear. People have tried to face it, but…” he shrugged, and Anna gave a faint, sympathetic wince. “Last time it was in Berk, it killed Astrid’s uncle. And… some people;” he was not old enough to remember for sure whether Spitelout had been among them, after all; “considered it to be a shameful death, not a battle-death. The Hoffersons took some scorn for it.”

“I’ve only known Astrid a couple of moons,” put in Heather, “but even I can imagine her response
Anna simply winced again.

“Yeah, when we were about eight I saw her beat up another kid twice her size over it,” said Hiccup with a sigh. He ran his hand through his hair. “We were what… four? Five, when it happened?” When he glanced over at Fishlegs, it only earned him a shrug. “But family honour still means a lot, on Berk. Astrid took it to heart.”

“So… do you think she’s going to try to train the Flightmare, or attack it?” said Heather bluntly. When Hiccup looked at her in surprise, she shrugged, and leaned against the wall. “Those are the only two things I can see that could restore that honour. Tame the creature that did it, or kill it.”

“I’m not sure that training it is going to cross Astrid’s mind,” Hiccup admitted. It had not particularly crossed his until Heather brought it up, although he supposed that it was a logical response. They had trained other dragons, found ways, and for having killed men the Flightmare was no worse than any number of the dragons they had dealt with. And if he phrased it as Heather had, it might do for the slight against her family’s honour as well. “But honestly, raising it as an option might not be a bad idea. First, though,” he pointed back at the crystal, “I want to run that by Gothi. Check whether we’re barking up the wrong tree or not in the first place.”

“Does this mean getting your and father walking up that rock spire thing again?” said Anna.

“No, I think this is important enough to make it a little less formal. Just you, me, and Toothless.” It probably said a lot about how concerned Anna already was that she didn’t even bother looking relieved at the idea of getting away from the hike up the spire again. Instead, as Hiccup nodded and stepped away, she hastily put the pendant back on again.

He had barely turned to face Elsa before he realised that she had managed to slip her boots back on. “I will find your father, or Gobber, and let them know,” she said, without Hiccup even having to ask. “Anna, you said that Gobber is at home, yes?”

“Last I saw him.”

“All right. I will start there.”

“Um…” Fishlegs looked around uncertainly, and Hiccup wondered how much of it was at the sudden change in direction of the conversation. Finally, his eyes seemed to settle on Heather, the only other person looking anything like as confused as him by the situation. “I can stay and finish helping you tidy up the rocks, if you’d like?” he offered. Heather’s look of confusion did not particularly shift. “And maybe tell you about the Flightmare?”

“Well, rocks I can handle,” she replied, finally shrugging. “But I get the feeling that I’m going to need to know a little more about the Flightmare over the next few days. Thanks.”

“All right, then. Come on, Toothless,” said Hiccup, grabbing his cloak. The house had cooled and the air cleared enough for him to swing it back on and be only a little uncomfortably warm. “Let’s go check in with Gothi and see if we can stop this going completely wrong…”
They landed tidily, despite the gusting winds that threatened to buffet them away from the spire entirely, and Hiccup breathed his thanks to Toothless as he and Anna climbed out of the saddle again. Anna opened her mouth, then had to spit out the tail of her braid that immediately whipped into it, before finally managing to point to Gothi’s boarded-closed windows.

“Did someone come up here to do that?” she said.

Even without asking, Hiccup was pretty sure of the answer, and shook his head. “She does it herself. Pretty handy with a hammer.”

This time, Anna’s look became a little more impressed. “Nutcase,” she muttered, all the same.

At another time, he might have been able to laugh, but the image of the Flightmare was still too clear in his head. He remembered peering from his window to see it, and catching just a glimpse of the white-blue light of it in the distance. But that young, Stoick’s warnings had actually been enough to keep him in the house. Or perhaps he just hadn’t been tall enough to make it out of the window. The memories were pretty distant nowadays.

With the sound of the wind, he was taking no chances, and banged on the door with his fist rather than trying to rap politely. Every heartbeat seemed to stretch out as he waited, and when he glanced over at Anna she looked equally uncomfortable, fiddling with the crystal around her neck.

Finally, the door opened, and Gothi looked over them both with her usual unimpressed, unsurprised expression. The air from her house was warm and herb-scented, but there was something sharp there as well that seemed to cut through his thoughts and settle uncomfortably between his shoulderblades.

He knew it was a sign that Eirik was improving that Gothi had returned to her spire at all, but it might just have been to be sure that it was shored up against the oncoming storm. Breathlessly, he realised that he had assumed that she was here at all, and not even thought to check with Duskhowl first.

The Flightmare, enough to strike fear into even the strongest of warriors. He needed to get a grip on himself before it managed to scare him without even reaching the village.

“We’ve come to ask about the troll crystals,” he said, not bothering with being indirect. Gothi nodded as if she had been expecting it, and for all Hiccup knew, she had. Hiccup pointed to Anna, who fumbled the pendant off her neck again. “Anna’s is… reacting somehow, when the wind comes down from the north.”

Again, Gothi nodded.

“Well, he supposed there was no harm in being blunt. “Is it Arvindell’s Fire? The Flightmare coming?”

This time, the cock of Gothi’s eyebrow and the slight tilt of her head looked vaguely impressed. Once more, she nodded, this time slow and considering, and Hiccup groaned and reached up to rub his forehead.

“Great. Does it tell you exactly how many days we’ve got?” A shrug, a wrinkle of Gothi’s nose. “Great. Headless chickens it is.” More of her words were coming back to him now, and Hiccup
sighed. “All right. Do you want me to tell my father?”

This time, Gothi’s shrug was accompanied with an expression that suggested that he was free to do so and save her a job. Hiccup tried to think of anything that he could ask, but realised that he was not managing to think much at all.

“Hopefully the storm will be bad enough to keep people indoors,” he muttered. Both on Berk and on Outcast Island. With a sigh, he turned to Anna. “Well, at least this means you get to experience some real Berkian winter. Which generally means being stuck in the house with the same handful of people until you drive each other completely insane.” He sighed. “But Monstrous Nightmares do make it quicker to dig people out again.

“Thanks, Gothi,” he added, turning back to her again. She acknowledged it with a wave of her hand. “And… before you ask;” she smiled, just a twitch, and he knew that he had not been mistaken at the glitter in her eye; “yes, I will probably have the academy try to do something about this before the whole village gets involved. I just…. need to figure out what.”

Gothi tapped him, twice and very lightly, on the top of his head. He suspected that was either telling him that he’d figure something out, or that he had better figure something out. It didn’t much matter which, he supposed.

“Yeah, pretty much. I’ll see you on the ground at some point.”

“So, how badly is this going to go?” said Anna, as they stumbled in through the door. The wind tried to follow them, and Hiccup had to lean against the wood to actually get the door closed behind them. “The Flightmare, Astrid, the weather…”

“Well, it’s not the best of timing,” Hiccup admitted.

“What did Gothi say?” said Elsa.

Hiccup jumped at the sound of her voice, looked properly around the room, and realised that not only was Elsa there but Gobber as well, eyebrows raised. “Sorry,” he said. “And she said… well, yes. It’s the Flightmare.”

“Oh joy,” said Gobber. “On the bright side, Elsa tells me that you warmed to Heather’s notion of training the beast. Got any plans for that, or is it optimism and stupidity?”

“The Berkian way,” said Hiccup.

“Optimism and stupidity. Good to know.”

Hiccup pulled off his cloak, followed it with his vest, and chose the seat closest to the fire to flop down into. It was far too big for him, but all that he really cared about was the warmth that began to seep immediately into his skin, and more importantly into his clothes. “I mean, we even got the
Hobblegrunt to tolerate us for a while, right? That’s all that we’d need with the Flightmare, not like Toothless.”

“Hah, you’d be lucky to get another like that one,” said Gobber, waving across to the fire. Hiccup looked over his left shoulder to see that Toothless was nosing contentedly at the edge of the ashes, eyes closed, and rumbling to himself. “One half as smart or half as daft, for that matter.”

“How are you going to get close enough?” said Elsa, sitting down opposite Hiccup. Ice still sparkled on her shoulders. The slightly dubious tone of voice was probably justified, he supposed, but he hoped that he would not live down to it. “You said that it is that frightening…”

“Enough to stop Fearless Finn Hofferson in his tracks,” Hiccup admitted. He shook his head. “It just… it’s never made sense, Gobber. Why would Finn freeze? Why would every viking who gets close enough to raise a blade to it freeze?”

“Funny what’ll get you, lad.” Even Gobber sounded like he was thinking hard on the words, though.

Hiccup traced his thumb back and forth across his lower lip, feeling a slight snag where his nail needed trimming. “Maybe it’s like the Hobblegrunt,” he said, words starting as a mumble but becoming clearer as he turned in his chair to properly face Gobber. “But where she attacks with anger, it attacks with fear instead. They attack,” he corrected himself. Only the Red Death still remained an it in his mind, too huge and too monstrous for anything else. But if they were to see hope for the Flightmare, that someday Berk might see it as something other than a killer, sooner or later it would have to be they.

He remembered, as well, the fury that had boiled in his veins when Mildew had called Elsa it. That had been meant for a wildling, not a dragon, but they were both full of the same sort of misconception.

“I mean, are we even sure that it’s the same Flightmare each time?” Hiccup shifted to sit more upright in the chair, gesturing with his right hand. “With Toothless, sure, we knew that we only had one Night Fury. But if the Flightmare is only here every eight to twelve years then—”

“Scars,” said Gobber firmly. “Those who do get close enough say it’s got a scar, right here.” He demonstrated down his left cheek, and Hiccup winced mostly because it was with his hook that Gobber was tracing the line. “Unless there’s been multiple with the same scar – or it’s some sort of mark all of them share, I s’pose – then it’s the same one for at least…” he huffed into his moustache. “Four visits? Five? From what I’ve heard, of course. Wasn’t here for even the one before last, after all.”

Hiccup chuckled, though there wasn’t much humour and more than a touch of hysteria behind it. “Well, that makes two of us. Although this is a first for the academy, so even you and I have still got more than that.” He dropped his hand to the arm of the chair, drumming his fingers in a pattern that felt something like a heartbeat. “All right. I want to get a plan together,” the door opened again, bringing with it a bite of cold wind, “before Astrid even finds out about this, otherwise I’m sure it will only end poorly…”

“Finds out about what?” said Stoick.

Hiccup greeted him with a wave, and sat back in the chair again, although it was at least marginally less of a slump this time. Anna wrestled her way out of her cloak and gloves, hopped on one foot for a moment as she struggled with her right boot before managing to kick off her left more easily, and grabbed a chair to pull over to Elsa’s side. Nowadays, at least, she picked up the chair rather
than dragging it with the resultant squeak of wood.

“Flightmare’s due,” Gobber provided, before Hiccup could think of a proper way to explain. “Gothi’s confirmed it.”

Immediately, Stoick’s placid expression slipped back to a scowl. “I’d half hoped it would stop with the fall of that Red Death,” he said.

Despite himself, Hiccup could only grimace, and shake his head. “The Red Death was controlling the raids. The Flightmare comes with Arvindell’s fire. And the Flightmare hits other islands as well, right?”

“Aye,” Stoick said, with a sigh, “but they’re generally after us, so I’d not heard from them yet in this cycle.”

“Can’t blame you for optimism,” said Gobber, which was, Hiccup had to admit, fair. “Still, Hiccup’s planning on training it this time around, instead.”

“Woah, woah, woah,” Hiccup sat up so sharply that he almost launched himself back to his feet again. “Planning is a strong word. We’re more at the… ideas stage.”

Anna sat down beside Elsa, and started tugging one of her twin braids loose with distracted, automatic hands. “I mean, I know it’s basic, but… would dragon nip work? Or, like, fish?”

Very well, Hiccup supposed, they were going to plunge right into the ideas rather than give him enough time to let it turn over in his mind and answers present themselves in a timely fashion. He shook his head. “No. I mean, there’s no reason that they wouldn’t like them,” he added, “but I doubt it would be enough. Toothless had been fighting Berk, but it was from a distance; we can’t be sure that he got close enough for anyone to ever raise a blade to him.”

If he had killed, it had been in falling timber and stone. At least, until Outcast Island.

“The dragons from the arena, when it was the arena,” he said, directing his words to Anna not just because she would most likely need them but because he could not look at his father or Gobber while speaking of the arena that they had condoned and run for so many years, “took time. I spent half of last summer working with them, slowly, feeding them and giving them light and fresh air. I took dragon nip, I reflected little bright lights about for Smokey to chase, I made sure to pet them. Sure, it was quicker than I thought it would be, but it still took time.

“And if Gobber’s right about the Flightmare, they might have been fighting for forty years or more. Any island with people will have attacked them. And however they defend themselves, they’re good enough at it to have kept alive for forty years.” His voice dropped. “They’ve probably killed a lot of fighters in that time.”

“If trying to train it proves dangerous to you or the rest of the riders,” said Stoick, a shade of warning and more than a shade of protectiveness in his voice, “then I want you to stop, at once. You are all more important than this. As long as we can prevent it from attacking this visit, it gives us eight more years before it might come again. And with what you’ve managed in one year, I’m sure the world will be very different in another eight.”

It was honestly hard to picture another eight years. It was hopeful and daunting all at once, a future rolling out that still needed to be filled, but Hiccup tamped down on the thoughts before they became overwhelming. The future would come; let it. What’s next, said Astrid’s voice in his mind.

“Aye, at the rate we’re going we’ll be drowning in Gronckles,” put in Gobber, perhaps seeing or
sensing just how overwhelmed Hiccup felt at the thought. “Have you hit a dozen yet?”

He honestly had to think for a moment, then jabbed a finger in Gobber’s direction. “Eight! And we’ve got seven Nightmares, so we’re not that Gronckle-heavy.”

“No, you can leave the heavy to the Gronckles,” said Gobber, and Hiccup threw up his hands in mock-disgust at the simplicity of the pun which he had, apparently, set up. “How many dragons altogether?”

“Twenty-six,” he admitted. “Including the Scauldron.”

“Near two a moon,” Gobber concluded. “Keep that up for eight years, and you’ll have, well, too damn many is how many.”

“Two hundred and eight,” said Elsa, fast enough to clip the end of Gobber’s words.

For a moment, Hiccup just stared at her, mind refusing to supply an explanation for the number. Then she realised that had provided the answer that Gobber had not even bothered trying for, and his staring became a sort of surprised owlish blink.

He wasn’t the only one. Anna was looking at her sister in outright bewilderment, and Hiccup saw Stoick and Gobber exchange a look. In the stretching silence, broken only by the sound of the fire and of Joan’s claws clattering on something metal in the back of the house, Elsa’s cheeks turned pink and she averted her eyes.

“It – it would be,” she began to say.

“Well, about half as many dragons as humans,” said Hiccup, trying to rescue something from the awkwardness of the situation. “See, Gobber, not drowning at all. Just enough to keep Fishlegs happy.”

“You bring back two hundred Gronckles for him to try and adopt, I don’t think Swifthelm will ever forgive you.”

“Well, I will miss her crabcakes,” said Hiccup. He had to admit, Fishlegs’s mother probably wouldn’t be impressed were such an absurdity to occur, though she would at least be fair enough to spread the blame between Hiccup for bringing that many Gronckles to Berk and Fishlegs for trying to adopt them all. “But, seriously;” he was sure that trying to be part of a conversation at home had not always felt like trying to herd the entire academy in the same direction; “it took days to get through to the dragons that Alvin had captured. Time to get through to the ones in the academy. The Hobblegrunt is the only dragon we’ve dealt with who was as dangerous, and she’s on the verge of leaving.”

“Perhaps I will get through, then,” Elsa said, more quietly. She took Anna’s hand, without looking round, slipping their fingers together, while her other hand came to rest over her heart. “The Hobblegrunt… chose me, I suppose. Perhaps the Flightmare will as well. And there will be no volitmaglaer this time. I would need to go alone, but—”

“No!” said Hiccup, and Anna cried much the same thing at much the same moment. Elsa looked surprised at both of them. “Elsa, this dragon has killed. I’m willing to try to get through to them peacefully, but I won’t put you in danger like that to do it.”

For a moment, her lips tightened, and he saw something in the depths of her that he had perhaps not quite seen before. Something that was tough, not hard, and gods help him from his years working with iron he knew the difference. Tough did not cut, might even deform beneath a blow, but it
would not shatter no matter how hard the strike.

“My ice has held back a Skrill’s lightning, and Toothless’s fire when he had the eel inside him,” she said. “If this dragon tries to strike me, it will not fare well. And of all of you,” her voice softened again, just a fraction, and she tilted her head to the side, “I am no stranger to fear. But I will need you beyond the range that my magic could lash out, or I will fear for you instead.”

“You would need us beyond your range,” Hiccup corrected her, “but I do not want this happening unless we cannot think of another way.”

He could see, in her eyes, the other reason that she was not afraid of the Flightmare. From one creature that had killed to another, she did not fear what the dragon could do.

“Dad,” said Hiccup; Stoick had been watching with a guarded expression, on the edge of the firelight with shadows at his shoulder. “Were you there, when the Flightmare killed Finn Hofferson?”

“Close, yes,” said Stoick. “But not close enough to see clearly. None were.”

Hiccup frowned. “He went off on his own?”

“There was a great flash of light, brighter than the dragon usually was, brighter than anything I’ve seen save, well,” Stoick nodded to Toothless, “a Night Fury’s fire. Anyone looking was blinded for a short while; even those of us who managed to shield our eyes had half our vision go. We heard the dragon roar, and then the sound…” he seemed to catch himself, and Hiccup was not sure whose benefit it was for. “Well, I’m sure you can guess the sound. Then the dragon took flight, and was too high for our arrows or catapults before anyone could fire on it.”

“And Finn Hofferson was the only one hurt?”

He tried to build the picture in his mind, of where they stood and how they might have looked to the dragon, of what the dragon had been trying to do. Whether there had been true rage in their kill, or whether they had just been trying to escape. And they were words that he needed to say before he even attempted to speak to Astrid; he knew that she would not give him the time for questions like this.

Stoick did not look too happy with the questioning, but either he could guess its purpose or he trusted Hiccup enough to answer anyway. “Aye. The rest of us were forming a wall, to keep it back from the village. Finn came to me before, and offered if he got the chance to flank it and take it by surprise. I said he could do so.”

That, Hiccup had not heard before. He wondered how many people even knew.

“We were on the edge of town, down by Smokefeet’s house – his mother was still alive in those days, it was her house really, but still. It landed there again, and this time Finn had made himself a hide, dragonskin masked with branches.” Stoick’s eyes flickered to Toothless. “Ah–”

“Again?” It had been a long time gone, and Hiccup could not worry about what had been done with dragonskin a decade and more ago. “It had landed there before?”

“Aye, nine years before that, in the same field. Smokefeet’s mother confirmed it. The land had been wooded before that, but she said too that it had been in that area before.”

Stoick looked entirely unsurprised at the next words from Hiccup’s lips. “I want to see that field.”
“Tomorrow, if the storm is not too severe,” said Stoick. “First, I want you to make plans for where to put all of those dragons of yours if the weather grows worse. Including that Scauldron, if need be.”

All that he could picture was the Scauldron in the pool in the cove. The water probably wasn’t even deep enough, and the mental image was absurd. “The weather will be here for moons, and the Flightmare for a night at most, after all.”

Hiccup nodded, distractedly, but the image in his mind was still that of a field and a glowing blue dragon within it.

Chapter End Notes

The Flightmare comes from the Dragons: Defenders of Berk episode "Fright of Passage", then goes on to reappear and become a more major feature in Race to The Edge. It's implied in the TV series that the ten year cycle is pretty static but I've made it somewhat more variable both to keep an element of frightening unpredictability to the dragon, and so that I can futz with the timelines a bit!
Chapter 9

The weather grew worse. Hiccup was awoken before dawn by the sound of the wind howling down from the north, hard enough to rattle the tiles on the roof and the shutters of his window in their frame. Tendrils of cold air seemed to creep in around the edges of the window, enough that he could feel it against his face, and he groaned.

Hiccup groaned, hiding his head beneath the blankets. “Autumn to devastating winter in one night. Thank you for your efficiency, Berk.”

Even the hiding was not that effective, and he could feel the cooler air on the back of his neck. Perfectly aware that he was not going to get back to sleep, Hiccup bundled himself in a blanket as best he could, edged to the foot of his bed without getting off it, and proceeded to fish clothes out of his clothes-chest and get dressed while exposing as little of himself as possible to the open air. It was a time-honoured Berkian talent, and aside from making a mental note to wear thick gloves if he had to handle his prosthetic outside during this sort of weather, not much ever changed about it.

He got downstairs to the sound of movement from the back room and just in time for Elsa to duck in through the front door with a new armful of firewood. She looked up and gave Hiccup an apologetic smile.

“Sorry. I will try not to let the wind in.”

Even in the house, Hiccup was wearing two shirts, while Elsa had pushed back her sleeves. Perhaps that was to avoid smudges of dirt from the wood getting onto them. Her cheeks were a little pink, but she was not paying attention to even the snow in her hair.

“I think the wind is doing a good enough job by itself,” Hiccup replied. The wind on Berk tended to the south-westerly, and most of the best houses, including Stoick’s, had been built accordingly. Unfortunately, it meant that the coldest winds then battered straight against their door. “If this gets much worse, we’ll probably board up the front of the house for the winter and use the back door. Where’s Anna?”

“Under three blankets,” said Elsa, wryly. “I thought I would make myself useful and fetch the wood, since…”

She shrugged, and he had to admit that it had saved one of them facing the cold quite so early in the morning. They had been so caught up in preparations for the Flightmare, preparations that would need to start that day, gods help them, that none of them had thought to check the wood the previous night.

For now, Hiccup grinned, and wandered over to their door. “Hey, Anna,” he rapped gently on the frame, “grab your clothes and pull them under the blankets with you to warm up. And wear your hair loose for now, it’ll keep the back of your neck warm.”

“Thank you!” came the muffled response.

“Is that why my ears are so cold, then?” said Gobber, emerging from the back room. He adjusted his moustache. “At least this keeps my mouth warm.”

“Wouldn’t want that freezing shut, would we?” said Hiccup.

This time, it was Stoick that groaned. “It is too early in the morning for this, for Odin’s sake.”
“I’d offer to huddle under the blankets with Anna to warm her up,” said Hiccup, to Elsa again. “But I’m not sure my father would appreciate that. Or that she’d appreciate my foot right now.” Cold feet were bad enough when they were flesh, or even wood. “And sending Toothless might be overkill.”

“Joan slept on our bed last night,” said Elsa. “Anna said that she made a good warming pan.”

“Yeah, if it gets too cold I’ll probably just sleep under Toothless’s wing. Thunderdrums don’t get so warm, or I’d suggest raising the bed up so he could sleep underneath it.”

“I’ve already got your father snoring,” said Gobber, grabbing the cauldron. “I don’t need a Thunderdrum in there as well.”

Stoick made a scoffing sound, which might have been for the continued foolery or might have been because he maintained that Gobber was the one who snored. Hiccup, of course, knew full well that it was both of them.

“I still need to see that field where the Flightmare has landed before,” he told his father, leaning on the end of the table rather than sitting down. He was already far enough below Stoick’s eyeline, and did not need to lower himself further. “If it,” he caught himself, remembered that he hoped for this dragon still, “if they’ve gone there twice, there must be a reason. We don’t know whether they landed there before that, fine. But do they always come from that direction?”

“Yes,” said Stoick. “But, Hiccup—”

“The storm is definitely coming, but the Flightmare is definitely coming as well!” said Hiccup, feeling fairly sure where his father was going with this. From Stoick’s sigh and vaguely disappointed look, he was right on target. “I can go now, or I can gamble on it getting better before the Flightmare comes, and I don’t want to gamble! We’ll stay on the ground, a Gronckle would struggle to fly in these winds, but there’s something about that area and we need to figure out what it is.”

He doubted that even a Gronckle would be safe in the weather, truth be told, but a dragon with a wider wingspan like Hookfang or Toothless would be in danger of having their wings ripped from their bodies. It was not an image on which Hiccup wanted to linger. He had seen what happened to ships that were caught off-guard by storms like this; at least, he had seen the lucky ones, who came back with ripped sails and shattered rigging but managed to come back at all.

“Besides,” he added, softening his voice and hoping that it sounded more reasonable, “if we’re going to have thick clouds then it’s going to be difficult to know when Arvindell’s Fire ignites. We need to be as prepared as if it were going to be tonight.”

For a moment, Stoick hesitated, and Hiccup found himself having to meet his father’s gaze in something that felt worryingly like a match of wills. He was genuinely shocked when Stoick was the one to look away first, with a heavy sigh, and make a vague gesture that felt like it was all but waving Hiccup off.

“Very well. But I do not want you flying in this weather, and I will be coming with you to show you the spot in question.”

Hiccup had no intention of flying either, but he simply nodded. With any luck, the Flightmare would also not be able to fly in the conditions outside either, which would at least buy them time.
He brought up Gronckles over breakfast, to which Stoick immediately replied that if they were fetching any Gronckles, they would be fetching Meatlug since doing would not involve the slippery path to the academy. Considering Fishlegs already knew of Hiccup’s suspicions regarding the Flightmare, it was probably the best way to keep things fairly quiet as well, while Gobber went to speak to Phlegma and Spitelout about making preparations for people to be holed up and protected in the Great Hall. At least they could blame it on the sharply worsening weather, and keep the Flightmare quiet for just a little longer.

Preparing the Great Hall sounded like a much nicer option than the field did, by the time that Hiccup was actually out there. The ground was just could enough that the snow was trying to stick, but the wind was so sharp and gusting that the only places it was settling were right at the bases of trees and against the walls of houses. The same wind did its best to sneak down boots, up sleeves, and down the back of Hiccup’s neck as he, his father, and Fishlegs all stood in the middle of Smokefeet’s field while Meatlug and Bashful grunted and sniffed around. Meatlug had been deliberately fetched; Bashful had happened to be wandering around the village and easy to gather in passing.

It couldn’t be the crops; the land had been full of cabbages when it had last been attacked, but fallow the time before. Even Stoick had muttered about being surprised what his own memory could turn up. The ground itself was currently frozen, and it would have taken a team of men all day with spades to accomplish what the Gronckles would be able to do in no time at all.

The wind, on the other hand, did not make communication particularly easy. Hiccup tried to get the dragons’ attention, failed, and when Fishlegs actually managed to do so tried and failed to communicate that he needed the dragons to dig. When shouting did not work, he tried miming, and Fishlegs only looked more bewildered until Stoick managed to thunder through the wind, “For Thor’s sake, get the Gronckles to dig!” and Hiccup wondered why he was actually bothering to be present at all.

With relatively few hand gestures from Fishlegs, Meatlug began obediently to dig, and whether Bashful was following her or obeying Fishlegs as well, Hiccup did not much care. The soil was a good yard deep, which even Hiccup knew meant that it had been carefully maintained over the years, but after the first foot began to change from a deep rich brown to a more orange, and then even paler, tone.

Or at least, Hiccup was fairly sure that was what was going on, but it was difficult with the wind right in his face.

As the hole got bigger, he hopped down into it despite what sounded like a protest from his father; if he couldn’t use the wind to his advantage, he had nothing on his side that morning. Meatlug looked up curiously as Hiccup slid down beside her, though Bashful kept digging until Hiccup put a hand on his cheek to steer him upwards again. It would probably be better not to dig up the entire field, after all.

There were gritty chunks of limestone starting to poke through the soil at the base of the hole, and Hiccup suspected that they had to be close to the bedrock. He ushered Bashful back upwards and
out of the hole again, and was just turning back to Meatlug when Stoick, grunting and muttering
curses, climbed down into the hole after Hiccup.

“Sorry, Dad,” said Hiccup, for the whole situation rather than any one part of it.

“What are you looking for?” Stoick replied, raising his voice over the wind.

Unfortunately, Hiccup was not entirely sure. There was nothing strange about the soil, no plants
creeping through it or unexpected roots that looked like anything more established than dandelions.
He could think of a few wild ideas, not least buried eggs that took years or decades to hatch, but
unfortunately nothing sensible was coming to mind.

“Something further down,” he shouted back. Stoick didn’t look wholly convinced, but either
Hiccup was getting better at bluffing or Stoick trusted him more than he deserved on that particular
day.

With a wave from his father, Hiccup guided Meatlug back in, and copied the hand movements that
Fishlegs had moved to get her to dig down into the limestone itself. He crouched down, which not
only brought him closer but kept him out of the worst of the wind, and got Meatlug to pause every
few inches while Hiccup brushed out the worst of the dirt and gravel to see what they were finding.

It was, unsurprisingly, not much. There was nothing at all strange about the limestone, nothing
different from the rest of Berk, and Hiccup was just starting to worry that this was chance, that the
Flightmare’s choice of route had nothing to do with the location in particular and was just habit,
when another swipe of Meatlug’s claws led to crumbling limestone and the bottom of the hole fell
away altogether.

“Woah, woah, woah!” shouted Hiccup, hurriedly pushing Meatlug back again. She snorted and
backed up, almost knocking Stoick over, as Hiccup concentrated on staying still so the rock
beneath him did not also give way.

After a couple of careful breaths, it seemed that the whole thing was not going to collapse. It might
have just been a small pothole, but Hiccup could feel the flutter of excitement in his chest,
wondering whether there might be something after all.

He gave his father a wave which he hoped communicated that everything was fine, then put one
hand to the ground and pulled the glove off the other with his teeth. The cold air stung his hand,
and he never thought that he would find himself hastily stuffing his bare hand into a pothole of
unknown depth or source, but life had taken some funny twists and turns.

Although the air was still cold, it was far less so than the wind above, enough that it felt a whole
lot better on his skin. There was a faint breeze, moving air of the sort that only happened in caves
of decent size with both entrances and exits, and when he flexed his wrist to touch the underside of
the cave ceiling it was slippery beneath his fingers.

Frowning, Hiccup withdrew his hand again. A clear goo that looked for all the world like dragon
snot was smeared over his fingers, but one sniff was enough to tell him that was not what it was. It
was also getting painfully cold in the outside air, and he wiped his hand on his cloak before
dragging his glove back on and sticking his gloved hand back down to cover it in whatever was
under there again.

Shadows shifted around him, and he looked up to see his father crouching opposite, frowning.
“What is it?” said Stoick, probably as mutedly as he dared with the wind. “Aside from a cavern
probably not many years from falling in.”
That was true, and before too long Smokefeet and his family might well be looking at having to move before their house collapsed from under them. Though they would not exactly be able to check out the land until spring, when the weather was at least a little less unpleasant. But Hiccup was more curious about the gel, which did not freeze on his fingers and which had, in places, an almost bluish edge to it.

“Algae,” he said finally. “I think. Which means there’s water flowing down there.” Which at least explained the cave. Hiccup eyed the edges of the wood at the bottom of the field. “How far are we from the Northern Swamps?”

“Eight or nine miles, no more,” said Stoick. There was already a weary edge to his voice that suggested he knew exactly where Hiccup was going with this.

He couldn’t be certain that whatever water was flowing beneath them flowed into or out of the Northern Swamps, of course, but Stoick would be a lot more likely to let Hiccup go to the Northern Swamps than to start climbing down into previously-unknown caves under Berk.

Probably with good reason.

“You’ll need Runa to escort you,” said Stoick pointedly.

Hiccup grimaced. While he more than trusted Runa to get them in and out safely, he doubted that she would want to keep anything from Astrid, especially something like the return of the Flightmare. And whether he could come up with a convincing lie was another matter altogether. “Discuss this at home?” he settled for, and Stoick nodded and straightened up.

Which just left the matter of the rather large hole they had dug in the middle of Smokefeet’s field. On the bright side, at least they had Gronckles with them. Hiccup cast around for a block of limestone large enough to block the hole, shoved it into place right-handed with his algae-smear left held clear, then backed up and gestured for Meatlug to fire at the block.

He jumped when Bashful followed her lead, but within moments the pool of Gronkle lava was cooling around the limestone and forming a plug that were probably, if he were honest, more secure than the limestone around it.

Getting out of the hole one-handed was more difficult, and snow was sticking to the algae, but he managed to keep it out of the soil even if there were a few graceless moments along the way. That done, he gestured to fill the hole back in again; Meatlug looked at him blankly.

To be fair, there were plenty of Berkians who weren’t all that good at hand gestures, either.

Mercifully, Fishlegs came to the rescue again, with a series of hand movements that made Meatlug perk up, head bobbing vigorously, and then start pushing the spoil heaps back into the hole. Once again, Bashful followed her, and Hiccup couldn’t help feeling pleased at his father’s look of pure astonishment at the sight. In no time at all, the hole was gone, replaced with a faint swell of bare earth that was only slightly paler than the untouched ground around it.

Stoick said something, lost to the wind, and Hiccup could not even read it behind his beard. But from the expression on his father’s face, he suspected it might have been an invocation to one of the gods again, and only hoped that it was for a good reason.
Barely had Hiccup opened the front door when Toothless bounded over to him with a chirp, plates up and mouth open. He licked Hiccup’s face eagerly, which was admittedly less annoying when it was at least warming him up, but also tried to put his front paws on Hiccup’s shoulders. All that managed to do was push Hiccup back into Fishlegs, and Hiccup squirmed his way free and darted into the house so that the others could actually follow him in.

“You’re back!” said Anna, voice ringing with relief. Though to be fair, Hiccup supposed, she didn’t have enough experience with Berk’s winter to know that this was not too bad. “You – oh, hi, Fishlegs!”

“Hi,” said Fishlegs, with an almost sheepish wave. Then Meatlug butted him in the back, knocking him further into the room so that she could follow with a grunt. Toothless finally stopped his attempts to stick his nose inside Hiccup’s shirt and turned to her with a soft bark, letting his tongue loll out of the side of his mouth. “Meatlug!”

“All we need is Thornado and we’ll have the full show,” said Gobber, watching with amusement. “Or are you going to try to fit the whole academy in here, Hiccup?”

Hiccup swiftly put aside the highly worrying thought of how exactly the twins and Snotlout would go about getting their dragons into the house. “Thought it would be easier to talk in here than out in the blizzard,” he said, having to slowly raise his voice as Toothless bounced in place. “Didn’t account for the dragons.”

“Aye, never thought you’d not be the worst one in the house,” said Gobber. His grin only broadened, and Hiccup did not even dare to glare; he knew that he still had any number of years of troublemaking to make up for.

Stoick finally managed to make it inside as well, and closed the door heavily behind them. “I did not anticipate the dragons joining us,” he said, an undercurrent of annoyance to it.

Concern immediately flooded Fishlegs’s expression, and Hiccup cleared his throat. “Bud, beams.” A flick of his hand, and Toothless set about installing himself above them, freeing up more than a little floor. “Fishlegs, why don’t you let Meatlug take the space by the fire?”

He looked round just in time to see Stoick raise his eyebrows, and suspected that this was going to be discussed later. But as far as he was concerned, Meatlug was just as much part of the academy as Fishlegs and equally unlikely to cause trouble. For now, he squirmed pulled his right glove off using his teeth and then carefully squirmed off his left so as not to disturb the smear of algae still across the top of it. While he would hardly consider himself an expert in algae – he would most likely have to ask some of the fishing families to see whether they had seen anything like it out at sea, or Runa whether she had seen it in the Northern Swamps.

“All right,” he said, aloud. “The Flightmare has gone through that field repeatedly. There was nothing in the soil that I could see that was unusual, but an underground river is. That side of town, it probably drains into the Northern Swamps. Has the Flightmare ever been spotted elsewhere?” He turned to his father. “Or which direction it flies towards Berk from? I would have thought it would come from the north, that’s the open water, but...”
He allowed the words to linger, and Stoick sighed. “Aye. It’s been sighted flying from the south-west before now. From the direction of the Northern Swamps. But Hiccup, this is hardly the weather—”

“Yes, I probably should have thought to do this in the summer,” said Hiccup. He knew full well that was not what Stoick meant, but was not going to give in to the look his father gave him. “But it’s too late now. Whatever does happen with the Flightmare, I don’t want it happening in the middle of Berk. There’s too much risk of bystanders getting involved.”

“Then put a watch on the south-west side, and wait for it when it comes.”

Hiccup shook his head. “Even with dragons, we couldn’t get down there fast enough.”

“You are not camping out in the Northern Swamps in this weather, and that is not open for negotiation,” said Stoick. This time his voice was darker, and when Hiccup looked up it was matched with a deep scowl.

“I’m not asking to,” he made sure to reply, trying to sound soothing. It came out a little too much like he spoke to dragons, and to judge by the way that Stoick only pressed his lips more tightly together that also did not go unnoticed. “But there has to be a reason that the Flightmare comes here, and a reason that it comes from the south-west. What if there’s something in the Northern Swamps that can help us to understand it?”

“Hiccup, is this now about keeping Berk safe from the Flightmare, or has it become about studying the Flightmare?”

He could not help falling abruptly, and guiltily, silent. Not because he was sure of the answer, but because he was not at all, and Hiccup felt discomfort grow in his stomach as the seconds stretched out around them. All too pressing, as well, was the sense of having an audience, the number of people seeing him not just embarrass himself but go back to doing it for selfish reasons.

It was much easier to make a fool of himself for the sake of Berk.

“I want Berk safe,” he said, finally. It came out almost hoarse. “That’s the most important thing. But if we just chase the Flightmare away from here, and it heads to the next island along, what’s going to happen? People will just get hurt there instead. I want to crack this for good, if I can.”

“The dragon is second to your safety and that of your riders,” said Stoick again, still stern.

“Second doesn’t mean not worth considering at all,” Hiccup retorted.

Fishlegs cleared his throat carefully. “Should I come back later?”

At least this was not taking place in front of the whole of Berk, he supposed, as no few of his spats with his father had when he was younger. But on the other hand, it was probably more awkward for Fishlegs to be witnessing this one.

“No,” said Hiccup quickly.

It might have gone better had Stoick not said “Yes” just at the same moment.

“All I am asking for right now is to head towards the Northern Swamps to see if we can find where this river comes out. Who knows? Runa would probably even know if there’s a spring that it probably relates to.”
“Hang on, have I got this right?” said Gobber. “You want to ask Runa about something about the Flightmare?”

“Yes, I know it isn’t ideal,” said Hiccup. He just about refrained from snapping because it was Gobber, and because Gobber had a good point. “But there are few others who go to the Northern Swamps, and none that I’d trust to go at this time of year.” He looked back to his father again. “Please, Dad, I don’t want this to turn into me threatening to go anyway, but I think that we both already know that I’m going, whatever happens.”

Stoick groaned. “Very well. But you will need to be the one to explain this to her.”

“So, how’s the axe coming along?”

“I’m still not totally sure that I won’t be Astrid’s first victim when she gets her hands on it again,” admitted Hiccup.

Fishlegs’s mother had, in no uncertain terms, made it clear what she thought of her son going into the Northern Swamps in the current weather. For all that Fishlegs had looked a little embarrassed at her putting her foot down, Hiccup knew immediately that he would not argue, and so it had culminated in Hiccup going by himself to ask Runa for her assistance, and her responding that it would need to wait until the following day.

The following day was, at least, marginally less windy. Hiccup said at first that he was looking for some dragon-related plants that would only be about during the winter, and though Runa commented that he could have given her more warning she agreed all the same. Astrid volunteered to accompany them, and Hiccup was relieved when it was Runa who reminded her that she was supposed to be sparring with Heather again that day.

For the first mile or so, they had not really spoken much, Hiccup not sure what he could say and Runa looking comfortable enough with the silence. But before he knew it, he was talking about Gronckle iron, and at least when Runa pulled the conversation round to the topic of her axe he knew that he was on more solid conversational ground.

“She’ll just be relieved to have it back. She’s convinced one of those Nadders has made off with it,” said Runa.

Hiccup had to admit, it was not impossible that they would do something like that. “Well, she does keep it well-polished,” he offered. Runa laughed. “Yeah, it’s… well, it’s basically ready. But I wanted to get some Changewing acid, uh, with your permission, I guess?”

She looked at him curiously. It was still snowing, but more steadily and with fewer gusts, and it was at least easier to talk through.

“To etch it,” he finished. “I mean, there are other ways of getting acid, but the Changewing acid is stronger. And a glass point…” Hiccup trailed off, with a shrug. Compared to beads, it would be
fairly easy to break off a chip of glass and round off the end.

“You know the axe is Astrid’s now, not mine,” said Runa. “If you think she’d approve, then do it.”

“Feels too strange to not get anyone’s permission,” he admitted. “I was planning to dr–”

“Keep it a surprise,” Runa said. Hiccup looked across warily, but from what he could see of her expression behind the scarf wrapped across the lower part of her face, she was smiling. Her eyes were a shade more green than Astrid’s, but he could see the same warmth there, and it set comfort and nervousness swirling in him in an almost similar way. They were too alike, he supposed, for him to not respect Runa as much as he respected Astrid. “I trust it’ll be fine. You keeping it at yours?”

“At the smithy. She came looking for it the other day…” he shook his head, and tried not to be too embarrassed about himself for his panic. “Luckily Gobber sent her off again.”

Runa laughed. “She was convinced that Snotlout had it, for a while.”

“Oh gods, please let that not be what they were arguing about…”

“Now she thinks it’s the twins.”

“Also a reasonable accusation.” After seeing Snotlout wrestle both twins to the ground to have to retrieve something – Hiccup could no longer even remember what – Hiccup had all but taken to checking his pockets when he left their company. “At least it’s not that far from Snoggletog. If I wind up with a black eye, you’ll know why.”

“She’ll be fine,” said Runa, not for the first time.

When he had cautiously approached her with the idea of working on Astrid’s axe for Snoggletog, he had half-expected to be told it was a foolish idea. It had felt extremely strange to be approaching one of Astrid’s parents at all, and he had fallen over himself to get Runa not to shout to Astrid before fumbling his way through an explanation. But she had smiled, and told him it sounded like a very good idea; there was a warmth to her voice that he was not quite sure he could place and that he was pretty sure he did not want to linger on for too long. She had then set about becoming something of his accomplice in retrieving Astrid’s axe when she was doing other work.

“She’s got other weapons,” he agreed.

Again, he thought that he heard Runa laugh, though it was somewhat muffled by her scarf and a flutter of the wind. Her next words, however, managed to be crystal clear.

“She could have chosen a lot worse than you.”

Hiccup walked into a gorse bush. It wasn’t intentional, but it might as well have been from the wave of desperation that washed over him to not be part of this conversation. It was difficult, for a moment, to think of much else than the fact that he had doubled over and the gorse bush was trying to join him inside his own vest. He pushed himself upright, grateful for his gloves, and peeled some of the plant off his chest.

“Sorry,” he said, voice slightly strangled. “Mud.”

He did not think for one moment that Runa would believe him, but it felt better to say it, at least.

“Better watch out,” she replied. “The Swamps are full of it.”
Nervous laughter bursting from him, Hiccup managed to get his feet back underneath him and start walking again. At least Runa started moving as well. “I, uh… I don’t know what to say to that,” he admitted.

The only thing that sprang to mind was making a joke at someone else’s expense, usually Snotlout’s to judge by his past performance, and that didn’t seem quite appropriate. Or as if it might be anything in his favour, for that matter.

“Don’t worry. You don’t have to.” Somehow, that didn’t manage to be wholly reassuring. “Thought I’d just take the opportunity to have it said while it’s only you and me.”

It was on the tip of his tongue to suggest that the Northern Swamps would be an excellent place to hide a body, but Hiccup restrained himself. He could feel the bubbling nervousness behind the flippancy, and knew well that it was not the time.

“Though while I have your attention,” Runa continued, amusement evident in her voice, and Hiccup had no idea what was coming next. “There’s been talk about the academy running again this winter, but for adults, not the usual trainees. How many people will you be taking for that?”

Safe conversational ground again; that was good to hear. And for the time being at least, the actual ground beneath their feet was still sound, as well. “We’re not sure,” he admitted. He still wasn’t sure whether adults would be easier to handle, or worse, than children. “No more than we could work with one-on-one, though.”

“Sounds fair. Obviously, I’d be looking to learn from more of you than just Astrid. I’ve seen plenty of Nadder the last year.”

“And plenty of Nadder hatchlings?” he hazarded a guess.

The look that she gave him from behind her scarf said it all.

“Yeah, Astrid’s had a few words about them, as well.” He supposed that most of what he had seen had been them at their cutest, just a day old and wanting only to eat and to sleep. He hadn’t dealt with the mischief-making, with their first bouts of fire, with them learning to fly. Even the eggs hatching had been a largely momentary thing. “You should probably be aware that Spitelout wants in on this session of the academy, as well.”

“I can handle Spitelout,” said Runa, with an unimpressed snort that was once again just too much like Astrid’s. “Don’t worry. We’ve not come to blows since Finn was taken.”

Hiccup pressed his lips tightly together, and tried not to panic. Out loud, at least. His own scarf gave him some measure of protection, but his mind went traitorously blank as he tried to think of anything to actually say.

Unfortunately, after a few paces Runa grabbed him by the arm, stopping him firmly in his tracks. Well, he supposed that he should have anticipated where Astrid had learnt that particular trick, and also possibly where she had learnt to read people like books.

“You’ve gone quiet,” she said flatly. “What is it?”

Well, he supposed that it would be better to have her refuse and turn back now, rather than on the edges of the Northern Marshes themselves. Hiccup tugged down his scarf, revealing his face but hopefully letting him look more honest into the process.

“I said I was looking for plants relating to dragons,” he said, “and that’s true. So’s the fact that it
has to be now. Because I think the plant that I’m looking for will give me a clue about the behaviour of the Flightmare.”

“You think the Flightmare’s coming again.” Her voice had gone hard, but he hoped it was a matter of business, and not of anger.

Hiccup swallowed. “I have evidence that it is.”

“Why didn’t you tell me first?”

“How would Astrid respond to hearing this?” he waved around them, though he was not even sure what it was that he meant. That the Flightmare was coming at all, that Hiccup knew, that Hiccup needed Runa to help him search for something that might help. “You know what she’s like.”

“Yes, and I doubt she’ll be any less angry if she finds out after the fact,” said Runa. “Did you not th-”

“No!” Hiccup snapped. “No, apparently I didn’t learn from what happened on Outcast Island! I’m still trying to give people answers instead of questions! Or maybe I would rather deal with Astrid’s anger once the Flightmare is dealt with, rather than having to handle both at once!”

It came out in an explosive rush, faster and more intense than he meant to, more than he would ever have intended to say in front of Runa. In front of almost anyone. In front of Elsa or Gobber, the words would have made him feel exposed; now it made him feel flayed, as if he had torn open the skin of his chest. Somehow it hurt worse when he saw the slight fall in Runa’s eyes, the sadness settling there. Reaching up, she took down her scarf in turn.

“I understand your reasoning,” she said, “but that won’t change how angry Astrid will be. You shouldn’t have asked me to bring you here.”

“You’re the one who enters the Northern Swamps most often. In this weather, you’re the only one I’d trust.”

She sighed. “What are you looking for, out here?”

“Algae,” he said. It only made Runa raise her eyebrows. “The Flightmare always lands in the same place. Underneath that field is an underground cavern, with a river, and an algae that seems faintly bluish. And then,” he fished beneath the neckline of his clothes. “I borrowed this.”

“Borrowed what?” said Runa.

A wholly justified question, especially when the object in question had managed to snag on the neck of his shirt. Finally, though, he managed to get hold of it, and withdrew the crystal pendant that Anna had brought back from the trolls, and which had first given them warning that the Flightmare was coming. Runa frowned at it.

“Borrowed what?” said Runa.

“It’s a long story how it came to Berk,” said Hiccup. He wasn’t ready to talk about trolls, even if Runa of all people, with her experience of the Wildlands, might be able to both listen to him and to keep those tales to herself afterwards. “But it reacts to certain things. It reacts to magic, and to Arvindell’s Fire. When I scooped some of the algae out of the underground cave, it didn’t look like much, but as soon as this came near it?”

Or more accurately, as soon as Anna had passed close enough to Hiccup’s discarded gloves, but that was neither here nor there.
“This reacted – not much, but it reacted.” Like a tremble, Anna had described it, but of energy instead of movement. “And the algae *glowed*.”

“Let me guess,” said Runa, voice still grim. “It glowed blue.”

“Faintly, yes.”

Neither of them had to say that the Flightmare glowed the same colour. Runa looked for a painfully long moment at the crystal clutched in Hiccup’s gloved hand, its surface a plain milky white that made it hard to even see with the snow still falling around them. She swallowed, then reached up, letting her hand linger on her scarf again. For an aching breath, Hiccup thought that it was all over.

“Come on, then,” she said. “We’d best keep walking.”
This time, the silence about them was more tense as they continued onwards towards the Northern Swamps. The land sloped down, bushes thickened around them, and Hiccup took to following Runa rather than walking at her elbow. She remained businesslike, and he did not question when she took them by a longer route or pointedly avoided some area of ground. Gobber had seen to it that he knew how to get himself out of a patch of sinking ground, but Hiccup knew full well that there were areas of the Northern Swamps dangerous enough to drown a horse. He did not want to encounter them.

“All right,” said Runa, as they called their second stop for water. “We’re about half an hour from the Swamps, but we’ll start hitting outlying areas soon. How do you intend to find this algae?”

“The crystal,” Hiccup said. That, at least, he had some confidence in. “It feels…”

*It feels like a heat haze looks, he wanted to say. It feels like the Northern Lights rippling on your skin. It feels like that coiling moment of power right before a dragon fires.*

He had wondered, and wondered still, whether it felt anything like what Elsa felt when using her magic. But it had felt unbearably intrusive to think of asking her, of requesting that she put on the crystal from the trolls that she had never even seen, and compare it to the feel of the magic that she had struggled with for so long. Magic she could not escape, while Anna or Hiccup could shrug the crystal on and off as easy as breathing. Part of him wanted to know, but wanting to not upset Elsa was stronger.

“It feels different,” he settled for, and it was saying nothing but it was all that he could say. Runa’s expression did not flicker.

“Only on bare skin? Or does it work through gloves?”

Sensible questions. Ones which he probably should have tested the night before. “I don’t know,” he said, and probably deserved the weary look which he could all but feel her giving him. “But I can…”

He pulled off his gloves, holding them in his teeth, and hunched his shoulders to protect his hands as best he could against his chest. Undoing the knot was the tricky part; looping the ends of the string and tying them about each other was easier. He put his gloves back on hurriedly, already feeling his fingers going stiff with cold, and then looped the pendant back around his neck again. He tugged at the strings, drawing them against each other, and shortened the string until it was almost flush with the base of his neck, touching his skin but also peeping out through his scarf.
“There,” he finished. He tried to make it sound decisive, but wasn’t sure it even made him sound like an adult. “This way… I should be able to feel it.”

“Fine,” said Runa. “We’ll cut diagonally, rather than heading straight in. It’ll give us the best chance of finding this algae. What do you think that it has to do with the Flightmare?” she added, as she started walking again.

This time, Hiccup had to hurry to keep up, watching Runa’s carefully-picked footsteps and trying to follow in them as precisely as possible. Runa did not even have to ask; this close to the Swamps, it would be foolish to try anything else.

“I don’t know,” he admitted. “But I’ve not seen it before, and finding it in the exact place the Flightmare has landed, twice, can’t be a coincidence.”

Runa did not disagree with him, but didn’t exactly agree either. Just glanced around again, eyes unreadable, and once she looked away again Hiccup winced to himself. The ground flattened out as they continued south, and the wind dropped a little, sheltered by the northern slopes down which they had walked. Clumps of willow trees were just visible through the snow, fading into the gloom, but Hiccup was more concerned about following Runa from tussock to tussock of grasses rather than risk sinking into the layers of moss between.

The grasses crackled and snapped beneath his feet, and when he looked at the heads of them he could see that they were beginning to freeze. It was stupid weather to be in the Swamps, but at least, he supposed, he was not out here by himself. He just concentrated hard on where he placed his left foot each time.

He was not sure how long they had been walking when he felt the change of the pendant against his skin. It was like a ripple running through his flesh, a tremor in his bones that made him pull up short and grab wildly beside him. There was nothing there, though, nothing but reed mace, and it crinkled and cracked beneath his fingers as he tried to stabilise himself.

Runa whirled to face him, and grabbed him by the shoulders to keep him upright. For a moment, the world flickered blue.

“Allgae,” he managed.

Whether it was that there was more of it, or because the pendant was against his throat and not in his hand, or something else altogether, he did not know. He rather hoped that it was the closest he was ever going to come to know what touching a Skrill felt like, because he was sure that every hair on his arms was standing straight on end.

“Where?” said Runa.

All that he could think about was the racing of his heart in his chest, the difficulty to breathe. There was, he managed to slowly think, a sort of tug to the feeling, like something had hooked behind his ribs and was trying to draw him forwards. But grasping the thoughts was like pushing his hand through honey.

With a growl in her throat, Runa ripped the glove off one of her hands, then reached beneath his scarf and loosened the string that held the pendant to his skin. Her fingers were icy cold, but that didn’t really mean anything until she managed to get the pendant loose enough to tug a few inches away from his skin, and Hiccup snatched in a breath that hurt the back of his mouth and filled his chest with cold but which he could at least feel.
“Take it off,” she said. For a split second his vision blurred, and it was Astrid, not Runa, giving the order. “It’s affecting you; take it off.”

He tried to summon the words to say that it was supposed to affect him, otherwise he wasn’t going to be able to find the algae, but there was anger and fear in her voice, and something more guarded in her eyes as she looked at him. Not quite the way that people had looked at him before Toothless, before everything, but perhaps the way that they had looked at him in the early days. When he was halfway to being a dangerous creature himself, associating himself with dragons and magic.

It was the first time that he had seen that look on Runa’s face, and it made him feel colder than the wind had.

He considered, for a heartbeat, saying that he had not thought that it would affect him quite so much. But he knew that there was no time, that he was already wasting it, and he fumbled to remove the pendant from his neck again.

Even through his glove, it felt as if he could feel the faintest vibration. But he was not sure whether that was just his hand, or even his own pounding heart.

“It can’t be that far away,” he said. He wasn’t even sure whether it was true, but gods, he could not imagine that much of a response from something far away. At least, he hoped that it could not, or he could not imagine how Gothi could have coped with being in the range of the troll pendant for so many years. “It… it’s got to be close by.”

Runa pulled her gloves back on again, tucking in her cuffs to prevent the wind from sneaking up on them. She still looked… troubled, perhaps that was the word. As if she were finding herself doubting whether she should have spoken so trustingly to Hiccup not all that many miles ago. But after a painful moment, she looked around them again, squinting slightly against the turning wind.

Turning. It took Hiccup a moment to realise that it was coming from the north. He wasn’t even sure why that made him so much more uncomfortable.

“There’s a dip behind there,” said Runa, nodding to a cluster of willows that seemed to droop down into the gloom. The sky above them was all grey, different tones from near-white to deep iron, almost painful to look at in different places for different reasons. The willows rustled and flicked against the sky, far beyond some subtle shiver. “There’s a pool. Could be a spring.”

He nodded clumsily, and waited while Runa scanned the ground around them before picking the best route across to the cluster of willows. The wind was growing stronger, and it made it increasingly difficult to follow exactly in her steps; he kept his eyes on the ground and his arms out to the side. He was relieved when they came to the foot of the willows, sturdier tufts of grass on which he could more easily stand, and was only thinking of looking up and stepping beside Runa when her arm shot sideways, catching him in the chest like an iron bar. He knew well enough to stop when arms were thrown in his way, though, and looked up sharply to see the scene spread out before them.

The Swamps glowed. Or at least, the patch that they were looking at did; an eerie blue, purplish at the edges, picked out every ripple and rock of the pool of water spread out below them. The wind threw patterns across its surface and lashed it at the edges.

“I’ve never seen this,” said Runa. Hiccup looked across; her eyes were wide, and the bluish light played strangely on her skin, stronger than the dim sunlight. Her voice was hoarse, tight in her throat, and it was almost worse to hear someone else sounding as fearful as he felt.
Hiccup looked over the sight again, as if somehow it would begin to make sense if he just stared for long enough. At least it explained the pendant, he supposed; it was a lot more than a smear of algae on a glove, and that had been noticeable enough.

“Arvindell’s Fire,” he said, finally. Runa looked across at him. “It must be Arvindell’s Fire. This,” he gestured with the pendant, still clutched in one gloved hand, “reacts to Arvindell’s Fire, and to the algae.” And to Elsa, but that was more distant, something that he could not handle right now. “They must be linked, this must be…”

Magic, perhaps. Or something so close to it that he could not see the difference, that it might as well be magic. With its own rules, written so deep into the world that he could not read them.

“You’re saying that Arvindell’s Fire makes this?” said Runa, her voice hard and sure again. He nodded, though he was nowhere near as certain as he felt, and did not expect her hand to wrap painfully hard around his arm. “Then we need to go. Now.”

He went to protest, to say that they had only just found the algae for which he had been foolish enough to be searching in this gods-forsaken weather, unable to tear his eyes away from the glimmering blue light that reminded him, inevitably it seemed, of Elsa’s magic.

Then there was the roar of a dragon, and the whole world seemed to tear itself apart.

He was pretty sure that he got hit by a tree. Or at least a considerable percentage of a tree; there were pieces scattered about him, floating on the water and mud in which Hiccup landed. He wasn’t sure how he had ended up in the air in the first place, but one moment Runa had been trying to pull him away from the glowing water and the next he was thrown into the mud, cold shock assailing him, his shocked gasp only serving to fill his mouth and nose with mud.

Hiccup pushed himself upwards, or at least cleared his face from the water, feeling it drip down his face and trickle down his skin. He looked up at the bank, at the mangled stumps of trees and torn-up ground that remained, and tried to fight his way to his feet again.

“Runa!” he shouted. The word was almost lost below the wind.

It really was more trying than actually managing to get back to his feet. Oh, Thor. It was watery enough to have splashed across his face, and for him to be able to spit out the worst of the taste, but he could feel the mud sucking at his legs as he tried to get them underneath him and he knew that he had to stop his thrashing.

“Runa!”

He managed to wrap his hand around a sturdy-looking tuft of grass, and gave it an experimental tug. It stayed in place, and Hiccup slowly increased the strain against it, until he felt himself shifting towards it through the thick, stinking mud.
Thick, stinking, glowing mud. It was as if he had been sprayed with paint, but instead of paint it was the algae, clinging to his clothes and soaking into the wool. Gods, this was absurd. All that he wanted to do was get out of the Swamps, but they were hours from Berk, hours from Berk and he was soaked to the skin, and he knew that his racing heart and the heat in his veins was only temporary.

He managed to get one foot free, and was not impressed that it was the metal one. It felt like his right boot was trying to remain in the mud, and he tried not to let it slip off his foot as he tried to twist himself further towards the land. His shoulders reached solid ground, and it was fine, he could do this, he’d fallen in bogs before now.

Admittedly not as winter was really getting its teeth into Berk, but he was sure that he had done dumber things. Probably even recently.

He drew in his breath, ready to shout Runa’s name a third time, as he looked up at the bank. Two things struck him at the same time. Firstly, that trees did not just explode, even in his disaster-prone vicinity.

And secondly, that the glowing blue shapes in front of him were not just waves and ripples.

In the shining blue, a pair of eyes blinked.

Hiccup’s throat seemed to constrict as his eyes managed to find the lines in the glittering, shifting blue light. A slender horn sweeping back over a broad, flat head; it was a little like the shape of Toothless’s head, a little like the shape of Thornado’s, and he could feel hysteria rising in his chest and threatening to consume him.

The Flightmare rose slowly out of the glowing water in front of him, like a creature coalescing from their own primordial smoke. They bared their teeth and hissed, a warning recognisable in any language, their throat full of a white-blue glare.

Hiccup realised, in a cold rush, that he did not know what to do. Whether this dragon would want eye contact or not, just how aggressive they might be when provoked.

Whether they might feel provoked by a human falling into their lake.

There was no time to think it through. Hiccup raised one shaking arm, trying not to make it feel too much as if he were throwing it in front of the dragon’s mouth, and offered his flat palm. He tore his eyes away from the Flightmare, squeezing them closed as he forced himself to look away. For a moment there was nothing but the whistling wind and the hissing sound of the Flightmare’s breath; no growl, no rising whine of readying to fire. He dared to let hope swell in his chest.

There was a snarl, and a warm mist sprayed over him. There was just enough time for him to think that it felt the same way as the sprays of blood on Outcast Island had felt, but then he opened his eyes and went to look around and realised that he could not.

His fingers would not curl, his arm would not lower, his head would not turn in place. Panic jolted through him as he found himself fixed, frozen, staring at the grasses streaked through with glimmering water onto which he had managed to drag himself. He could still feel the icy water running down his skin and filling his boot, feel his own heartbeat thundering in his chest, and with a sinking horror realised that he could feel, as well, the hot roll of the Flightmare’s breath brushing over his hand.

He prayed to the gods that Runa would get safely back to Berk.
There was a rush of air, a Nadder’s furious shriek – a Nadder –

Heat blared past him, so close that it washed in painful waves across his hand. There was a solid splash behind him, then an arm scooped around his chest and Astrid snarled, wordlessly, as she dragged him the rest of the way out of the mud and flung him over Stormfly’s back like a lamb carcass on Slaughter Day. It knocked the breath from his lungs, made stars fly behind his eyes, and then spikes jabbed his side as Astrid hauled herself back into the saddle.

One arm scooped around him again, and he was hauled towards a sitting position. It was horrifying, helpless and being pulled around by a rag doll, the world lurching in front of his vision into a blue-white blur that made his stomach rise in his throat. Being pulled around by Gobber or his father had been one thing, but this was worse, feeling his limbs like nothing more than sacks of sand and unable to even see the world around him. He was pulled up against Astrid’s body, his head knocking against the metal of her pauldrons.

“Finally eating like a Viking,” she snapped to no-one in particular, as she dragged him almost into her lap. It was as if he were riding sidesaddle, which sounded like an even worse idea on a dragon than it did on a horse. “Still got a bony head…”

Stormfly took sharply to the air, and the still-blurred ground turned to still-blurred sky in front of his eyes. He heard a grating shriek, a sound that had to be the Flightmare, and Stormfly whirled in the air and answered with a roar and a blaze of fire that streaked white-hot light across the world.

With the world impossible to see, noises became an intolerable whirl, shouting dragons and the howling wind. The cold began to soak into his skin, like ice slicing into his flesh, and he wanted to gasp for breath but could not even manage to. His body refused to shiver, even as the air whipped at his skin and clothes, even as Astrid seemed to grow hotter against his shoulder.

Another flash of light, then Stormfly seemed to drop from the sky, so fast that Hiccup tasted acid in the back of his throat. They tumbled into gloom, some sort of shadow perhaps, and he was manhandled down from Stormfly’s back again and pushed onto his back on the ground.

“Hiccup?” said Astrid. It was not quite a snap, had a tremble of fear behind it. At least he could still hear clearly. She was a peach-gold blur in front of him, then as she leaned in she slipped back into focus again, worry and fear and anger all wound together in her eyes. “Hiccup, answer me!”

She shifted, but after a moment his eyes moved to focus again, and the next blink was of his own volition. Pain rippled through him, like blood returning to cold fingers, and he managed to make it to half-seated and turn away from Astrid just in time for his stomach to rebel entirely. He threw up, bitter and hot in his throat, shuddering and retching on air before falling to panting as he tried to sit up entirely.

“What in Thor’s name are you doing out here?” said Astrid. “That’s the Flightmare—”

“I noticed,” he replied, wiping his mouth with the back of his arm then regretting it as he felt a fresh wave of cold muddy water on his skin. He pulled his arm away and looked down; the algae was still strewn in patches and splatters across him, glowing faintly blue in the shade of the willows which he realised they were under.

Astrid punched his arm, harder than she usually did, and he grunted in pain. “You boneheaded,” she began.

“I didn’t think they would get here yet,” he said, words a little slurred. His tongue felt thick in his mouth, as if it did not want to move properly, and his hand slipped from under him as he tried to
push upright. He would have fallen onto his back again had Astrid not grabbed the front of his tunic and hauled him upright. As it was, his head felt as if it were lolling on his neck, and he thought for a moment that he might vomit again. “I was trying to get ahead of them.”

Astrid opened her mouth, and he wasn’t sure which one of them was shaking but could feel that at least one of them was, then pressed her lips tightly together again. The next thing that he knew, she slapped his cheek, a slam of a connection that seemed to rattle his teeth and made everything blur again for a moment.

He looked at her in shock, unable to think of a single thing to say, clever or otherwise. The line of her jaw was tense, her eyes wide and dark and furious in the dim light, her breathing ragged. And he didn’t know what he should say.

“Stay here,” said Astrid. Whether the trembling was in her voice or his head, he couldn’t say. “Elsa and Toothless are coming. I’m finding my mother.”

“Astrid.” He grabbed for her forearm, and she looked at his hand with anger in her eyes. “The Flightmare… has some sort of venom. Don’t get within range.”

Reaching round, Astrid drew from her back the longbow that he had not even seen. It might have had more marks on it since Outcast Island, but it still fired as true as ever.

“I wasn’t going to,” she replied, voice cold.

She gave him one last shove on the chest, this one a clear message to stay on the ground, and sprang to her feet. Even watching her made Hiccup feel sick again. She swung onto Stormfly’s back in one move, and then was gone, faster than his eyes could properly follow her beyond the protective veil of willow.

There were a few breathless moments, then he heard Stormfly shriek again. Hiccup hauled himself to sit up, body protesting not with pain but with a sort of leadenness that made it feel as if he was pushing through the mud of the swamps still. But every time that he blinked, the world felt a little bit sharper, and his head stopped spinning quite so badly. Gods, this was worse than boats. He rolled onto his knees, then managed to pull himself upright using the trunk of the tree, his left leg feeling a whole lot more stable while his right ankle wobbled beneath him. He didn’t have the spare thoughts for a clever comment about that, either.

Painfully aware that he was still covered with glowing algae, algae which only felt more visible as the clouds above them darkened and the wind became colder and sharper still, he peered through the willow fronds. The bright blaze of Stormfly’s fire made him wince, then there was a silent flare of blue-white light that could only be the Flightmare firing in response. He held his breath for a pained moment until Stormfly gave another furious shriek.

Under the effects of the Flightmare, he had not been able to make a sound. If she was still crying out, she had not been hit.

His thoughts, too, felt leaden, but he knew that was the horror and shock, not the effects of the Flightmare. He put his hand to his head, closing his eyes, and trying to concentrate as shivers began to wrack through him.

The Flightmare was here. Either Arvindell’s Fire was as well, or the Flightmare was preceding it. His gut said that it was the former, that the sky was ablaze but that clouds or the weak daylight had rendered it impossible to see. The glowing of the algae had to be because of Arvindell’s Fire as well, in some way that he did not understand. And the Flightmare was… what? Defending the
algae?

Acting like Snotlout when someone tried to steal his stew?

If Hiccup had tried to keep track of all of Johann’s stories over the years, he would not have had room in his brain. But he did remember something about a type of bird that only grew its distinctive pink feathers when it ate some sort of shellfish.

“Berk built on your food supply,” he said, to nobody in particular and the distant, roaring Flightmare beyond the willow. “We built on your food and then wondered why… damn it!”

He looked down at himself. Covering himself in the Flightmare’s same food source was probably not going to be the best way to win their favour, either. He was still shivering, so hard that it made it difficult to breathe, and he could feel his clothes sticking to his skin. That was definitely bad. But if Stormfly was here, and Toothless not far behind, they would be able to retreat to Berk a lot more easily and quickly.

Provided the Flightmare did not pursue them. Either there would be damage to Berk, or there would be harm done to the Flightmare. If not both.

The gusting of the wind slowed and grew quieter above him, and he peered upwards with a frown. The clouds were clearing above them, revealing a slowly darkening sky shot through with the bright lights of Arvindell’s Fire, dancing in taunting lines against the blue. Hiccup’s mouth went dry, and for a moment he was lost in the lashing patterns of it all, like a thousand fish beneath the water’s surface or a flock of dragons arcing against the sky.

Then he heard the whistle of a Night Fury’s wings, and his heart leapt in his chest. Toothless drew up his flame, and fired, a slam of power that sent glowing water spraying into the air and across the sky. The Flightmare screamed, and Hiccup felt a twinge of guilt; he did not know whether the dragon, or Berk, had been here first.

He needed to work out a way to end this peacefully. Preferably without freezing in the process. The air seemed to be getting colder around him, the clouds of his breath growing thicker, and he had to slacken his jaw as his teeth started to chatter.

In another moment, Toothless burst into the hollow of the willow with him, with a deep rumble that verged on a growl. Hiccup stumbled towards him and dropped to one knee to throw an arm over his shoulder. Toothless huffed, warm and damp and smelling of fish, the most welcome feeling that Hiccup had ever known.

An ice-cold hand came to rest on his shoulder, and he looked up to see Elsa, hair loose and expression worried, climbing down from Toothless’s saddle. It took him a moment longer to take in that Heather was in the saddle behind her, staying in place as Elsa dismounted.

The question that was on his lips was displaced as a familiar Monstrous Nightmare roar cut through the sky, and orange-red fire poured down.

“Why did you bring Snotlout?” he asked Elsa, straightening up again.

She whirled her cloak off her shoulders and dragged it around his. It was cold where it brushed his cheek, but dry, and he would have dragged on about any clothing in the world for that feeling. “He and Hookfang were outside. Your father sent him as well.”

Truth be told, Hiccup was not sure that the show of force was all that good of an idea, but he understood why Stoick had ordered it. The last time that the Flightmare had been in Berk, they had
killed.

“All right,” he said. “You stay with Toothless, I’ll hitch a ride with Snotlout. We need to find Runa and get out of here – preferably without the Flightmare chasing us. Let them drive us off.”

But Elsa shook her head. “You should have Toothless.”

“Elsa–”

She raised her right arm across her body, so sling or bandages now, as an ice shield glittered into being on her arm. It was as wide as a normal shield, though thinner, and Hiccup trusted it all the same. He did not want her to have to use it, gods no, but he knew that it was a reminder to him of what she was capable of.

“All right,” he said. “Be careful. It sprays some sort of mist,” he gestured from his lips, “that will lock you in place.” He did not even consciously avoid the word freeze, just found himself using a different one. “You won’t be able to move; I don’t know about using your magic. Don’t get sprayed.”

She nodded, shield fading away as she lowered her arm again. From Toothless’s back, Heather removed something from the satchel on her shoulder, stuffed whatever it was down her shirt, and then unlooped the bag to offer it to Elsa. “Here. You might need these.”

Hiccup could guess what was in the bag. With a momentary flicker of a smile, Elsa accepted the satchel and put it over her shoulder in return. “Thank you.”

“You’ll need to break the stalks to set them off. The ground won’t be hard enough.”

Well, at least that confirmed Hiccup’s suspicions. He levered himself into Toothless’s saddle, movements slightly awkward from trying to avoid Heather; she sat behind him, no safety strap, but he needed to be able to see clearly what he was doing. Toothless’s warmth immediately seemed to soak into his legs, and it was easier to clip his foot into the stirrup again as Heather’s arms slipped straight around his waist.

“Be careful,” he said, one more time.

Elsa’s tilt of her head and pointed look had an air of sympathy, but also a sense that he was the one being a fool in this situation. He supposed that his actions for the day did not exactly form a good counter-argument for that. At least her cloak covered up the worst of his glowing, although he dreaded to think what his face and hair must look like.

Then she slipped out between the willow fronds, and was gone. Hiccup took a deep breath, opened Toothless’s tail, and in one bound put them back into the air again.

The air was cold. If he had thought it was bad before, it was nothing compared to the scalding cold
of the wind on his exposed face as they cut into the darkening sky. Night was coming in fast around them, and he wondered whether Runa might have turned them back earlier if the Flightmare were not so terrible a thing to face. Or whether he would have done it, if he were searching with anyone other than Runa. Arvindell’s Fire was visible against the sky, brighter than a normal aurora, red and orange edges flickering in the green.

As he drew them steady, high up enough to see the glowing pool below and the source of it, the spring bubbling up from the ground and feeding in, he saw Stormfly still. Astrid’s movement was that of drawing a bow, and as the Flightmare erupted up from the pool again in a flash of light she fired, the Flightmare screamed and blasted a glowing mist at her in return, but Stormfly was already rolling away in the air, arrow-tight, and wheeling away.

The Flightmare turned to follow her movement, but before they could get far Snotlout and Hookfang streamed in with a billow of bright fire, orange against blue bright enough to make Hiccup squint. The Flightmare screeched again, the sound this time definitely pained, but the lash of their tail as they whirled had a warning to it as well.

“Back off!” Hiccup shouted, into the echoing sky. He was not sure whether Astrid or Snotlout heard it. Another scan told him that Astrid was alone on Stormfly’s back, that they had not yet picked up Runa, and he breathed a curse. They all needed to get out of here. With a growl, he twitched his knee against Toothless’s side, and Toothless fired into the air, light and sharp.

With a growl, Hookfang wheeled upwards, fire extinguishing and leaving him more of a shadow against the sky. When Stormfly did the same, Astrid gave a frustrated shout, wheeling in the saddle to fire a second arrow towards the Flightmare.

“Damn it, Hiccup!” she shouted, as the three dragons drew level. Even from here, he could see the angry colour in her cheeks.

“We’re not here to kill dragons!” he replied, and she looked away sharply. He wondered whether it was the reminder that the Flightmare was only a dragon, like the very ones they rode. Whether Astrid had made it into a monster in her mind, like he still often did the Red Death.

“Then what do you suggest?” called Snotlout, shoulders tense as he clung to Hookfang’s horns.

“That we stop riling them up!” They couldn’t use food, and it wasn’t as if he was going to get close enough to treat the dragon well, stroke their flanks or clean their scales. Hiccup and Runa had intruded onto the Flightmare’s food, and Astrid and Snotlout had proceeded to fire on them. Right now, it might well have been a question of whether Elsa would be able to make herself look like someone who did not need to be attacked.

A year and more of persuading her that she was human, and now they were relying on her to be able to make herself seem as un-human, as un-Berkian, as possible. He hoped that she could forgive him for it.

“Concentrate on finding Runa,” he shouted. “We were on the ridge when we got separated. Do not antagonise the Flightmare further.”

“How about getting it to not antagonise us?” said Snotlout.

“Snotlout!”

He understood, but it was far from being the time. He felt Heather shift behind him, peering down, and glanced as well to see Elsa and the Flightmare facing each other across the surface of the pool.
Breath hitching, he forced back the urge to swoop in, between them or to pull Elsa away; perhaps she, of all of them, could get through.

Perhaps all the Flightmare needed was a chance.
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

Some not-too-graphic dragon-on-dragon violence in this chapter, but also a depiction of a needle decompression of a pneumothorax. (In plain words: jamming a big needle between two ribs to draw out trapped air.)

A warning rumble in Toothless’s chest made Hiccup shift his weight, holding him back from firing. He tried to bring himself to scan the ground for Runa, for any sort of movement, but even with the air having grown still around them the water still rippled, the trees and grasses were shifting, and with every shift or flap of the Flightmare’s wings everything shifted further. As the sky grew darker, Arvindell’s Fire seemed so strong as to cast a strange green glow over everything, striking the blue-white light of the algae-strewn pool.

Hiccup pointed sharply to the ridgeline where he and Runa had been standing, and Astrid looked at him angrily but peeled around to head in that direction. He stole another glance in Elsa’s direction; she was at the edge of the pool, half-crouched, with the Flightmare hovering with slow lazy wingbeats above the centre of it. Their head snapped up to the dragons overhead, and Hiccup hastily waved for Snotlout to move on as well, drawing Toothless after them. The Flightmare seemed to decide that Elsa was the more pressing matter, and turned their gaze back towards her.

He couldn’t help the way that his heart was in his throat as Elsa took a step out onto the surface of the marsh. From the height at which they were flying, he could not tell whether she was picking her way across sturdier points or freezing the marsh beneath her feet, but he did not know whether it mattered to the Flightmare or not. But she stepped closer, and closer again, and the Flightmare did not rear or snap although their wings twitched a couple of times and their light seemed to rise and fall like a breath.

“Come on, Elsa,” said Hiccup, quietly. She had to be freezing the marsh, to be walking in such a straight line.

She had been the one that the Hobblegrunt had been able to trust. Toothless stilled for her hand, Thornado chuffed in greeting to her, there wasn’t a hatchling that would not climb into her waiting arms. Hiccup knew he was no slouch with dragons either, but considering he had fallen into the Flightmare’s food source and then dragged himself through it, he could see why they might not like him too much. Though he could not hear, he could only suspect that she was talking to the dragon, soothing them.

Heather’s arms were uncomfortably tight around his waist, but he was still shivering violently and would not trust his thighs to hold him in place right now. He certainly was not planning to try to do any rolls.

“You’ve got this,” he said.

Elsa made it within a few paces of the Flightmare, and slowly raised her hand. The Flightmare stilled, watching her, their light growing dimmer for a moment as Elsa steadily uncurled and straightened up.
For a moment, he held a flicker of hope in his chest.

Then the Flightmare shrieked, a terrible warning sound, and sprayed a burning-bright mist. Hiccup shouted, wordless, but did not even have time to do more than turn Toothless in the air before a wall of light seemed to form between the Flightmare and Elsa.

Hiccup squinted, but the light did not seem to fade. He managed to see Elsa, standing with her arms raised and crossed to protect her head, and the Flightmare snarling barely a yard away from her. Between them was a sharp plane of light, and Hiccup blinked as he realised that it had to be the Flightmare’s mist, trapped in Elsa’s ice.

“Baldr’s ghost…” said Heather.

The Flightmare lunged at the ice with a snarl, and Elsa stumbled backwards as they smacked their head against it. Her footing seemed to give out beneath her, and a shield formed on her arm in a whirl of light but Hiccup was struck again by just how huge the Flightmare was beside her, how large were the dragons with and around which they moved.

Above them, Hookfang erupted into flame, and swooped down towards the scene.

“Coming in hot!” Snotlout shouted, the words just about audible as he streaked past.

Hiccup wanted to disapprove, but really couldn’t, as Hookfang breathed a plume of fire down over the surface of the swamp and the Flightmare in the middle of it. The Flightmare screamed, a grating sound all down Hiccup’s spine, and for all that he had hated himself for hurting Outcasts or Berserkers, it was far worse to think that he was involved in hurting another dragon. He was about to shout at Snotlout to pull away again, until he realised that Hookfang had dropped to land on the treacherous surface of the swamp, that Elsa was climbing hastily into the saddle behind Snotlout, and that Snotlout’s body language was scared and not full of his usual bluster.

A growl creeping out between his teeth, Hiccup looked for Astrid and Stormfly. His heart leapt into his mouth when he saw that she had landed on the ridgeline; surely she could not be readying to fire again, not when Hiccup had ordered them to hold back. True, Snotlout had disobeyed that, but for one thing he was Snotlout and for another he had driven the Flightmare back beneath the water’s surface long enough for Elsa to get away.

It was a wash of relief when he realised that she was helping her mother onto Stormfly’s back, Runa emerging from the Swamps far more gracefully and subtly than Hiccup had managed. Stormfly took off again without a sound or attack, and though there was still tension and anger in Astrid’s form Hiccup would take that anger over something happening to any of them.

As soon as both of the dragons were in the air again, he nudged Toothless northwards, shifting his weight to prompt a bark that seemed to rumble around the sky. Hookfang answered with a roar, while Stormfly gave a shake of her head but no clear reply as Hiccup pealed them away.

Once they were clear enough of the Marshes, perhaps a third of the distance back to Berk, he put Toothless down again in an open area of land. The clouds were developing above them again, the wind and snow returning, and he wondered what part of the sky’s actions that night had been Elsa’s doing. He did not have time to think, though, not as Stormfly came in to land as well. Before her feet had even touched the ground, Astrid had all but vaulted down off Stormfly’s back, and it was all that Hiccup could do to get to his feet before she was upon him.

She grabbed him by the front of Elsa’s cloak, and he almost stumbled back into Heather. It might have been a good thing that he could get more grip from his metal foot if he braced it just right.
“You had better have an explanation worthy of Loki’s own tongue, Hiccup,” she snarled, “for coming out here in search of the Flightmare–”

“First, you need to let me talk to explain,” he said, so quickly that the words almost blurred into one another.

Astrid’s jaw shifted, and he thought that he heard a faint growl in her throat, but she pressed her lips together tightly and gave him a glare that could have burnt holes through his skull.

“I didn’t come searching for the Flightmare. I planned to get in and out before it even got here. Because I never wanted it to even get to Berk–”

“So, what? You’re putting yourself out as a sacrifice for it? And not just you, but my mother? You didn’t even have Toothless with you!”

“Astrid!” called Runa, running across. Strange, how vital those seconds of time to dismount sensibly could feel. Stormfly padded to the edge of the clear ground, leaving enough room for Hookfang to fold his wings and drop in as well. “Astrid, there’s no need to start on him like that!”

Well, great. Just what Hiccup needed right now. Astrid’s hold on the cloak had his weight shifted uncomfortably backwards, so that he was trying not to fall into Heather’s lap and starting to feel his back start to ache in the process.

“Did you know?” Astrid demanded, disbelief and horror twining together in her voice. “Did you know that you were coming out here hunting the Flightmare?”

“Not hunting the–” Hiccup began to protest again, but Astrid did not seem to notice as a flicker of a pained look crossed Runa’s face, a conflicted edge.

Astrid rounded on him again. “You didn’t tell her!” she snapped. “You brought my mother into the Flightmare’s path without even telling her! How dare you–”

“Astrid! No! He told me before we reached the Swamps.” Runa finally reached them, and grabbed Astrid’s wrist to pull her arm again. It was a relief to be able to stand up straight, although Astrid was still standing so close to him that it made him feel a little uncomfortable. “I could have turned back, and didn’t. For Frigg’s sake, girl, don’t act like I’ve had no choice in the matter.”

The worst moment was the look of shock on Astrid’s face, before she managed to fold it away into anger again. Shock that Runa could so much as disapprove of what she was saying, let alone talk to her like a child for it.

There had been a reason that Hiccup had realised years ago that it was less humiliating to argue with his father in public. It had just been his desperate hope that one day he would win an argument for all to see that had made him keep trying.

He knew that Astrid had never learnt to bear that sort of humiliation.

“Oi!” Snotlout shouted, and Hiccup had probably never been so grateful for Snotlout’s existence before. “How about we deal with the latest psycho dragon that’s already tried to eat two of us!”

Heather slipped out of the saddle, and Hiccup was all too aware of having no personal space by the time that Toothless, Astrid and Heather were all standing close around him.

“Yeah, let’s deal with the dragon first,” said Heather pointedly, then lowered her voice. “And you two handle your relationship issues later, all right?”
It seemed that the day was determined to embarrass him in as many ways as possible, and through as many different people as possible. Hiccup did not groan aloud, despite the temptation to do so.

“All right,” he said. It came out a little bit loud, but at least in the wind it was not too obvious that it was nerves. The cold was still biting at him, and he hitched Elsa’s cloak more tightly around himself in the faint hope of keeping in what little heat he had. “Gather round! Make more of a circle.”

Snotlout swung himself out of the saddle with an exaggerated groan, but his walk over to join them was a little bit hastier than it needed to be. Elsa dismounted as well, her hair whipping wildly but her face composed as she joined them in something that did almost resemble a circle, and at least let Hiccup feel like he could breathe again. Even if Astrid was standing stiffly opposite him, feet planted and eyes pained and dangerous.

“The Flightmare is here,” he said; Snotlout made a scoffing sound, and he ignored it. “And now we know why. That algae? Is its food.”

“Then why come to Berk, if the algae is here?” said Heather. “This has to be safer than facing you guys.”

He ran a hand through his hair, which was probably a regrettable decision but since his gloves and hair were equally strewn with algae, he didn’t waste more than a moment thinking about it. “I don’t know,” he admitted. “It makes no sense.”

“All right,” Snotlout said. “How about we burn the algae, then the Flightmare has no more reason to come here. Problem solved!”

“Burn the Swamps?” said Astrid. “Are you serious?”

“I will find a way—” Snotlout began, with a jab of his finger back at the Swamps that to Hiccup rang more as anger, and fear, than bravado.

“To deprive Berk of resources,” said Hiccup sharply, and Runa nodded in grim agreement. “Never mind possibly letting the dragon starve.”

“It’s a killer,” Astrid snapped.

“Then so are we!” he shot back. Her jaw tightened, enough that he could see it even across the distance. “We need to give it a chance of peace as well!”

He put both hands on his hair, turned on his heel, and walked away a few paces. The cold was biting at his skin, gnawing at his stump, stinging in his eyes and on his lips. It was hard to push the thought of it aside even with the thought of the Flightmare nearby, even with the memory of the dragon’s breath on his skin and the way that it had frozen him in place.

Breathing through his mouth, and wincing at the stinging cold of it, he turned back towards them again. “All right. I need all of you to stay here. Whatever happens, we need to keep the Flightmare in the Swamps, not heading north to Berk.”

“You’re gonna do something stupid again, aren’t you?” said Snotlout.

He tried to give Snotlout a withering look, but wasn’t sure that it had too much power behind it. Snotlout had been immune to it for years, anyway. “I’m going to go back and keep an eye on the Flightmare from a distance,” he said, with pointed emphasis. Astrid still shook her head, disbelief and frustration on her features. “I want to see if there’s a reason they head towards Berk.”
Heather was right. There was a whole pool of the algae, and if the Flightmare had bothered to land there at all then it had to be edible for them. Surely it was enough to glut even a dragon’s appetite, which meant that there had to be something driving them away. And he wasn’t going to be able to solve this riddle until he knew what that something was.

“You are not going off by yourself!” Astrid said, outrage clear in her voice.

“ Toothless is the only dragon that can fly fast enough, and is dark enough, to not be spotted.” A Monstrous Nightmare might have had a chance, but stealth was not exactly one of Hookfang’s gods-given gifts, and a tendency to set himself on fire certainly did not help. Astrid was still shaking her head grimly. “We can take one other person, if you insist, but that’s our only option.”

“Then I’m coming.”

It was Runa, and not Hiccup, who persuaded Astrid to leave the longbow behind. She pointed out quite rightly that they had a dragon, a dragon who had only fired once at that, and who had better reflexes and more power than any human, wielding any weapon, could hope for. Though Astrid was scowling, she wrapped her arms tightly about Hiccup as they took off, all but pinning him in place in the saddle. He was more grateful than he would admit aloud.

The wind was gusty and uneven, but nothing that Toothless could not handle with controlled movements and slight furling of his wings. Hiccup pulled them high enough that he was fairly sure they would be hidden by the dark bellies of the lowest-hanging clouds, and nudged them back towards the Swamps at a careful pace.

He wondered whether he should say something, but could not find anything that felt like the right words. Instead, they flew in painful silence, the wind whistling against Hiccup’s stinging-cold ears, until a distant dragon’s snarl made his head prick up.

Astrid’s right hand moved to his bicep and gripped hard enough to hurt. “Flightmare,” she said. He hadn’t heard enough of the Flightmare to be sure, but only frowned and held his tongue. A faint shift of the clouds, a few wingbeats further in the air, and the glowing pool came back into sight again, rippling and dancing. There was a visible streak onto the surrounding grass where Hiccup had hauled himself out of the pool, and he felt guilty again.

It took a moment, and several blinks, for him to realise that the Flightmare was on the edge of the pool, that the sinuous shape was not just another extension of the water. They were not as large as he had thought, their head wide on its short, stocky body, but the whipping tail and the frondlike wings had probably given the impression of size. As he watched, they dipped their head to the water, but paused, and then looked up again. A curl of the venom that they breathed left their mouth, a visible wisp against the dark ground.

Something was wrong. Hiccup could feel it pricking at his muscles, tight beneath his skin. The Flightmare whipped their tail, once, sharply, then fell abruptly still again with their eyes fixed on
something in the darkness. Beneath him, Toothless rumbled, inaudible but tangible against his legs, and Astrid’s grip on his arm shifted so that he could feel the tips of her fingers pressing in.

“Something’s happening,” said Astrid behind him, words stern and sharp enough to be audible over the wind.

He nodded first, rather than trying to voice the unease in his gut, then saw something in the shifting gloom below, a difference in the movement of the pool, and knew just what the Flightmare looked like. A single deer, surrounded by wolves.

“There’s something else down there,” he replied.

For a brief, half-guilty moment, he wished that it was Runa with him once again. Not because of whether Astrid was angry with him or not; he knew that she could focus on what was happening, would deal with the anger later now that she had something to face now, but because Runa knew these Swamps better than just about anyone in Berk.

He had asked her, just once, whether she had seen any other types of dragons in the Wildlands. It had been almost offhand, to see if there was anything else to put into the Book of Dragons, any other species that they might some day want to seek out and try to work with. And Runa, he knew, would be a reliable source.

She had shrugged. “There are things in the Wildlands, but I avoid them. Especially somewhere like the Northern Swamps. Sorry, Hiccup, I can’t help you there.”

Things. He wondered whether the Snow Wraith they had faced in the summer had been one of those sort of things, the sort that cropped up in winter stories and fairy tales, that Gobber had deployed in the evenings as a way to get Hiccup to sit still and behave for, at least, a while. If that was the case, it did not bode well for what might be below them.

The snarl, again, and this time he was sure that it was not the Flightmare. A dark shape lunged towards the Flightmare, and they leapt into the air in response, with a snap and a flurry of the blue-white gas. For a moment, it illuminated the shape of whatever it was that had attacked, and Hiccup realised with a jolt that it was another dragon, perhaps half the size, but with multiple twisting horns on its head.

Astrid drew in a sharp breath, and her grip on his arm slackened for a moment.

“Not safer than facing us,” said Hiccup quietly, thinking of Heather’s words.

He didn’t dare look round to see Astrid’s expression. But they needed the others, and quickly; he could pick out other slinking shapes in the darkness now that he knew to look for them, and even as he scrabbled to think another shadow appeared seemingly from nowhere – from the water? he wondered in bewilderment – and slammed into the Flightmare, sending them both tumbling through the air. He heard dragons scream, thought he heard the tear of flesh beneath it, and his heart began to race in his chest.

“We need the others. There’s too many of them.”

Even as he turned Toothless back, he could feel the way that Astrid stiffened, her half-hesitation. But she did not say anything, released her hold on his arm, and a moment later he thought that he felt her curled fist come gently to rest in the middle of his back.

He gave Toothless his head, and they shot back so quickly that it was hard to draw breath against the air. They slammed into a landing, Astrid snarling something incoherent against his back, and
even Hiccup had to grab Toothless’s saddle to prevent him from being thrown clear.

“Back in the saddles!” he shouted. The others were all standing close together, dragons and humans alike looking shocked at their reappearance. Astrid all but threw herself out of the saddle behind him, sprinting to Stormfly. “There’s more hostile dragons there! We have to break it up!”

“So now we have two hostile species, fighting, and you want to get involved?” snapped Snotlout. It didn’t quite have the same ring of incredulity as it once would have done, as if he knew not to expect any better of Hiccup nowadays. But all the same, he grabbed Hookfang’s saddle, and the dragon obediently lowered his head to bring it down.

Heather was frowning as well, putting her satchel back across her body. “And which side are we on?”

“The side of no-one getting killed!”

It was falling together. The algae responded to Arvindell’s Fire, and the Flightmare followed the algae. It led them into the territory of this other dragon species, and a fight was all but inevitable. Perhaps Vikings did seem like an easier choice than whatever this other dragon species was, especially if they knew the marsh and could move through water and over land with equal ease. Especially if they hunted as a pack.

Everyone bolted for the nearest dragon, and somehow Hiccup found himself with Elsa at his back again, Heather with Astrid on Stormfly, and Snotlout looking more than a little intimidated at the thought of sharing a dragon with Runa. Astrid had her longbow back, but Hiccup did not say anything; the Flightmare had clearly felt its bite, yes, but they were known to have much softer and thinner hide than most other dragons. And if a few arrows were needed to help break up whatever was happening, he was not going to turn them down out of pride.

He was starting to get the feeling in his legs back after the pain of the cold, although they were aching in whole new ways as a result. He held on tight, and felt Elsa’s arms latch around him as Toothless took off again, closing the distance back with all the speed that they could muster. The world blurred around them until the pool, the Flightmare, and the other dragons they were fighting all burst back into view at once, and Toothless swung into an arc to circle above them.

Elsa said something in Marulosen that sounded as if it might have come through gritted teeth. Even Hiccup would admit that he did not normally fly like this with a second person in the saddle. Below, the Flightmare let forth a billow of gas, but not quickly enough to prevent one of the other dragons from striking them and sending them splashing down into the algae-lit pool once again.

“Let’s break this up!” Hiccup shouted, in the vague direction of the others although they were still far enough back that they would probably not hear.

Elsa’s hand came to rest on his arm. She was ice-cold to the touch again, and her hair was long enough that as they circled round, it managed to get in his face again as well. How she could see, he had no idea. “I need to be on the ground. I cannot fight from up here.”

He did not want to agree, but he knew that Elsa was better with the strengths and limits of her own powers than he could ever be. “All right. Hang on!”

A nudge of his knee, and they dropped. Toothless announced his presence with a second shot into the pool, this one drawing out a flurry of yelps and shrieks as multiple dragons scattered away once again. Hiccup dropped them down into the empty space it formed, and Elsa swung to one side of
the saddle, then grabbed his shoulder and leant close to his ear again.

“I have an idea. I will keep the Flightmare safe; drive the others away.”

There was no time to question it before she dropped the remaining distance, landing on glimmering water that turned to glimmering ice beneath her feet. One of the other dragons snarled to her side, and she made a swift upwards gesture with her left palm that brought a wall of the same glowing ice blooming upwards. Fire, orange licked through with marshlight-green, lashed against it, but it held.

It was Toothless who noticed something on their right, and spat a fireball in that direction before Hiccup even had time to look. The tense of his muscles was a clear message, and Hiccup obliged with the tail fin so that they could launch back into the air, wheeling and twisting to avoid Stormfly as she barrelled in above them. Hiccup tried to shout above the wind to concentrate on the other dragons, but he could not even hear himself.

A swathe of light flowed up beneath them. Hiccup had to squint to see, but could faintly make out the sight of Elsa forming a dome, her ice still streaked through with the algae and glowing more brightly than ever, around herself. But no, he realised with a shock – not just around herself, but around the Flightmare as well, closing them away from the circling dragons around.

“What in Frigg’s name–” someone shouted, but Hiccup did not catch the rest of it as he spun Toothless sharply sideways in the air to avoid the dragon that barrelled upwards out of the darkness towards them. They spun like a dancer, Toothless’s wings snapping in tight, and Hiccup only caught a glimpse of the dragon as they passed.

As they levelled out again, turning in place, they found themselves facing the dragon at last. They really were smaller than Hiccup might have expected, body only about the size of a large sheep, with four gangly legs and narrow wings. From what he thought he could see in the light, their body was a deep reddish-orange colour, like autumn leaves, streaked through with darker stripes that made it hard to quite see clearly. At least until he saw their coal-ember eyes, points of light in the darkness.

Hiccup was painfully aware that, even on Toothless’s back and with Elsa’s borrowed cloak around him, he was more visible than these dragons. Toothless’s red and white tail fin would probably not help either.

A guiding touch, and Toothless fired, just below and to the side of the strange dragon. They gave an indignant shriek and peeled away in the other direction, as Hiccup had hoped, and he turned Toothless in the air to scan the scene below. Hookfang flared red in the darkness, and suddenly the lights were almost giddying, green above them and blue below and Hookfang roaring red. With all of them going, it seemed to become even harder to catch sight of the small, dark dragons that had attacked the Flightmare, but either Astrid and Snotlout were doing better than him or they, as well, were letting their dragons lead.

He felt Toothless banking left, and tipped the fin to follow, giving up on trying to think ahead and just following instead. Toothless whipped around, his tail catching another of the dragons across the face hard enough to jolt them in the air as well, then fired down at one that was breathing flame against the shining ice of Elsa’s dome. The Night Fury blast grazed the top of the ice, but even that did not melt it, and the dragon turned and darted down beneath the surface of the water.

Whatever Elsa’s idea had been, he hoped that it was going to work.

As they levelled out for a minute, he saw Stormfly swoop low, saw Astrid choosing her moment
perfectly to be able to get a full draw while on the dragon’s back. One of the dragons snarled – a
snarl, not a scream, and perhaps that should not have relieved him but somehow it did – as she
loosed it, and moments later smoke was billowing up in two places beside the dome of ice.

Finally, everything seemed to go still. Hookfang had landed again, with flames still dancing along
his wings, and was growling slow and steady at a clump of willow trees. The other dragons were
gone, only the wind to break the quiet, and Hiccup brought Toothless in to land as well on what
looked like a sufficiently solid area of land. It held, and he climbed down carefully, picking his
way towards the ice.

Even with the energy of the fight fading in his blood, it was still astonishing to see. The dome had
to be thirty feet across, but shallow as a bowl, only ten or twelve feet high even at the centre. For a
terrible moment, Hiccup saw again the dome that Elsa had formed around herself, herself and
Anna’s frozen form, on the shore of Arendelle, but he blinked it away and forced down the
moment of fear in his chest.

Just as he was wondering whether he should try to shout, or bang on the ice, it began to fade away
again. It trickled down itself in melting streams, raggedly from the top outwards, until he could see
Elsa kneeling on the surface of the swamp, her dress splattered with the glowing water, with her
hand outstretched to rest on the snout of the Flightmare. Blood was dripping down the dragon’s
side from ragged clawmarks, looking black against their pale blue flank, and they were breathing
hard. As Hiccup took another tentative step forwards, their nose twitched round and they growled
faintly, but Elsa made a wordless, soothing sound and they fell still again.

Carefully, he approached, having to spread his arms as he stepped onto the ice which Elsa had
created. Even bumpy with moss and speckled with algae, it was a struggle to keep his balance, and
in the end he dropped to his knees as well and crawled the last couple of paces. His dignity was
already in tatters for the day, in any case.

The Flightmare seemed to almost pant as Hiccup came closer, but this time their eyes upon him
were not so bad. Elsa lowered her hand, and Hiccup offered up his in turn, palm soft and as
welcoming as he could make it given the shivers that were trying to run through him again. Gods,
he was going to need a night by the fire after this. The Flightmare looked him over, sniffed his
hand – belatedly, he wondered whether he should have removed his algae-splattered, muddy glove
– and grumbled, but neither butted his hand nor drew away.

“Thank you,” he said to Elsa. He had honestly meant to say ‘well done’, but to be honest the two
sentiments were not too far apart right now. “Thank you.”

“Astrid?” called Astrid. He looked up, trying not to move too sharply, to see that she had landed
by the trees that Hookfang had been focusing on. “We’ve got a live one over here.”

He blinked a couple of times, trying to work out what in Odin’s name she was talking about, but
his brain refused to offer any sensible suggestions. For a haunting moment, he feared that she was
going to have found eggs, like the Nadder from the previous winter all over again. He knelt up,
squinted into the darkness, and caught the gleam of a fire-red eye in the darkness.

“Injured?” he called simply. He could not really think of another reason that the dragon would not
have left with the others.

“Yes.”

He rubbed his forehead, dropping back down onto his heels. The metal one dug into his backside,
and promptly reminded him why he had given up on this position in the last year or so. Grimacing,
Hiccup shifted his weight to the side, and tried to gather his thoughts into something that resembled an order.

“We take them back to Berk,” he called back. Even from a distance, he could see Astrid’s shift of surprise. “Both of them.” A gesture between the Flightmare and the dragon beneath the trees. “We get the Gronckles to dig down to the stream nearer the town, let the Flightmare eat there, safely, without getting into fights over territory. We fix that one up, and get it back out here.”

Try to make up for all of their years of assumptions.

Without waiting for anyone to object, he got back to his feet again, wobbling only slightly before Toothless seemed to all but appear at his side. He put his hand on Toothless’s head, feeling the warmth and coiled strength, and although the Flightmare rumbled again, deep in their throat, Toothless only huffed in response and it seemed to keep too much tension from building in the air.

“Let’s fix this,” he said, quietly enough that only Elsa, Toothless and the Flightmare had a chance of hearing him. Quite how many things were on the list to fix, he was not even sure. “I’m going to need some Gronckles.”

Probably it was a good thing that it was Smokefeet, of all people, who was head of the household where the underground stream was closest to the surface. He had seen what dragons could do since the beginning, had been receptive to them, and with his family working with woods they did not so desperately need the land. That did not stop him from watching with no small shock on his face as Hiccup, now with Runa’s cloak around his shoulders as well, shakily directed the four Gronckles they had gathered to dig out the area once again.

Stoick ran into the field while they were still digging, Anna at his heels and Gobber not all that far behind them. Anna overtook him, her eyes fixed straight on Elsa who was still kneeling in front of the Flightmare, but Stoick caught her without missing a beat, wrapping one arm around her waist and hauling her back.

She yelped, and squirmed in Stoick’s grasp, but he said something that was lost to the wind and she fell still again. Elsa looked up from beside the Flightmare and held up a hand, in what Hiccup would guess was supposed to be a reassuring gesture. She, of all of them, was fine. It had even occurred to her to freeze shut the Flightmare’s wounds, and once she had done so they had been willing to follow the other dragons back to the outskirts of Berk.

As Stoick’s eyes settled on Hiccup again, his arm in front of Anna slackened, and a look of astonishment overcame him. It took Hiccup an embarrassingly long few seconds to think that it was just possibly linked to the fact that he was still covered with the glowing algae.

He raised a hand, and waved them both over. Stoick finally released Anna altogether, but she held it together enough to walk quickly, and not run, over to Elsa’s side. For his part, Stoick strode around the hole, took Hiccup by the shoulders and looked him over with clear confusion on his face.
“I fell in the bog,” said Hiccup, then realised that probably didn’t make much sense without any context either. “Uh… the algae. Uh… it’s a long story.”

Stoick ran a hand over Hiccup’s blue-strewn hair, and drew it away to reveal that it, too, was now streaked with the algae. He glanced over to the Flightmare, clearly making the connection in an instant, and Hiccup nodded wearily.

“Yes. That sort of long story. Hookfang is taking an injured dragon round to our house, I thought Gobber would be there…”

“Another Flightmare?”

“No, it’s…” Hiccup waved his hands vaguely, intending to indicate a smaller dragon, but judging by his father’s frown was not really achieving much in the way of actual communication. “Smaller. Striped. Orange and brownish. I feel like I’d seen it in Bork’s notes, but…”

“Marsh Tiger,” Gobber provided, appearing beside them. He poked Hiccup’s hair with his hook, then frowned at the blue smear on the metal. “Now tell me, have I been eating bad cheese or is this glowing?”

“It’s the algae,” said Hiccup. “It glows… under Arvindell’s Fire, I think. I don’t know.” Another shiver ran through him, sending his teeth chattering and making him hunch over beneath the two cloaks. “Thor.”

“All right, you need to get inside,” said Stoick.

Hiccup gestured vaguely towards the Flightmare. “Someone should–”

“Aye, but someone doesn’t always have to be you,” Stoick said firmly. He put his hand on Hiccup’s shoulder. “That academy of yours has enough people, so–”

“I can do it,” said Heather, appearing at Hiccup’s shoulder. She, like everyone else, had managed to stay significantly drier than Hiccup, and apart from a few splashes of mud and algae around her boots seemed well enough. She adjusted her hood better against the wind, then patted her satchel. “I can take some notes. You can come and pick them up tomorrow, if you want.”

He knew that there was something else behind her suggestion, behind the innocent smile that she gave both him and Stoick, but he was too cold and tired to try to figure it out. Instead he nodded, grateful, and Stoick either accepted the offer at face value or trusted Hiccup’s judgement and, after a moment, nodded as well.

Stoick disbanded the rest of them, promised Heather that he would send at least one person down armed in case anyone got ideas into their head about the Flightmare, and steered Hiccup home with a hand to the shoulder. Anna tried to do the same to Elsa, but had to unlink their arms, and Hiccup saw her grimace at the cold of Elsa’s skin.

Snotlout and Hookfang were outside the house, Snotlout shifting uncomfortably and with his hands shoved under his armpits to judge by the way that his cloak was falling. The Marsh Tiger was lying on their side in the lee of the house, side rising and falling shallowly, some of the ribs moving opposite to the rest.

“Flail chest,” said Gobber, without even getting closer to it.

“There’s cuts, as well.”
Gobber huffed. “Trust you to find the difficult ones. Come on, then, I need to keep an eye on you and it, and you need to be indoors.” Before Hiccup could put together anything that resembled a sentence, Gobber had used his hook to flick open one of the knots of the straps on his right arm, shook it off with a snap of his wrist, and then bent down and in quick, practised movements wrapped it around the snout of the Marsh Tiger. He scooped up the dragon in his arms, with a grumble that sounded more like habit than really meant, and nodded to the door.

Pushing it open, Stoick stepped back to let the rest of them in first, and Gobber paused in the doorway still with an armful of dragon.

“Go on,” said Gobber. “You need to let the others know. And possibly settle some arguments, for the Hoffersons’ sake,” he added, a little more pointedly.

Stoick’s sigh sounded more than a little pained, but he patted Gobber on the shoulder and, once Gobber and the dragon were both inside, let the door swing closed behind them all.

“Right,” said Gobber. “Elsa, I want you with me on this one, let’s get this table clear. Anna, there’s two buckets of water by the stairs. They need to go next to the fire, warm up. You good to grab this one,” he nodded to Hiccup, who did not even bother trying to look offended, “a new set of dry clothes from upstairs? And as for you, Hiccup,” as Elsa managed to make enough space on the table, he laid the dragon down, “that chair there,” a jab of his hook, “and outer layers off only. No peeling anything off your skin.”

“Yes, boss,” said Hiccup, but he could get neither bite nor teasing behind it as he sat down into the chair pointed out. Not too close to the fire, but close enough for the heat to start pooling in him at least. There was a second chair within arm’s reach, and he slung Elsa’s cloak over the back of it before removing his own.

Another couple of shivers ran through him, but he could feel the heat in his face and starting to make his fingertips tingle uncomfortably. Anna moved the buckets close to the fire, with a bit of a splash when it came to the second one, and took the steps two at a time as she bolted upstairs.

Hiccup looked back round to Gobber, whose gaze was fixed solely on the Marsh Tiger. He looked grim, pressing on the dragon’s chest with his fingertips and then pulling back their lip to look at the gum beneath. He shook his head, grimacing. “Course there’s air leaking out. Haven’t done this in a decade and the rest.”

Elsa looked over at Hiccup helplessly, but all that he could do was shrug and start to peel off his vest. His shirt beneath was definitely clinging to his skin, and even without Gobber’s reminder he would have known better than to try to pull that off while he was still too cold to feel what he was doing.

With a mutter to himself, Gobber disappeared into the back room; there was a clattering, Hiccup winced, then Gobber emerged a moment later with a small wooden trunk tucked under his left arm. He put it on the table next to the Marsh Tiger, flicked it open, and withdrew a sort of funnel with a very long, narrow neck.

“I dread to think where that’s going,” said Hiccup.

“Aye,” replied Gobber, “you probably should.”

Without missing a beat, he plunged the funnel down between two of the Marsh Tiger’s ribs. The dragon groaned, and Elsa jumped away from the table with her eyes wide.
“Had a Nadder… nine or ten years back now,” said Gobber, raising his voice slightly. Hiccup watched as the dragon’s chest shifted, but realised with wonder and horror together that their breathing seemed to be growing deeper, smoother. “Cracked rib from training, got into its lung. Gothi showed me this trick,” he nodded to the funnel, “though she said she’d only done it before on humans.” He shook his head. “I wouldn’t be trying that myself. Folks get their wounds infected more easily than dragons do. And they need it doing more than once, while that Nadder didn’t need such a thing. Probably to do with breathing fire,” he added, more to himself, as he held up the funnel with his hook and ran his fingers over the Marsh Tiger’s ribs.

“Hiccup, I found…” Anna trailed off halfway through her sentence and halfway down the stairs as she spotted the Marsh Tiger on the table and whatever it was that Gobber was doing. She paled beneath her freckles, then swallowed and squared her shoulders. “Found some spare clothes.”

“Good,” said Gobber, without looking round. “See how that water’s doing, would you? Now, Elsa, you think you can freeze this until I can get it sewed up?” He nodded to the injury. “No idea how much blood the poor bugger’s lost, or how much it can. Never seen a Marsh Tiger alive before now.”

Hiccup did not even have to ask the obvious question; Gobber would not specify unless he needed to. “You said you did this on a Nadder, before?”

“Aye. It was… you were four, come to think of it. Big red male Nadder, grumpy bugger even after I spent a night stitching his chest back together and kept him out of the ring for half a moon to heal up.” Only then was there a flicker of a pause, Gobber’s hand stilling as he plucked needle and thread from the box and paused, as if weighing them in his hand. Then he closed the lid smartly. “Two moons later, he was the final test that year. Melana was in the final two, lost to Baleful – you won’t remember him, got killed in an attack not much after. Not a good year.”

Hiccup wondered, sometimes, how Gobber had been able to bear the contradictory ideas of killing the dragons and of caring for them so that they could be killed. But he supposed that at least for a while, he had done the same thing. Only days, less than half a moon between first meeting the Gronckle they would come to know as Meatlug and shooting Toothless down, but he had still been able to do it. The world had seemed a different shape, then, but it was strange looking back now.

“Right, let’s look at those cuts,” said Gobber, rolling the Marsh Tiger more onto their back. They gave a half-hearted swipe with their foreleg, but he was able to brush it away easily enough. “Shallow. The Flightmare?”

“Yeah. They must have landed right in the middle of the Marsh Tiger’s territory.”

“And wondered why you were there as well, this time around. Some of these will need stitching, the others should do fine. Right, Anna, you see if that water’s warm enough, and if it is, Hiccup, your hands and that stump are going in it.”

“All at once?” He had the absurd image of himself hunched over, or with all of his limbs tied together like a hunted boar.

“Unless you’d rather choose between them, yes!” Gobber retorted. “Hands are always the worst, but that stump will be vulnerable to it. I’m just glad that you went with the wooden socket.”

Even through socks, so was Hiccup. It was a bit disconcerting for Anna to have to help him remove his foot, although her rambling, muttered apologies-cum-running-commentary might have only succeeded in making it worse. Eventually, though, she managed to clear enough mud from the pin to get it removed, and Hiccup nodded to the water.
“Oh, right, water, yes.” Anna almost stumbled over her feet as she stood back up, and Elsa gave a concerned glance from where she was standing at Gobber’s shoulder while he stitched the shallow slashes in the Marsh Tiger’s chest. The Marsh Tiger pawed vaguely at the strap around their muzzle, but either they realised they were being helped or they were not really conscious enough to struggle too much. “All right, let’s test that…” she stuck her hand straight into the bucket, which was not exactly the ideal way, but Hiccup was not going to interrupt. He looked warily at Joan, who was sniffing around the Marsh Tiger’s tail, until Elsa saw the direction he was looking and quickly scooped up the Terror. She squeaked in protest. “Yes, right, water is good. Now, are you supposed to take your gloves off when…” she set the bucket down in front of him.

“Could do,” said Hiccup, sticking his hands straight into the water. “But it would be safer for my hands to make sure the gloves aren’t stuck to them first.”

The hot water ached dully, and he grimaced, but he knew that he was only uncomfortable while the Marsh Tiger was facing much worse. He carefully flexed his hands, starting with his knuckles and working his way out towards the tips of his fingers. When he realised that Anna was still sitting on her heels, watching his hands and biting her lip nervously, he gave her a smile which he hoped looked like he knew what he was doing, and wasn’t just going on a combination of vaguely remembering doing this once before and the fact that Gobber would surely stop him if he were doing it wrong.

“You might want to take your own cloak off as well,” he said, as Anna’s worried gaze became just a bit too much.

At least it got her to stop staring at his hands, as she looked blankly at his face for a moment before looking down at herself. “Oh. Oh! Right!” She sprang to her feet again, fast enough to almost knock over the bucket of water in which Hiccup was now slowly moving all of his fingers. He waited until her whirlwind had moved out of his way before slowly and painstakingly starting to pull the glove off his right hand.

Getting off a wet leather glove was not really that much easier than getting off a frozen one, and Hiccup kept a careful eye for any sign of blood as well as keeping his concentration on the glove and the way that it felt moving past his skin. As long as it was moving, and not snagging, he hoped it would be fine. Mercifully, the water continued to be clear around his hand, and when he removed the glove all the way he could see that his hand was mostly bruise-red, with paler patches on his fingertips. Grimacing, he set about peeling off the other glove as Anna noticed Joan still squirming in Elsa’s arms and hurried to retrieve her.

“How are those hands looking?” said Gobber.

“Ten fingers, two thumbs,” Hiccup replied. “All good.”

It was Anna who frowned, while Gobber naturally knew to pay no attention to Hiccup’s flippancy and just shook his head. “Well, if there’s any more injured dragons to tell me about, now’s the time.”

“You saw the Flightmare. Just a few scratches. And none of the other Marsh Tigers were sticking around for us to find out.” Hiccup wrung out the gloves as best he could, and laid them on the chair next to his other wet clothes. “None of our dragons got hit.”

The Marsh Tiger gave another groan, but it was more like a complaint than any real sort of threat. “Oh, hush, you,” said Gobber. “Don’t think this one’s full grown, by its colouring. See this striping, round the feet?” Hiccup looked up, but Gobber seemed more caught up in pointing it out to Elsa. “Only the young’uns have that. Hiccup,” he added, making Hiccup jump in his seat, “get
that leg of yours in the water before I come over there and dunk you in!"

He considered cracking a joke to Anna, but in the circumstances it would probably have been a bad idea. Instead, Hiccup swung his foot into the warm water, then put his elbows on his knees and hung his head as the first wave of pain rolled over his skin. The sock itself coming away was like a sting, but the heat hitting the flesh beneath was more like pressing hard on a bruise.

“And what have we learned today?” said Gobber, with the hint of the sing-song that he had used when Hiccup was young and the answer had been a new way to get himself injured.

Instead, Hiccup watched traces of glowing blue swirl in the water around his foot. “Far too much to list,” he replied.
Despite what he might have deserved with all of his foolishness, he woke up with all of his fingers still intact, and only three of them with small blisters. It took only a little more effort than usual to be able to dress, and though his stump was sore it felt well enough to wear his foot as long as he carried his cane as well.

Even if he did limp a little on his way downstairs.

The Marsh Tiger had squirrelled themselves into a corner overnight, behind a couple of boxes and under a side table. Hiccup put out Toothless’s basket of fish for breakfast, swiped one from the top despite the Night Fury’s grumble, and slid down to sit on the floor about six feet away from the Marsh Tiger. He dropped the fish about halfway between them, leaned his head back against the wall, and watched the ceiling.

From the corner of his eye, he could see the Marsh Tiger still regarding him. Their glowing-coal eyes were no less bright than the previous night, although they looked a little less startling by the low, lazy firelight. Hiccup waited, patient and trying not to let his thoughts linger on just what parts of him ached, and which parts might still be glowing faintly, from falling in the swamp the previous day.

The Marsh Tiger crept out, head and shoulders at first. Webbed feet, eyes high on their head like Hookfang but nostrils raised as well. Those same nostrils were twitching, and given that Toothless was on his last basket of fish and they were about to get the next few days’ in, even Hiccup could smell the piece that he had picked out. Hopefully a dragon from a freshwater swamp would still be interested in saltwater fish. Bit by bit, the dragon crept closer, and Hiccup kept his eyes up and body relaxed, left hand resting on the floor where they could see it. Far enough out to reveal the already-scabbing wounds on their side, far enough to reveal back feet just as webbed as the front.

Hiccup allowed himself a twitch of a smile. For a dragon that his people had been fighting just the night before, they did not seem too inclined to start another fight now.

Then it occurred to him that he could not hear any snoring from the back room, and the door on his right hand side opened. The Marsh Tiger snatched the fish and darted back into the shadow of the table.

“Damn it,” said Hiccup,

Stoick looked down at him with a frown for a moment before looking over to the table and the faint huff of smoke from underneath it. He rolled his eyes. “Come on, up you get. Last I heard last night, Smokefeet was going to see if he could get the Flightmare into his woodshed with a few buckets of that algae, or if it was going to fly off again.”

“Any sign of Heather?” Given the circumstances, Hiccup put aside his pride and allowed himself to be hoisted up by the armpits. Even if the Marsh Tiger looked wary when his foot scraped against the floor.

“She was headed home. I offered to bring those notes back, but she said that she wanted to get them tidied up for you. Said they should be ready by about noon.”
Though Stoick probably did not have the wherewithal to be anything more than faintly confused by Heather’s stubborn request, Hiccup was starting to suspect what she had in mind. At least enough to know that he wished he was going to be more fit to be seen than being still slightly grubby from the day before and back using his cane again, frostbite on his fingers and frostburn on his ears and cheeks. But he supposed that it said something that he wasn’t going to take the opportunity to flee anyway.

It did not surprise him that Anna looked groggy at breakfast, or that she managed to dip the end of one of her plaits in her porridge. Rather more unusual was for Elsa to also be stifling yawns, at least until she admitted that the Marsh Tiger had been grumbling to themselves at times throughout the night, and more than once had scraped around the bottom of their door. True enough, there were clawmarks visible on the wood, and Stoick again took on that slightly despairing look which made it clear that he was regretting the whole dragon business about as much as he had once regretted letting Hiccup apprentice in the forge.

All the same, he had agreed to let the Marsh Tiger stay in the house overnight – probably in no small part thanks to Hiccup pointing out that Toothless would be more than capable of getting down the stairs and dealing with the smaller dragon should trouble arise – and did not raise further complaints now.

Gobber insisted on checking Hiccup’s hand and stump, ignoring Hiccup’s roll of his eyes as he had to strip off his foot and the appropriate sock again, before setting about luring the Marsh Tiger back out to have their wounds looked at again. A dozen fish, a lump of cheese and introducing Joan as an intermediary later, the dragon was lying with their head in Hiccup’s lap while Gobber looked them over.

“Scratches are looking clean. And it doesn’t look like that lung’s still leaking.” Gobber shook his head, and gestured with his hook. “If humans could heal up like that, there’d be a lot less dragons around. All right, another day or so to make sure those scratches stay good, and this one’ll be good to head back off.”

“So you’re not planning on keeping this one?” said Stoick.

“Pack dragons,” said Gobber, before Hiccup could even work out whether he was being teased or warned about bringing back more species of dragons. “Unless you want a couple of dozen of them hanging out, I doubt this one would like it here. And we don’t have the bogs for them.”

For at least a moment, Stoick looked relieved. Probably a warning, then.

The snow had settled in, and between that and the knowledge that Arvindell’s Fire might be just behind the clouds, people were choosing to stay indoors. Hiccup had a clear path through the village, as long as he kept a careful eye on where he was putting his cane along the way, and kept a spare cloak wrapped tightly around him as he made his way to Heather’s house. He had done his best with a wet comb to get all of the algae out of his hair, and even if Anna had laughed herself
speechless Elsa had checked the back of his neck, behind his ears, and other places which he could not see and which Gobber would only be inclined to tease him about.

All the same, he hesitated before knocking on the door, until Toothless headbutted his hip pointedly.

“Yes, thank you,” said Hiccup, and finally knocked. There was a comment from inside which sounded insultingly like, ‘Finally’, and a couple of seconds later Heather pulled open the door and gestured for him to come in.

She had shadows under her eyes, and her hair scraped up into a bun. “Notes are waiting for you on the table. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I need to feed Hnoss and Gersemi,” she looked at Hiccup, then across the room, “and I’ll leave you two to talk.”

Toothless padded into the room as well, sniffing around, as Heather pulled on her cloak. She was already dressed for the outdoors, albeit in clothes that did not quite fit and had patches on the knees and elbows, and boots on. Without missing a beat, she scooped up the two buckets of fish and rocks beside the front door, one rather more full than the other, and used her foot to flick the door closed behind her as she exited.

“Subtle sometimes, isn’t she?” said Hiccup.

“That’s one way to put it,” Astrid replied.

Nervousness fluttering in his chest again, Hiccup turned to meet her gaze. She was standing against the back wall of the room, arms folded across her chest and shoulders set defensively, and caught his eyes for a moment before looking away again.

“I, uh, wasn’t aware of… how much she knew,” he tried again, but the sentence trailed off halfway through and hung uncomfortably in the air between them.

“She basically asked me, about the second time that I came over to help her learn to fight,” said Astrid. “I didn’t see any point in lying, and I didn’t realise…”

Her words drifted away, and she shifted against the wall. Tilted her head, making her hair fall away from her eyes instead of into them, but still didn’t look back at him again. Hiccup doubted that the table in the corner of the room was that interesting.

He took a few steps forwards, mostly so that he would not get hit by the door were it to open again, but stopped with the huge pieces of slate still taking up the space between them. There were shards of metal adhered to them, glittering in the firelight.

“Didn’t realise?” he prompted, carefully, when Astrid did not continue.

Finally, Astrid unfolded her arms, even if it was just to push back her hair. “It doesn’t matter,” she said.

He could see that it did, though, whatever it was. “No, Astrid, it’s all right, I just want to–”

“Not right now,” she said, quickly but not too sharply. It took him a moment to place as nervousness, something he was far from used to associating with Astrid. “Look, I….” she pressed her lips together, a ghost of a grimace in her expression, then shook her head and sighed as if at herself. “This is what you meant, wasn’t it? When you said that you weren’t as comfortable with my choices as I was?”
It took him a moment to place the words, beside the fire in her house with both of them in bandages and wearing dried blood on their skin. “Yeah,” said Hiccup, softly. “It was.”

“Fine,” she said, with an air of finality, peeling upright and walking towards him. No, he realised; not towards him, but past him and towards the door instead. “I get it. And that should mean that you get why I wanted the fight with the Berserkers. We’re even.”

“Astrid – Astrid.” He caught her arm as she went to pass him, regretted it for a heartbeat considering how easily she would be able to pull away from him, and was more than a little surprised when she stopped. Her shoulders dropped a fraction, her breath almost a sigh. “We have to talk about this.”

“Astrid—”

“We didn’t talk about Heather, and we fought, we didn’t talk about this, and we fought.” Fought was perhaps something of a compliment to his actions, considering he had mostly fallen over and thrown up, but the essence had been the same. “And if we don’t learn to talk, then we’re just going to fight again.”

Astrid sighed. Hiccup swallowed down his pride.

“And… yes. It was me that didn’t talk, this time and… sort of the last time with Heather, as well. I need to fix that.”

Astrid looked to his hand, around her bicep, then she reached round and ran her fingers over his. She finally met his gaze; there were still shadows beneath her eyes, and he ached to brush the hair back from her cheek. But she nodded. “All right,” she said, quietly.

Hiccup glanced around them. Heather had not left much in the way of a place to sit, the floor or the table the only real options other than one chair pushed up against the wall, and he nodded over to the stairs instead as he let his fingers slip from her arm. She followed him over and sat beside him, so close that he thought he could feel the radiating heat of her skin, but he dropped his elbows to his knees and looked down at the floor instead.

“I should have told you that I was going after the Flightmare,” he said.

He expected her to agree with him. “Why didn’t you?” said Astrid instead, matching his low tone.

It had been a decision made with his gut, and not his head, but at least overnight there had been time to think of the answer. “Because I thought it would be easier to tell you that I’d faced it than it would be to tell you that I was going to.”

He heard Astrid turn to look at him, and could imagine her look of disbelief. “You think I’m scarier than the Flightmare?”

“Well… your definite anger versus the possibility of the Flightmare? I was ready to risk the Flightmare.” When he heard Astrid huff, with the ghost of a laugh behind it, it was finally possible for him to look up at her again. “I knew that if you knew the Flightmare was coming, you were going to want it dead.”

“And you didn’t want it dead.” It wasn’t a question.

“I didn’t want you to kill a dragon, either,” he replied. “The Red Deaths, the Whispering Death… they were different. They came for us. But this was going to be the first time that we dealt with the Flightmare, knowing what we now know, and I wanted to give them… and us… a chance.”
“And…” this time Astrid ran one hand through her hair, pushing it back, and looked away in what might have been guilt. “You didn’t think that I’d give it that chance.” That wasn’t a question either, and Hiccup didn’t think that he’d have an answer for it. He watched instead as she pressed her lips together, half-pursed them, and he couldn’t help thinking of placing a kiss upon them. But it was far, far from the time. “Maybe I wouldn’t have done.”

She shook her head.

“That dragon was why I learned to fight, Hiccup. I was four years old, and I saw the Flightmare kill my uncle. He was there, and then there was a flare of light, and when I could see again the Flightmare was gone and all that was left was blood and bones. And I told myself… I was going to learn to fight, so that didn’t happen again. I was going to be better than the dragon, better than my uncle had been, as if somehow I was going to stop the war by myself.

“And you did it instead.” For just a few words, her voice was soft, and almost frightened. Hiccup reached over and took her hand, her cold fingers; he squeezed, and after a moment she squeezed back.

“The war isn’t over yet,” he admitted. It hurt to say. “It won’t be over until humans stop attacking dragons, until dragons stop attacking humans. And we can’t tell dragons that it’s over, so we have to tell the humans instead. And… perhaps there will always be some dragons, and some humans, who don’t listen.”

“And you thought I might be one of them.”

He reached out with his free hand, the scar in its palm aching after the changes from cold to warm of the morning, and tucked hair that was hardly loose back behind her ear. “You aren’t.” He knew it had been close, and it ached in his chest. Astrid had been just one day from killing the Nightmare – and it had just been the Nightmare then, long before the name Hookfang had ever been uttered. “You could have been… but you chose not to. You looked at Toothless, and you saw something other than everything that we’d been told. I just worried that maybe… it wouldn’t be so easy with the Flightmare.”

“I still shouldn’t have slapped you,” Astrid admitted. “Calling you a muttonhead was fair enough, but I shouldn’t have slapped you.” She looked up, and reached to turn his chin gently to the right, looking over his right cheek. “Hasn’t left a mark, at least. I don’t think I’d want to explain that to the Chief.” Just as Hiccup was wondering whether he was allowed to laugh at that, she frowned. “You still have whatever that glowing stuff is in your ear, though.”

“That would be the algae,” he said.

“You know, you never did tell me the whole story about that.”

Finally, he let out a breathless, relieved laugh, and let the words spill out. What his father had said, digging up Smokefeet’s field, the pendant and the algae and Arvindell’s Fire. Astrid had seen the pendant in Kristoff’s hands, at least, and he could tell her close to everything, for once. The words poured out, but before he knew it he was talking about his desperate moment of offering the Flightmare his hand, that the knife he carried had not even been the last option that came to his mind. Astrid rolled her hand so that she could twine her fingers with his, and listened, her expression tender and more sad than angry now.

He squeezed her hand again. “You know, technically you called me boneheaded, not a muttonhead.”
“I really don’t remember,” she said. “I just couldn’t imagine… losing my mother to that dragon. Or losing you. Can you at least try not to cover yourself in a dragon’s food and then lie in front of its open mouth next time?”

This time the laugh burst out of him, disbelieving and ringing on the walls, and Astrid laughed beside him. He turned back to her, caught her jaw, and kissed her on the lips again, apology and forgiveness and gratitude all wound together, and she breathed softly against his lips. Her hand came to rest on his shoulder as she kissed him back, just softly and for a moment before drawing back a fraction. Their foreheads came to rest together.

“I’ll talk first next time,” he said, like a promise. “Not afterwards.”

“I think perhaps we should both try that.”

He had his eyes still closed, aware of the heat of her skin against him, the scent of her skin. Then Astrid tilted her mouth back to him and kissed him again; he wondered whether that was a sort of apology, as well. He understood why she had been so angry, in the passion of the moment and scared for him, he understood now, as well, how many years and how much of herself she was still working on. But she tightened her fingers against his hand, and he let his touch drift down to her neck, feeling the touch of her pulse against his fingertips.

Because she had stopped, when it counted, had held her fire once her people were safe and had stood back to watch the Flightmare eat when they coaxed the dragon in to land in the same field where her uncle had died. And he wasn’t sure how much she already knew or how much he should tell her, her pride as bad as his at times.

Instead he kissed her back, her lips soft and warm, and she murmured something wordless against his mouth. Her skirt pressed uncomfortably against his thigh, but it was still a reminder that it was her, that she was still with him, that neither of them had done anything that stupid.

His thoughts were just slipping away, fading into relief and something approaching comfort, when the door rattled open in a blast of cold air. He all but jumped out of Astrid’s arms, had to grab to keep his balance to not fall down a step, and looked wide-eyed to remember that this was in fact Heather’s house, and that she was the one shoving the door closed behind her.

“You’d think we’re headed for Fimburvinter,” she said, dropping both buckets with a rattle and reaching up to unfasten her cloak. Finally turning, she looked from one to the other and raised her eyebrows. “Feel better for talking?”

“Actually, this is Berk’s standard for winter,” Astrid said. “We’ll let you know if it gets unusually cold.”

“Good to know.” Heather went to walk past the table by the door, then paused, looked back down at it, and used both hands to pick up the axe that was lying there. She turned to Astrid, frowning, and Hiccup rose to his feet as he recognised it. “So, are you actually going to give this back to Hiccup, or is it just going to make it as far as here?”

“That’s my father’s axe!”

Heather glanced at him, then gave Astrid an even more pointed look that Hiccup could not even hope to read.

“I did bring it over here because I thought that you would be persuading Hiccup here as well,” said Astrid, as if she were pointing out something apparent. Hiccup crossed the room, and Heather
deposited the axe into his hands. He looked round, unable to quite find words to frame his question, and Astrid shrugged. “Your father lent it to me yesterday. Said that even if he couldn’t come to bring you back… maybe that could help.”

And it had not even ended up buried in a dragon, which could only be a bonus. Although it did make the handle feel rather heavier question in his hand as an uncomfortable question rose. “Uh… did my father say…” he licked his lips, not quite sure how to phrase it, and from Astrid’s frown he was not exactly doing a good job of communicating it with awkward silence alone. “I haven’t told him anything,” he said, helplessly.

Astrid kept frowning a moment longer, then comprehension seemed to slowly dawn on her features. It was readily apparent, though, that she was looking somewhere behind him, and he looked round sharply to see Heather mouthing something and pointing between the two of them. She gave him a look of innocence, a moment too late for it to be believable.

He raised his eyebrows.

“Astrid didn’t have to tell me about you two,” said Heather. “I figured it out quite easily by myself. But,” she stood on one leg to pull off the other boot, “I’m used to reading people quickly. And I could see that the rest of the riders don’t know.”

“Except Anna,” Hiccup admitted. Considering the second time Anna and Astrid had met, it would not have been at all hard for her to figure it out, and honestly she had been pretty discreet about it overall. “And maybe Elsa.” It was harder to be sure there, but she did have a habit of not being present at very opportune times.

Heather pulled off her other boot and grimaced. “Well, I am going to find dry socks.”

“Really, not subtle at all,” said Hiccup.

An impish smile twitched at the corner of Heather’s mouth. “Hey, I have to make up for being the newcomer somehow. But my foot really is wet, so if you’ll excuse me…” she dropped her boots by the fire and headed for the back bedroom, leaving Hiccup clutching his father’s axe and feeling more than a bit of a fool.

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“‘Maybe’ Elsa?” said Astrid, as the door closed behind Heather.

He looked round sheepishly, and gave a lopsided shrug. “I mean, we haven’t talked about… anything. But I figure she probably knows.”

He did not expect Astrid to be looking uncomfortable as well, or to have her arms crossed over her chest. Not aggressively; her shoulders weren’t set, and if anything her eyes were on the axe and not on him. “You don’t even talk to Elsa about… us?”

Tightening his hands on the axe, he swallowed nervously. “I don’t… I mean…” apparently even his overactive vocabulary was fleeing him in the situation. It was remarkably unhelpful. “I don’t really talk to anyone about… us,” he said. “I mean, why… how would I?”

It was hard to exactly read Astrid’s expression, but she closed the distance between them and released one arm, at least, to run over the carvings of the axe he held. “Do you not want people to know?” she said, more quietly than before. Whether it was deliberate, to make sure that Heather had no chance of hearing even by accident, he did not know.

But the words made his mouth go dry, made the bottom of his stomach feel like a lead weight. “I just figured that, well, you wouldn’t want people to know,” he said. Astrid looked up sharply. “I
mean, seriously. Me?"

He gestured to himself, with a vague jerk of the axe in his own direction, and Astrid’s expression softened a little.

“And it’s habit, I guess. I mean, my father still doesn’t think it’s appropriate for Elsa to come into my room and talk to me after dark;” which was most of the day, at the moment, anyway. Or at least, Hiccup assumed that his father’s stance on the matter had not changed; he was not exactly going to ask Stoick such a question and invite anything from stony silence to hideous embarrassment for an answer. “So talking to him would be…” he trailed off, raising his eyebrows and huffing in a way that he hoped got across even a fraction of the message.

Astrid cocked her head slightly. “And Gobber?”

“Has a suspicion, and teases me mercilessly on that alone,” he said. The memory of Gobber pointing out imaginary lovebites rose in his mind, and he felt himself growing red. Between that and the number of things that he had overheard being said in the smithy and only come to understand years later, there was no way that he would get through a conversation with Gobber with his dignity intact. If he even bothered trying to have dignity around Gobber anymore.

Astrid’s hand ran along the handle of the axe until her fingers brushed his, then she leant in and pressed the lightest of kisses to the corner of his mouth. “You should try talking to someone,” she said. “It can make things feel… different. More real.”

Letting someone else in on something that had previously been a secret, more by accident than design. That, at least, he could understand. “Are you volunteering Heather?” he said, trying to keep jest in his voice.

“I don’t think she really needs volunteering.” Another glance, and Astrid lowered her voice again from where it had been drifting back towards the normal volume. “She asked me outright, before I knew it I was talking. It felt good. But I think it makes her feel part of Berk.”

“Knowing people’s secrets.”

“Hey, having one up on Snotlout never hurt anyone.” She shifted closer again, enough that he made sure to turn the axe over in his hands so that its blade was not pointed towards either of any of them. “Besides, if she’s going to let us use her house as a place to talk, then we owe her a few secrets.”

“Don’t let her hear you say that.” He had seen quickly enough that Heather did not like the idea of owing things, and might not be too keen on the idea of being owed either.

“I’m not the muttonhead in this relationship,” said Astrid.

He went to point out the number of times that she had dived in axe-first when a few words might have helped the situation, but did not manage to before she planted a single, firm kiss on his lips again. “That’s not always going to work, you know,” he said instead, as she drew away.

“I’ll keep using it as long as it does, though,” she replied, smiling. She ran her fingers back along the axe handle, and then tapped the back of his hand. “And you really should get that back to your father. I’m surprised he didn’t ask for it last night.”

“Probably the Flightmare distracted him from that,” said Hiccup, honestly. “Or the fact that I came home covered in glowing algae.”
She snorted. “That was pretty impressive.”

“Yeah, even by my standards of catastrophe that was spectacular.”

“For a moment...” there was only the slightest hesitation, and he almost wasn’t sure it was there at all. “For a moment, you looked like the Flightmare as well.”

Too much like a dragon, and not human enough. The words would have stung, coming from anyone but Astrid. But from her it felt more like a warning, before he went too far into all of the reckless behaviour that he had been showing all summer. All year, perhaps. But Dragon Island and Arendelle and Outcast Island had seemed to be so close together, as if he had staggered from one to the other without time to ever really catch his balance in between.

He needed to start acting like a human again. And the visits to other islands which his father had planned would probably be the best place to start.

“Before Snoggletog, my father wants to make a political visit to the Quiet-Lifes. And possibly Mystery Isle as well,” he said. Astrid looked up, frowning slightly at his change in topic, and stepped back far enough that they could look each other over more easily. At least, it helped to ease the ache in Hiccup’s chest, of being close to her but not quite close enough. “About Berserker Island. We’re going by dragon, with the season, and,” he forced himself to slow down his words, “I was wondering whether you wanted to come.”

Not that he had asked Stoick. Then again, Stoick had been too busy trying to ensure that Berk was stable for the winter before he left for however long it would take. Hiccup wanted Anna there as well, for what politics she knew even if it was southern politics and not chiefing, although he knew they would still not be able to introduce her as Queen. He had no political reason for wanting Elsa to come, just knew that he would want her presence there, and truth be told it was similar with Astrid. But she was the best flyer that they had, the one who had been able to change her mind first and furthest.

“To the Islands of the Quiet Life?” said Astrid.

“That’s the plan.”

She stared at him for a couple of seconds, face almost blank but not quite hiding her shock, then shook her head. “I... you know how this time of year gets for my parents. And why would you even want me to go?”

“You and Stormfly are – you’re the best that we have,” he said, earnestly. “We’re not going out there to teach the Quiet-Lifes how to fly, or anything like that, but they’re going to see us flying and we’re going to have to explain that it’s possible to have peace. And I’d like you to be there for that.”

“This time of year is so busy, Hiccup,” said Astrid, after just another fraction of a second’s pause. She put her hands over his, squeezed, but then let go. “I’m sorry – if you need me there, then I can be, but–”

“No, no, it’s fine,” he said quickly. It was going to be a little harder, of course, but he knew that he still wasn’t going alone. “I should have given you more warning, at least. But hey, talking about things before they happen, at least.”

She chuckled. “Yeah. I’ll work on it too.”

She stepped back completely just as the door opened and Heather reappeared, in sock-clad feet and
with a different tunic for good measure. They were similar shades of green, both rather worn, but this one had a patch on one elbow and longer sleeves that came right down to her knuckles. She paused as they both looked round, and raised her eyebrows.

“Bad time? I can waste another few minutes if you want to talk for longer.”

“We’re good,” said Astrid, laughter in her voice, before Hiccup could weigh up asking for those few extra minutes. “You find any spare boots?”

“I’ll let those dry; they fit better,” she said, gesturing to the ones by the fire still. “Say, Hiccup, can I ask you about plants?”

“As long as you don’t expect anything too in-depth,” he answered honestly. He glanced around, then set his father’s axe back down again as he felt a conversation starting to kick up again. “I can tell you what’s a plant and what isn’t, though.”

She rolled her eyes good-naturedly.

“You need me for this?” said Astrid. Heather shook her head, and Astrid shrugged, tucking back her hair. “I should probably get going then, my mother wants to take Stormfly to an area that we don’t normally manage to harvest. There’s some plants that are at their best just as the first snowfall comes in,” she added, in Heather’s direction again, “but getting around in that snow is a lot easier with a dragon.”

“And landing is a lot easier with a Nadder than a Nightmare,” Hiccup added.

“Well, I’ll leave that to those who know more about wild plants than I do,” said Heather.

“I’m learning,” said Astrid, in a self-deprecating sort of tone that Hiccup would usually have tried to either deny or to tease her about, but before he could manage to she stepped in and pressed a kiss to the corner of his cheek. It was brief and soft and made his stomach seem to turn over on itself, then she flashed a smile that was for him alone and backed away a couple of paces before turning, scooping up her cloak from beside the door, and pulling it on even as she made her way outside.

Another gust of cold wind took her place for a moment, this one actually bringing in a few snowflakes with it. “I’ll admit,” said Hiccup, brain lurching for something to say to Heather that did not acknowledge what she had just seen, “Berk has made its transition to winter rather more abruptly than usual. So, uh, plants?”

Heather’s fond smile faded away. “Yeah,” she said. “I mean, if you don’t know too much about plants, I guess I should just ask if you know who does, if that would be better.”

“Phlegma’s probably the best,” said Hiccup, “or Gothi, if you can get someone who can translate for you, but Gobber’s probably busy with fixing tools that couldn’t be put out of use in the summer, never mind Snoggletog gifts.” Which Hiccup had also still not managed to finish sorting out, but he was getting very good at putting that off. “Depends on the plant, I guess. What is it?”

“It’s a southern plant,” said Heather. “I mean, mostly a southern one. The island that my mother got it from called it Moonless Night, but that could well be made up. It’s difficult to grow at the best of times, but…” she shrugged, this time more awkwardly, and put one hand on her hip. Her gaze slipped to somewhere over Hiccup’s shoulder. “If I can grow it, then it will let me clear my debt to your family. Quickly.”

“Heather,” he said, voice softening, “you know that you don’t have to rush to—”
“And provide for my father once he joins me,” she continued, as if she had not even heard him. He took the hint.

“Well, I think Phlegma has some plants that she keeps in the lee of her house to keep them warm, but I don’t ask too many questions. I’m bad enough with dragon eggs, never mind plants.”

“Those winter garden designs that you did. Do you think you could get one of them ready?” She paused for a moment, almost breathlessly. “I know it would mean I owe you more in the short term, but if I could get these to grow then it would be worth it.”

“If you’re worried about losing the plant, you could always trade them with Phlegma,” Hiccup offered. “If anyone could get them to grow, she probably could.” Curiosity, though, tingled at the base of his spine, and he couldn’t help tilting his head to her. “What is it, something like pepper?”

“Let’s just say that there’s plenty of women will be wanting to get hold of some, if I can get it growing,” said Heather. It made it absolutely no clearer, and Hiccup simply frowned at her. “Fine, if you must know; it’s supposed to be very effective at preventing pregnancy.”

“Oh. Oh!” And in an instant, everything that she had said made sense, the name had a terrible clarity about it, and he firmly wished that he had never asked. “That’s…” Hiccup ran his hand across his mouth, and Heather finally cracked a smile at him as he fumbled for words.

It felt like being at the forge all over again.

“It’s not something I’ve ever heard of,” he settled for. “Phlegma… might.” That was a bad direction for his mind to go in, and he hauled it back again immediately. “I don’t know. Uh… that expensive?”

Heather held up one hand, little finger extended. “My mother paid in gold for it,” she said, and Hiccup simply blinked, aware that his mouth was still slightly open. Berk was not a rich island, with perhaps one good chest of gold to their name, but Hiccup had noticed the patches on Heather’s clothes, the simplicity of the karve, had presumed that what money her family had was tied up inexorably in their ship. “She and my father had been saving for when they were going to stop sailing and settle down. They meant—” Her voice cracked mid-sentence, abruptly, and Hiccup stepped forwards without an idea of what he could do. Before he reached her, though, she had forced a placid, blank smile back onto her face and looked back at him again. “It was an investment. I only realised the seeds were among the crates when I found them a couple of days ago.”

“Phlegma would be best to talk to,” he said again, not sure what else he could offer. His memories of his mother were faint and distant, and for years he had not realised what it meant to be taken, had just grown up without her in his life. He knew that he could never hope to understand what Heather had seen and felt that day on Outcast Island. Heather nodded at his words, and he didn’t think that it was his imagination that there was some gratitude there. “And if I do get the glass for a winter garden for her, then perhaps you’d be able to barter some space in it, for a cutting or so.”

“That sounds like a good idea.” Her words had a brittle edge, but if he weren’t listening carefully then he might have been fooled. “Or I’d be willing to trade work for the space.”

“How’s the Gronckle iron going?”

“I know a lot of rocks which it probably isn’t,” said Heather, with a grimace that was probably slightly over-dramatised. “But I’m hoping to find out by Snoggletog.”
“You tell Gobber what’s in that for Snoggletog, I don’t think he’s going to care what anyone else
gets him,” said Hiccup. “Please, don’t show me up that badly.”

“I’ll wait until just after,” she said, with a hint of a promise about it. “And I’ll talk to Phlegma.
She’s the one from the trial, isn’t she?”

Of course, he should have remembered that would be Heather’s first association. It was all that he
could do not to wince openly. “Well, at least she’s easy to tell from Spitelout. And was impressed
by the giant cabbage, so the academy is on her good side.”

“Nice to know I’m on someone’s good side.” There was a dark edge to Heather’s voice, but once
again before Hiccup could say anything she had stepped around him, picked up his father’s axe,
and put it back into his hands again. “Go on, you should get this back before your father wonders
what I’m getting up to with you.”

“That – that is not funny,” he said, wishing that he had a hand free to point at her but with both of
them rather occupied by keeping a tight grip on the axe.

“Subject to the charms of a foreign, older woman…” she steered him towards the door.

“Not funny at all–” Gods, she didn’t even know about what Stoick had said about Hiccup and Elsa,
although whether she could have had some idea just from watching their interactions he did not
know. It did not help that his cheeks were now burning hot enough that the snow was probably
going to melt on them even more quickly than usual.

“Well, you’d best make sure you’ve got the notes for your alibi.” She scooped up a roll of
parchment from beside the door as well and dumped it into his hands with the axe. He juggled to
catch them both, by this point standing close enough to feel a hint of a draft. “That Flightmare still
in the woodshed of that poor man whose field you dug up?”

“That is my next thing to check,” he admitted. “Well… once my father has his axe back.”

Chapter End Notes

Hiccup, honey, maybe don’t go from "I don't talk to anyone about this relationship" to "come to another island with me in what looks like a rather official position" in the space of one conversation. Because at the beginning of this convo, Astrid worried that you were deliberately keeping her secret rather than just being your awkward self, and at the end of it she's worrying that you're asking her to go as your official 'intended' or similar. (Mentioning that Anna and Elsa were also going might have helped avoid that impression.)

...Hiccup really can be a muttonhead at times.

'Moonless Night' is inspired by silphium, a long-extinct plant said to have been a very
effective contraceptive/early abortificant. It may well have been driven to extinction some 2000-2300 years ago by human over-use(!) as it was almost impossible to
cultivate and had to be harvested from the wild. It's not the same plant, as silphium
would be long extinct by this point, but a made-up close relative with similar
properties.

(Hiccup, learn when to *not* ask questions about plant uses.)
The Flightmare was, indeed, still in the woodshed. True, they had apparently burrowed into the furthest corner of the woodshed that they could reach, and were hissing like an angry cat whenever anyone came near, but Smokefeet and Brawn had taken turns keeping watch overnight to make sure that nobody tried to take out their own revenge. Less expectedly, Fishlegs was waiting outside the woodshed with a bucket of algae when Hiccup approached with Toothless and Stoick close behind him. Fishlegs turned and clutched the bucket to his chest, almost spilling it; it still glimmered faintly, although the light was harder to see in the day.

“So,” said Hiccup, trying to act as if he had the faintest idea what he was doing, “are we ready to see if they’re going to come out and say hello?”

Even Fishlegs didn’t look all too convinced; Brawn raised an eyebrow, visibly unimpressed, and Hiccup did not even bother looking around to see how bad his father’s expression might be. Instead he tried not to flush, and reassured himself that at least he had managed one successful thing today in returning his father’s axe.

“All right, then. Fishlegs, how long have you been here?”

“Uh… half an hour, maybe?” said Fishlegs, with a glance at Brawn. Hiccup felt a pang of guilt, although none of them had particularly agreed when they might return to the site. “I tried throwing in some mutton and a fish, but it doesn’t seem to be interested.”

“Well, I guess more algae should tell whether they’re full or picky,” said Hiccup. He held out his hand for the bucket.

Fishlegs hesitated for a moment. “Are you sure?”

“I’m not going to roll in it again,” he said. Fishlegs still did not look wholly convinced, but he let Hiccup take the bucket from him all the same. As he stepped into the woodshed, the Flightmare looked round sharply, and Hiccup slowly and carefully set aside his cane and reached up to undo the cape from around his neck. He couldn’t help the hiss of breath that escaped him as the cold air struck beneath, and his heart sped up in his chest, but he could see the Flightmare’s eyes tracing over him. He pulled his dagger from its sheath, held it out at arm’s length, and dropped it to the ground. The Gronckle iron let it catch, and it stood upright from the wooden floor.

The Flightmare snorted.

“It’s all right, buddy,” said Hiccup. “Come on, I’ve got some nice algae for you.”

In the shade of the woodshed, he could see that the Flightmare was glowing as well, faint and dim like the moon behind clouds. As Hiccup stepped closer, the light flared for a moment as the Flightmare rumbled deep in their chest, and he crouched down and set the bucket on the floor beside him. It brought them closer to eye-height, although it was difficult to see exactly where the Flightmare was looking behind the bright sheen of their eyes.

“Is that the aurora up there still giving you that light, huh?” said Hiccup. He nudged the bucket closer; it scraped on the floor, and the Flightmare hunkered down with a warning hiss and a wisp of venom. Hiccup fell still again. He had a suspicion that this time, there would be no mercy if they
did lash out. “We can’t see it during the day, but I guess you can feel it. I wonder what you look like the rest of the time…”

Kneeling, he used both hands to raise the bucket a fraction of the inch and move it, silently, towards the Flightmare again. He put it down about a foot away from them, then shuffled back as quietly as he could himself, dropped to one knee and rested both arms on the other leg.

The Flightmare’s nostrils twitched as they sniffed, and Hiccup wondered for a moment whether they could smell the Marsh Tiger on him. Then they spat, a tight fast puff of venom that enveloped the bucket and nothing more, and he heard his father’s readying his axe in a clink of metal and hastily brought up one hand to warn his father back. He did not dare take his eyes off the Flightmare, as they carefully stepped forwards, straightened up, and peered into the bucket with lips still parted and, most likely, more venom ready.

Their tongue flashed out, lapping at the surface once or twice as if checking, then they backed into their corner once again, curling into the shadow.

“I think we can say with some certainty that’s ‘full’,” said Hiccup. He did feel proud of himself for his voice not shaking, even if he couldn’t help the racing of his heart. The Flightmare twitched their tail at him, but it felt less confrontational, more like they were testing the waters of communication. “Probably doesn’t have that much room for a stomach in there… I’m guessing they’d ideally want to feed again tonight, if Arvindell’s Fire holds.”

“It may do,” said Stoick, grimly. Hiccup dared a look around just in time to see his father putting his axe away again. “Sometimes it appears for one night, sometimes two. If we’re lucky, Arvindell’s Fire will pass by nightfall. I assume the dragon will move on by then?”

Hiccup was not sure how he was supposed to know that for sure, but resisted the urge to point that out. “If they’re only here for the algae, then there’s no reason for them to stay afterwards.” He had no idea exactly what the Flightmare did for the rest of the decade or so that they were not in Berk, but he hoped that they were not facing battles in the same way that they had once done from the village. He reached out a hand towards the Flightmare contemplatively, but their head jerked up and there was faint, warning hiss. “All right, all right, point made. No, I don’t see this one wanting to stick around either. Looks like you’re a bit of a loner, huh?”

He looked over at the dragon, who made a faint sound that was at least not a growl. As far as the day was going, Hiccup would take that.

He retrieved his cloak and cane, and Brawn eventually gave up and brought out two stools for Hiccup and Fishlegs to perch on. Brawn left it to Stoick to watch them as they tried to sketch the dragon and scribbled down notes, clumsy through gloves that still didn’t really feel like they were keeping out all of the cold. As time wore on, the twins came by to stare and make unhelpful suggestions, and Ruffnut restrained Tuffnut by the belt to stop him from going into the woodshed.

It might have been gratifying, had she not added, “Didn’t you hear what Snotlout said that thing did
“I wasn’t unconscious,” said Hiccup defensively, only for both of the twins to look at him in such a way as to communicate that it really didn’t matter to them and, to judge by Ruffnut’s grin, she was going to keep it stored for blackmail material anyway.

He went back to making his notes with Fishlegs, as that sounded like a much safer proposition.

Even the twins lost their interest before too long, however, and left them to their note-taking and rubbing their hands together in an attempt to keep them even vaguely warm. The Flightmare proved surprisingly unexciting, or at least surprisingly unthreatening, curling up with their head on their tail and even snoring faintly to themselves. Fishlegs exchanged a glance with Hiccup before making a note. The snow waned at first, to flecks so fine they barely seemed to even touch anything, let alone settle, then started to grow thicker and the wind gustier.

“Er, Hiccup?” said Fishlegs, as Hiccup was contemplating whether he could get close to the dragon to make more sketches. “We’re probably going to have to give this up for the day…”

Hiccup grimaced, but had to admit that his stump was starting to ache. “Yeah, we’re probably about done.” He handed over his notes. “Are you good to look through those and see if they make sense? We need to talk Marsh Tigers at some point, with Gobber.” And possibly ask around the village, come Snoggletog or some other night when people were feeling talkative, to see what other stories they might turn up. It might take a delicate balance, though, to get stories of the Wildlands without it creeping over into stories of wildlings, especially when he had made no secret that he had contacted them not long after Slaughter Day.

“I can do that,” said Fishlegs, sounding at least mostly confident. He looked at the Flightmare again, less nervously than he had at the beginning of the morning. “It’s not really all that big, is it?”

“About Toothless’s size. Definitely smaller than Meatlug.” Hiccup curled his fingers into his palm, and grimaced at how cold they felt. Gobber was probably going to tell him off for that, especially so soon after the frostbite from falling in the Swamps, and he was going to deserve it.

Fishlegs looked like he was going to say something more, then shook his head instead. He mumbled something about leaving, rose, and was about to pick up the stool on which he had been sitting when Stoick stepped in and put a hand to his arm.

“I’ll take care of that,” said Stoick.

“Yes, chief,” said Fishlegs hurriedly, and all but fled.

Hiccup was not quite sure what he was supposed to expect when Stoick sat down beside him with a creak of wood. “Is everything all right, Dad?” he said, tearing his eyes away from the Flightmare to glance up. There was something entrancing about the dragon, something in the way that their light flowed like breath. Something that was as entrancing as watching Elsa weave her magic between her hands, and he was not sure whether he wanted to linger on that for too long.

“Aye, lad. I just… I haven’t looked much at that beast, myself, and I was hoping to.”

The metal of Stoick’s scalemail was very cold where it brushed Hiccup’s leg, and Hiccup shifted a fraction to escape it. The hand on his shoulder, though, was very much warm.

“I’m sorry that I’ve not been with you much, these last couple of days,” said Stoick, quietly. Hiccup frowned at him, not at all sure what he ought to think, let alone what he ought to say.
“You had things you needed to do,” he said, finally. It was not as if Stoick could have left the village to prepare itself and accompany Hiccup and Runa into the Swamps; people would have run around like headless chickens, just as Gothi had accused them, and there would have been fights or worse. Old feelings about dragons would have bubbled to the surface, and that would have done nobody any good. With a pang in his chest, though, Hiccup realised that he thought he knew exactly what his father meant. “And… I do benefit from your chiefing as well,” he said, the words coming out a bit more clumsily than usual. His hands fidgeted together almost of their own accord, nervous in his lap, until he gathered himself enough to wave at the Flightmare. “I mean, it was you who kept this guy from getting attacked last night.”

Stoick squeezed his shoulder, quiet for a long moment with his eyes fixed on the Flightmare instead of on Hiccup. At least his hand was not so uncertain and delicate a touch as it had once been, afraid of breaking some part of Hiccup and making him worse than he already was.

“It’s a strange beast,” Stoick said finally. On instinct, it almost stung to have his words ignored, but Hiccup was learning better at least. If Stoick did not reply, it was because he did not know what to say, not that he disapproved of the words. He was not shy about voicing his disapproval. “I remember when I first saw it. It had been sighted only a few moons before I was born, and Heavy used to tell me about it when we were boys.”

For all that Stoick spoke rarely of Valka, it was even stranger to hear him speak of his brother. Hiccup’s throat tightened.

“I was eleven when it came to the village again. This great shining beast,” Stoick’s hand brushed the air in front of them, like sweeping across a scene, “in the summer twilight. And I remember thinking, that after all of the dragons I had seen, and the Nightmares I had killed before I was even supposed to be a man, that dragon was something I would never see the like of.” His hand fell back to his lap again. “And then the next time it came, my father told me as his heir to prepare the defence against it, and I lost more than one of my men.”

Stoick’s fingers drummed out a pattern on his knee, and another glance make Hiccup wince to see that his father was not even wearing gloves despite the biting cold. But then again, Stoick’s hands had been rough as long as he could remember, as sturdy as leather themselves.

“Hopefully… this is it,” Hiccup said, slowly, when it seemed that his father was not going to say more. “There’s not going to be a next time. Or at least not the same sort of next time. And this time… I know I shouldn’t have fallen in the pond, but if me falling in the pond is the worst injury we had, then that’s… well, that used to be a typical night.” He could feel the seriousness of his words slipping away, and wasn’t sure whether he really meant for it to happen or not. It was hard to judge whether his father’s long-suffering sigh was truly annoyed or not, though.

“I’m sure that there was a good point, buried in that,” said Stoick, finally. “But… aye. It’s the cleanest we’ve ever dealt with the beast.” His eyes settled on the Flightmare, shadows beneath them. “Let’s just see if we can keep it that way as we get it gone.”
For all that Hiccup worried that the Flightmare might remain for another night – they did not look so frightening by day, sheltering in the back of the woodshed, but even he could see how in the dark they could drive people to panic – they left not much before sunset, just as Hiccup was passing through again in a lull between flurries of snow. Their head snapped up, eyes fixed on the clouds as if they could bore straight through, and with only a moment to pause and look Hiccup over again they took to the sky and were lost to the clouds within seconds.

It felt almost anti-climactic, in a way. Hiccup rubbed the blisters on his fingertips, and reminded himself to feel relieved that it had all passed so easily.

Astrid caught up to him before he made it home, jogging through the snow with the hood of her cloak up and her cheeks pink. She slowed as she reached him, and he gave a smile which he hoped looked more confident than it felt.

“So… it’s done, then?”

“Yeah.” He saw the flicker in Astrid’s expression, like she was not quite sure whether to be happy or not. “Looks like. I’ll give it a couple of days, but after that, I want to call an academy meeting. The seven of us,” he clarified, and Astrid raised an eyebrow. “Well, eight, I guess. Anna might be able to help, she knows some of the politics at least.”

“Politics? With the academy?” Now it was both eyebrows, and Astrid looked at him as if he’d suggested asking the yaks for advice on training dragons. “Unless you want to return to our childhood days of Snotlout outlining what he’d do as chief…”

Something which had gone on for too many years, and alternated too unpredictably between being just annoying and feeling like an actual possibility. Hiccup grimaced. “Yeah, thanks for that reminder. No, I meant about the fact that my father and I are visiting the Islands of the Quiet Life, we’re going to be going by dragon, and even if I don’t intend on training them they’re going to see.”

“So you said this morning,” said Astrid.

“And if you and I need to start talking, then I owe it to the rest of the riders to talk to them, as well.” He had a feeling, in his gut, that in some way the riders would always be those of them that had faced Dragon Island together on dragonback, the one year who had neither finished training in the arena, nor begun training in the academy. “Or at least to let them know that I’ll be borrowing a Gronckle.”

“A Gronckle?”

“My father and I have been making plans,” he admitted. “There’s a yak involved.”

Astrid looked surprised for a moment, then her expression softened and she laughed, punching him lightly on the shoulder. “I’m not even going to ask. But, fine, I’ll let people know if I see them first. Tomorrow morning?”

“I’m thinking the day after. Really put the… Swamps incident behind us.”

“Finish washing the algae out of your hair.”

“Something like that, yeah.”
Somehow, Hiccup did manage to wrench the conversation at the Great Hall – the winds were too strong to dare head to the academy – in the right direction, although he did not get much actual input from them and felt a little as if he was giving a lecture rather than trying to host a discussion.

“You aren’t gonna be teaching them to be riders, though, right?” said Ruffnut, folding her arms and looking more serious than he was used to. “It’ll still just be us?”

“I promise you,” Hiccup said, the words coming out before he even particularly thought about them.

Ruffnut nodded, went back to looking bored, and nothing else was particularly forthcoming apart from Snotlout’s griping that Hiccup got to visit other islands. Hiccup chose not to comment that the island he most commonly visited was Berserker Island, or how bad those visits had been.

He bid them a fairly lukewarm farewell, then wrapped his cloak tightly around him to head back home, staying close to Anna’s side when he saw her slipping on the ice steps. Elsa caught her, though, and Anna gave a thin but grateful smile as she steadied herself and carried on.

“You know,” said Anna, somewhat breathlessly, “other than the academy in the summer, this is going to be the first time I’ve been off the island.”

With the whistling wind and bitter cold, it was difficult to be sure just how much of the shake in Anna’s voice was nervousness. He could see the points of her elbows beneath her cloak, cinched so tight that Elsa had not managed to slip a hand to or around her. Hiccup gave her a worried look as they continued down the steps. Ahead of them, Ruffnut pushed Snotlout into a snowbank, then she and Tuffnut both took off running.

Business as usual for Berk, then.

“You’ll be fine,” said Hiccup. “Your Northur is great, you’ll be with us, and you’ll probably understand more of the politics than I do.”

She rolled her eyes. “Yeah, Viking politics, my speciality.”

He almost frowned, but stopped himself just in time. Admittedly, a particularly sharp gust of wind that squirrelled straight under his clothes probably helped turn it into something of a grimace at least. “Can’t be that different. I’m sure southern kingdoms come up with a better reason for a feud than knocking over a pint, but it comes down to being much the same. And you know the situation with the Berserkers. Their history.”

“I’d never even heard of the Quiet-Lifes,” said Anna, scowling. Elsa gave her a concerned look, though Anna did not look round to notice.

“And they like it that way,” he replied, hoping that it sounded more reassuring than it felt. “As far as the Quiet-Lifes are concerned, any island that doesn’t know about them is an island with no reason to declare war on them. Gods know how they cropped up on an island so close to the Berserkers, but there you go.” They reached flatter ground, and Toothless came alongside Hiccup,
a comforting warm presence at his hip. “Politics is a pattern. People fit into it.”

“Politics is kingdoms’ histories,” Anna retorted. “And I don’t even know the kingdoms, let alone the histories.”

He did not point out that calling them ‘kingdoms’ was probably the first mistake when it came to Vikings. Even Berk would reject the term, although they would understand where it came from; other islands would be outright offended. But it wasn’t difficult to guess that it was not the right time to point that out.

“I’ll give you the quick version. Trust me, these guys are easy to deal with. To a slightly un-Viking-like extent.”

She looked at him dubiously.

“Come on.” He nodded to home, a welcome shadow through the snow. “I’ll introduce you to Viking diplomacy. First lesson: walk softly, and carry a big yak.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, but I’ve been waiting to use that big yak line for a while now.

Auroras are in fact active 24/7, but usually in the ultraviolet spectrum. So Hiccup is probably right, and there is still some aurora effect keeping the algae glimmering, and the Flightmare in Berk.
This chapter is going up a day early because I have the time available right now! I'm on holiday this week, and wasn't sure whether I'd be able to do tomorrow. So better early than late!

Dragon-riding was rather less fun in the winter than in the summer. Hiccup tucked his sleeves into his gloves, drew his scarf up and his helmet down, and still found himself squinting against the cold wind and blinking away stray flakes of snow or fat freezing drops of sleet that came into his eyes. No matter how many times he flexed his fingers or rubbed his thighs to keep the blood flowing, hours of riding was going to do nothing but leave him stiff and sore, and he knew it before they even set off.

Still, it was better than boats were at the best of times.

The main problem with the flying was that it was just boring. It felt so strange to say that, to think that something as incredible as flying could lose that electrifying edge and that feeling of whipping through the sky, but somewhere around the middle of the day when he had his hands shoved in his armpits and the bridge of his nose had gone numb it managed it.

Perhaps it was simply that Toothless was having to restrain himself to the pace of Thornado and the two Gronckles which they had brought with them. They could not rip the sky apart with their wings, could not whirl through the clouds or dip to touch the ocean’s freezing waves. It almost felt as if it were not Toothless at all, as if they were being constrained into the skin of a different dragon, or at least forced apart rather than being allowed to fly together as, he was sure, they were both aching to.

Most likely, it also did not help that there was no talking to be done. The wind was steady, not so blustery as to prevent them from flying altogether, but it made it impossible to shout between the dragons, and Stoick was with Thornado while Anna and Elsa shared the saddle of the green-blue Gronckle who had followed them back after the terrible fight with the Speed Stingers.

All that he was really left with was the tangle of his own thoughts, a mesh of nervousness through which he occasionally managed to concentrate on thinking about improvements he could make to Toothless’s saddle and harness, or when he was going to be able to finish fixing up Astrid’s axe before Snoggletog. Too often, though, he was stuck thinking about the cold and discomfort of the moment, his own concerns about the meeting they were about to begin, or flashes of fear and horror about what Dagur had already inflicted upon them.

Even having found a suitable cave for the night, leeward and with enough room to build a fire, the only way that he managed to scrounge any warmth was curling up at Toothless’s side. Stoick somewhat reluctantly allowed Anna to sleep under Toothless’s other wing, and insisted on keeping watch even when Hiccup protested that they could easily enough take shifts.

It was still dark the next morning when they set out again, Anna having fumbled and cursed as she got changed under the shelter of Toothless’s wing, Elsa stepping out of view around the side of the rocks where the wind would most likely be at its bitterest.
It was a bad time of year to be travelling, even if the dragons made it about bearable. But, as even Stoick had needed to acknowledge, there would be no time better until spring came around, and by then it could well be too late. There was no helping that they were travelling east, that a storm could come and go on Berk before the Islands of the Quiet Life would have any warning of it, and perhaps the best that they could do would be to go before Snoggletog and the further worsening of the weather that tended to come in the new year.

At the very least, Stoick could guide them. Navigation from the air was easier than that by sea, more islands and more landmarks to follow, especially as they moved westward into the areas of the Archipelago more densely scattered with islands and rocks. But Hiccup was all too aware that most of his time anywhere near this region had been spent hanging over the stern of the boat and trying not to vomit his entire intestinal tract, and he was far more used to the landscape as it looked while he was moving away from it, not heading towards it.

It was only as the distinctive shoreline of the Islands of the Quiet Life came into view, and Stoick slowed, that Hiccup knew he needed to press forwards in turn. He tried to swallow his nerves as he swung round in front of the others, raised a hand for the two Gronckles to stop, and caught his father’s eye.

More than the rest of the flight, he wished that he could say something, or at least say something without having to scream it through the wind and still only having a chance of it being heard. He felt very young, and very vulnerable without armour as a deliberate show of peace to the Quiet-Lifes. But Stoick caught his eye, expression softening, and gave him just one clear nod across the distance.

He nodded back, and with a flick of Toothless’s tail they whipped away.

Toothless was the only one fast enough to make this easy. They swept high, higher than arrows or crossbow bolts would reach; this part of the Archipelago had never faced the sort of onslaught from dragons that Berk had, and would not have large weapons anything like so close at hand. A few boats whipped past below, brave enough to be on the water but not moving far from the safe shores of the Islands, but Hiccup did not have time for them and set his eyes on the largest isle where the main village was based.

He had a rough idea of the lay of the land, but it had been years since Berk had visited and he had not been looking with a dragon-rider’s eye in those days. Now he scanned the village, set his eyes on a clearing at the edge of it, and before he could lose his nerve brought Toothless into a blistering dive.

At the last minute, Toothless’s wings spread wide to arrest their plunge, and Hiccup felt the jolt run through his body and the dropping of his stomach as they landed. He swung out of the saddle before Toothless even had time to furl his wings, and held up his arms to the already-approaching villagers who were making it to the back of the houses.

There was a lot of shouting, which he had expected, but mercifully no horns to spread the word and no screaming in terror. All of the first handful of people that he saw had only axes, although he knew that bows and nets would not be that far behind, but looks of shock brought them up short as they realised that there was a human, as well as a dragon, among them.

“Stop!” Hiccup shouted, putting as much force behind the words as he could. “I’m from Berk! Stop!”

Names did not mean much, even ones as distinctive as his. Trying to explain what they had done with the dragons was far too much to fit into one phrase, too much to shout in one go. But the
name Berk would give them pause, would let them know that this was something to which they needed to listen.

“‘I’m an envoy from Berk!’” he repeated. “I need to speak to Chief Seatrude Waverender. Chief Seatrude!”

People were at the edge of the clearing, weapons readied, but did not attack them, and that could only be a positive sign. As Hiccup waited, heart in his mouth, Seatrude pushed her way through her people and stood staring at him, what he strongly suspected was shock pinning her in place. Her right arm with its sheath of tattoos was exposed despite the cold weather, but her sword was still at her side as she looked between Hiccup and Toothless. As tall and brawny as any viking, her shoulder would be level with Hiccup’s head, and the glare that she levelled on him could have split rock.

He removed his helmet, keeping his cloak pushed back to reveal that he carried nothing other than his knife. “‘I’m Hiccup Haddock,’” he called to her, “‘son of Stoick the Vast of Berk. We come as an envoy to speak to your people.’”

Carefully, he rested one hand on Toothless’s shoulder, as much for his own reassurance as to check that Toothless was still gentle and low in his body language. He could feel the faint thrum of tension in Toothless’s shoulder, but it was deeply restrained, well-hidden, enough that the others would not be seeing him as any more dangerous than a dragon always looked.

“And the beast?” she nodded to him.

“Will not hurt you.” He had to keep it simple, enough that it could be shouted across the yards between them.

Seatrude looked them over again, but he could see her realising that there was a test of her mettle beneath it all. That had been deliberate, and Stoick’s idea, and for all that Hiccup was none too fond of it he had to admit that it would be a way to get other chiefs to try. Brave without swords in their hands.

There was no council on the Islands of the Quiet Life, never had been; though they had more people than Berk, each of the smaller villages on the smaller isles had a representative who would relay messages to and from the Chief, but Seatrude led them by herself. But even Stoick might not have been able to look to his council if such a challenge were placed before him, and certainly Seatrude could not afford to hesitate long now.

“Weapons down,” she shouted, turning to holler it back across her peoples’ heads. “Spread the word! Weapons down!” She nodded to a few of the men and women around her, a clear message for them to remain, and Hiccup could not help but see that one of them had a net in their hands. A shoddy rope one, meant for fishing and not for dragons, but it would still be enough to entangle Toothless for a short while.

Turning back, Seatrude looked him over again, then strode across the yards between them. Her gaze started on Hiccup, then slipped to Toothless as she came nearer, hand half-closing as if aching for the hilt of her sword but never quite reaching across.

“Hiccup Haddock,” she said finally, tearing her eyes across to him. “You look different than I remember.”

“It’s been seven years,” he admitted. And even then, Berk had only come to the Quiet-Lifes’ shores because the winds had been against them and the Berserkers had grown too testy and forced them
to at least leave to somewhere. Some of the goods from the Berserkers that had been meant to return to Berk had instead ended up on this island to mitigate the cost of keeping them. At least it had reconfirmed the peace between their islands, Berk more worried about dragons than about war with other humans, the Quiet-Lifes living up to their name.

“Why do you return now? And with dragons, no less?”

“The dragons are because it is impossible to come by boat,” said Hiccup. Snow was settled around them, although there were only a few fine flakes in the air. “I’m sorry that we had to bring them to your shores and impose them on your people. But it is important that we speak to you, and as soon as possible, about the Berserkers.”

Seatrude frowned. “You’ll not find their new boy chief on his island. He’s gone viking.”

“Not viking,” said Hiccup. He remembered Dagur’s face by firelight, the smile as he wrapped the chain of the Skrill around his arm, and his stomach jolted. It was all he could do to keep it from showing on his expression. “He’s talking of a new Berserker Empire. Berk does not want to see that happen.”

Her expression hardened, frown fading but eyes becoming more worrying to stand before. “You bring a dragon to give us messages of war by our own neighbours?”

“We don’t want to,” he said, not knowing quite how else to respond to her words. “Dagur has forced our hand.”

As soon as the words left his lips, he heard the irony of them, felt it aching in his right palm. Seatrude might appreciate it as well, later. But he could still feel the tension in the air, still feel her considering whether she should send away this near-stranger and the dangerous creature he had brought to her shores.

Send away, or more.

“We want to prevent as much fighting as we can,” Hiccup added. His heart was still racing in his chest, seemingly as fast as it had ever done when he had been fighting, and part of him thought that was absurd but another part thought, more darkly, that he was still risking war. “We’ve brought food for you – meat – and steel, in gratitude for even letting me land on your shores. Please, will you at least hear my father speak? Chief to chief.”

Seatrude pressed her lips tightly together, until the scar on her left cheek twitched. But the hand at her side, which Hiccup tried to watch without letting his gaze move from her face, did not stray towards her sword again. “Where is he?” she said.

Hope flaring, Hiccup pointed out towards the rocks where his father and the others were waiting. “With the rest of our party. There are four of us altogether, and five dragons – a Thunderdrum, two Gronckles and a Terrible Terror. Will you let me call them in to land?”

He had to admit, she was doing well at hiding how much surprise must have been rushing through her. Another pause, not quite long enough to be a hesitation, but Hiccup had the sense that his father would have been calling for his council again. A lot of weight on one pair of shoulders, he thought, a little more cynically than he might have done a couple of years before.

“Bring them in,” she said, almost sharply.

“I need to let him fire,” said Hiccup, with a light touch to Toothless’s head. “It will be out to sea, no damage, but it will be bright and loud.”
This time, she looked at him with more bewilderment, but he fancied it was for the fact that he had thought to give her warning at all. She did not object, did not speak at all, and after a moment Hiccup simply nodded and took it as permission.

“Thank you. Toothless.” He pointed out to the sky, firmly.

As he did so, Seatrude finally turned to her people, cupping a hand around her mouth. “Dragon fire! Weapons down!”

Without Hiccup having to ask for it, Toothless kept his fire light, almost gentle, a cracking sound but a blast that fluttered lilac against the clouds. There were shouts through the village, Seatrude’s order – or reassurance – spreading, and then Hiccup’s heart leapt in his chest as he caught the movement of the dragons, and knew that they had managed at least the first step.

Stoick cut a fine figure on Thornado’s back. He sat as straight as a southern ruler on a horse, as proud as a warlord on his throne, and his beard was a flare of red against the greyish sky, the grey-blue sea, the brighter blue of Thornado beneath him. It was strange to think of it that way, really, when he had seen Stoick struggle to bond with a dragon in the first place, then had watched Thornado generally be wilful and specifically dunk Stoick in the sea on a number of occasions, but he had to admit that now, in perhaps the important moment, his father looked truly impressive.

Thornado came in to a smooth and unusually well-behaved landing, and Stoick dismounted without ever looking away from Seatrude. Behind him, Elsa and Anna came quietly down to land as well, sliding down off the back of the green-blue Gronckle and waiting at his side. Elsa, cloaked and gloved for the sake of appearance, looked around carefully, and when Hiccup caught her eye he nodded in a way that he hoped looked reassuring.

“Stoick the Vast,” said Seatrude, as he approached with Thornado trotting patiently at his heels. There was something of a crowd gathering, more people than Hiccup could count now between and just in front of the houses that formed the edge of the village.

Stoick nodded in response, then extended his hand. “Seatrude Waverender. I thank you for letting us land on your shores.”

She glanced around, then clasped his hand with a hearty smack. “Fewer men than last time you were here.”

“A boat needs a full crew,” said Stoick. “Dragons do not. There are the four of us, as you can see.”

“You son said that you came to speak of the Berserkers. Their boy chief;” Hiccup caught the words again, and wondered just what was behind them; “will not be found there. I fear your journey is in vain.”

As their hands came apart again, Stoick shook his head. “We know. He has already taken Outcast Island, and looks towards Berk. He speaks of a new Berserker Empire.”
They had agreed not to speak of the Skrill, not yet. At least not until they were talking to Seatrude alone, not before an audience of bewildered villagers. The Skrill was far more than merely the Berserkers reaching out; it was reaching back two centuries and into horror.

“And you wish to speak to us of it,” said Seatrude, with a hint of disapproval.

“We thought it better to speak now, and not when he has already begun to conquer other lands and take control of their swords.”

Seatrude paused for a moment, then gave a non-committal grunt and something that looked halfway to a nod. Stoick’s expression did not waver, and he turned to Hiccup with an air of confidence still in place.

“Bring the other one down,” he said.

Toothless’s name had slipped out already, but for the most part they were not supposed to be using them. Steps that were more difficult to take, Stoick had said, and despite his frustration Hiccup knew that it was more important to have the dragons accepted at all than it was to have them accepted by name. At least with only four dragons, they did not need names to know that it was Bashful they were talking about.

Hiccup gestured for Toothless to remain with Stoick, and stepped into an open area. Raising his hands, he gestured for Bashful to come closer to the ground, hovering lower and lower until finally the large basket beneath him bumped gently against the ground. Hiccup quickly undid the four buckles that held the straps in place, letting the basket settle completely, and waved Bashful down beside it.

As Bashful landed, Hiccup stepped close and rubbed his nose, ran a hand up to scratch behind his ears. Bashful grunted happily and butted his nose against Hiccup’s chest, and all over again Hiccup was flattered and overwhelmed that a dragon who had been with them so short a time, who had never really been trained or domesticated, responded so well just to sweeping movements of Hiccup’s hands. He glanced back over his shoulder to see that Stoick was leading Seatrude over towards the basket, and Hiccup hastily grabbed one side of the whaleskin over the top at the same time as his father grabbed the other so they could pull it back in unison.

“We’ve brought meat, as thanks,” Stoick said once again. “Yak, mostly, and some mutton. Steel of knife-quality.”

It was far more than would be needed to make up for putting them up for a few days, and they all knew it. Hiccup could see the calculation in Seatrude’s mind, how much meat would fill the basket to the depth at which it sat, how many it would feed, how much it would add to their stores. Winter had come in hard this year, with little warning, and for all that people knew to build up their stores as best they could, there were always winters that took them by surprise.

“You need to stay, to speak to us,” said Seatrude, words carefully balanced between judgement and warning.

“It need not be long. We do not need to wait for the tides or the winds,” Stoick said. More advantages of the dragons, and Hiccup watched Seatrude carefully. At least he would probably be taken for nothing more than a curious boy, he could not help but think, wryly. “And the dragons are well-fed; they will not need to eat until we return to Berk.”

“Are they safe, to be around my people?” Seatrude continued, and Hiccup knew that they were edging closer to acceptance. “We have no arenas here, as I understand is the custom on some
islands.”

“They will sleep outdoors or in, and we have brought the smaller dragons for a reason,” said Stoick. A slight flash of the blade concealed within its sheath, a warning in words, and Hiccup wondered how he could ever learn to lead in the way that his father did. “The Gronckles and the Thunderdrum will even spend their nights off this island, if you so wish. Whatever it is that will make your people most comfortable. There is no danger from the dragons unless they are attacked.”

“No danger from dragons?” She raised her eyebrows pointedly, shifting her weight and resting her left hand on the hilt of her sword in a way that was almost casual. But nothing ever was, not in moments like this, not even the way that Hiccup folded his arms on the edge of the basket so that he could watch more keenly.

“It’s been over a year,” Hiccup said, firm enough for Seatrude to whip her gaze around. “And we’ve had no deaths from dragons. No livestock lost to them.” Save the sheep that may or may not have been Mildew’s own doing, and admittedly a rumoured chicken here and there but nothing worse than foxes had been known to cause. “No ships destroyed.”

“Such a peace on Berk would be unprecedented.” There was a hint of a challenge about it, testing out to see if they might be lying, but the dragons already standing calmly beside their houses while armed men and women milled all too nearby had to be telling its own tale as well. More than that, the basket that Bashful had carried and the saddles on the dragons’ backs made them look very different than they would once have done. Animals, but not monsters.

“In their last attack, Dagur and his men spilled more blood and took more lives than the dragons have done in a year and more,” said Stoick. “He means war. We mean to prevent it.”

Seatrude reached up, and rubbed at her chin. “The meade hall. The dragons will fit through the doors, and my people will be able to return to their homes and avoid them. Will that suit?”

“They have been in our Great Hall on Berk,” Stoick replied. Except Thornado, at least, but Hiccup had no intention of bringing that up. Besides which, Thornado seemed almost aware of his role, an envoy as much as the rest of them, and on his best behaviour. “And other buildings besides. Aye, they will be fine.”

“And the others.” With a flick of her hand, Seatrude gestured to Elsa and Anna. “I don’t recognise them.”

Stoick cleared his throat, and Hiccup caught Elsa’s eye and hastily gestured for them to approach. He slipped back around the basket to beside his father, and Toothless, as Elsa gave the Gronckle one last touch on the nose to keep him in place before moving towards them, Anna hesitating for a moment before hurrying to catch up.

“Chief Seatrude,” said Hiccup, before his father had to make the introductions himself. “Anna, and Elsa, of Maruloet. Another kingdom against which Dagur has been making threats. Anna, Elsa, this is Chief Seatrude Waverender of the Quiet-Lifes, who has seen fit to accept our envoy.”

Seatrude extended her hand to them, just as Anna caught herself in the first fraction of a curtsey. It was not much, just a dip at her knees and a slight inclination of her head, but Hiccup saw the mortification flash in her eyes before she almost grabbed at Seatrude’s hand. Her first shake was a little too hard, jerky, but it almost immediately fell smoother as she seemed to remember how she must have been taught to shake the hands of Viking chiefs. It went on too long, though, until Hiccup remembered that as Queen she would not have been the one to break the handshake, and he
tried not to wince before she finally remembered herself and dropped her hand away again, flushing.

After that, Elsa’s move to bring in her left hand as well as her right seemed really quite normal. Seatrude scanned over both of Elsa’s hands, then the whole of her, lingering at the knife on her hip.

“Left-handed,” she said, as Elsa’s hands dropped away again. Elsa gave her a look of polite surprise, but Hiccup thought he might have seen flickers of true fear in her eyes. “I’ve known others shake hands the same way. Now, where is this Terrible Terror?”

Seatrude scanned around them again, as if expecting it to appear on some shoulder or another, until Anna cleared her throat and parted her cloak further to reveal Joan’s head poking out of a pouch on her hip, sniffing with some interest at the air. Another silence fell about them, this one a little more pregnant, but seeing as a single Terror had never been considered much of a problem at the worst of times it did not seem to take her more than a few blinks to gather herself.

“Well, then. Come on,” she stepped back, and jerked her head towards the centre of the village. “Let’s see you indoors, out of this cold.” It was not maternal, more an order, and the look which she gave Stoick still had sternness about it. “And you can give a full account of what led to this.”

The meade hall was a freestanding structure, though solidly built enough that the wind whistled and gusted around but did not manage to get inside. The bonfires kept it warm, slightly smoky and smelling of people and food, and it felt larger than it really was when Seatrude had it almost emptied out in order to allow the dragons inside.

It took six men to move the basket of meat and steel that they had brought, and there was still no small amount of cursing. Hiccup did feel a twinge of pride, especially when Bashful grunted and it was easy to imagine that he was asking why the humans were working in a group when he, one dragon, had been able to do the work alone.

Hiccup did his best to stick to the movements of his hands, and not have to address the dragons, knowing that their names were likely to slip out. He, Anna and Elsa were the ones to remove the saddles, right down to Toothless’s tail, while Stoick talked to Seatrude in a grim undertone and perhaps a dozen of her people rearranged benches and tables away from the dragons and stoked the fires. Ale was cracked open, and though Hiccup would have preferred water he knew that the main Island was not particularly blessed with springlines. At least it would be enough to take the taste of salt off his lips.

“Is it true?” said Seatrude, as Hiccup, Elsa and Anna joined them at the table. “The black one, it’s the Night Fury?”

“Yes,” Hiccup was not quite sure what else she might have wanted him to say. “The only one that Berk has seen.”

“He’s the fastest of them, as well,” added Stoick. There was a reason for it beyond idle boasting,
Hiccup was sure, even if he was not quite certain what that reason was yet. “They took down the Red Death – we’ll explain what that is,” he added, as Seatrude began to frown again. “Hiccup has brought notes with him, our new Book of Dragons. More complete, more thorough. There isn’t a dragon alive or thought dead that the Night Fury could not face.”

Ah. Laying ground for when they were forced to speak of the Skrill. Hiccup took rather more of a gulp of the ale as the realisation sank in, and Elsa gave him a worried glance. In truth, he was not sure what might happen when the Skrill and Toothless – inevitably, it increasingly felt – met. But he believed in Toothless all the same.

“I’ll get the Book,” he said in an attempt to gather himself, putting down his mug again. He swung around on the bench to where Toothless was lying behind them, saddlebags at his side, and withdrew the book in its safe whaleskin wrap from inside. The last thing that they needed was to have this one fall victim to the elements. His stomach was turning over as badly as ever it had on a boat, the knowledge that despite the polite words and genteel behaviour they were speaking around the edges of war, as he scooped it up and laid it out in front of them.

Seatrude’s expression shifted to one of polite interest; the Quiet-Lifes were more inclined to books than many of the other parts of the archipelago. “New bindings?” she said, as he turned it to face her.

“We’ve been working on it since last winter,” said Hiccup. “Since we realised that we can work with dragons in a different way, and that there’s more that we need to know.” And since the old one had been lost to the Red Death, but that part was perhaps less of a glowing recommendation. “It’s not just how to fight them, now – we study how they grow, what they eat, how they behave. That needs more page space than it did before. And we’ve been adding new dragons, as well.”

Joan did her best to patter across the table towards the book, but Anna gently caught hold of her and brought her back again. It earned another interested look from Seatrude, eyes flickering from Anna’s quick-moving hands to the look of vague annoyance on her face and back again. Hiccup knew that Anna was more than used to Joan’s misbehaviour, but for an outsider it must have looked strange for even a small dragon to be treated so tamely.

He cleared his throat, to draw her attention back to the new pages, new dragons. Mostly the Red Death and Toothless, but the Snow Wraith had something of a page. Hiccup knew roughly where the Red Death’s pages would be, and only had to flick through a few to reveal it, one page of writing and the other a huge drawing of the Red Death itself.

Herself. Hiccup had seen her eggs, and the horrors they had become.

Most of his drawing was done from the memory of what it had been like to see her through the glow of the volcano, although now and then there had been a flicker of what it must have been like to fight her in the air. She loomed into the page, huge head with its crest and broad, powerful shoulders, the uppermost joints of her wings just jutting into the picture. Her teeth were bared, bright against the darkness of her mouth and the dark rock against which he had drawn her, and her three right eyes were set straight ahead of her, onto the small figure of the Viking standing lonely at her feet. That was all fancy; there had been no moment that he saw when any one person had stood before her like that with axe and shield, and it certainly had not been his father, as the figure undoubtedly appeared to be. But it gave a sense of her size, of just what she had been.

Seatrude fell quiet for a moment. “This is what you called the Red Death.”

“A land-dwelling relative of the Green Death,” said Hiccup. “It was on Dragon Island, and was the reason that the dragons attacked Berk in such numbers.”
“And this is how you won your peace.” She tapped the page with one nail, voice still somewhere between a question and a statement.

“Part of how,” replied Stoick, before Hiccup had to work out whether to say yes or not. “It was Hiccup and the Night Fury that took down this beast;” Seatrude looked up sharply, first at him and then round to Hiccup with more amazement than she had even shown when he had first arrived. “It stopped the attacks from the dragons, aye, but it would not have given us what we have now. We work with them,” he nodded to Thornado and the Gronckles, “and in return, they work with us. As you have seen, they brought us here tonight.”

Seatrude looked down at the book again, and nodded. “The Red Death won you a peace, you mean, but your peace is something different. I can see that.”

“We are aware that it is strange,” said Stoick. “And we would not have brought it to you unless we had to. But unfortunately, we have to.”

Sitting back in her chair, Seatrude drained her mug of ale, and set it down heavily on the table. “Aye,” she said, finally. Tiredness had crept into her voice, and Hiccup found himself tracing the shadows beneath her eyes and the streaks of grey in her dark hair. “That Dagur was a menace from when he claimed chiefhood.”

“Some time before this spring,” Stoick prompted.

“Late summer, right after a howling storm, was when we heard of it,” said Seatrude. “Arrived on our shores with blood still under his nails from killing his father. Said he expected tribute from us, not trade, since we wouldn’t be of any use to him as an army.”

“You must have known that this meant he was seeking to make an empire again,” Stoick said. He leant his elbows on the table, but his posture and his voice softened, and Hiccup had the sense of the Chief slipping back into being a leader, just a person who had found themselves with so many depending upon them. “Emperors demand tribute, not fellow chiefs.”

“Believe me, we’ve known that since their last empire. Osvald knew he had the better of us in trade, but he kept it to a treaty to say we’d support each other in war. Their swords for our fish, truth be told.” She poured herself another mug of ale from the large jug that had been set beside them, without needing to cross to the barrel or calling any of her men from the far end of the hall. They were out of hearing, Hiccup noted, and had to admit to being grateful that he, Elsa and Anna were still privy to the conversation. “But then again, what has he asked of Berk?”

“He has not made his demands yet,” said Stoick. “But his intentions include the deaths of those of us who ride dragons, as Hiccup has shown us how to do, and mine besides.”

“Hmm. Your chiefhood is by birth, not by the sword.” She nodded, then turned to Anna and Elsa. “What about your land? Maru…loet? Why have you been sent with Berk’s Chief and Heir?”

There was a definite sense of title about the word Heir, and it made Hiccup want to cringe all the more. But he knew that there was a challenge to Seatrude’s words, that she was testing the newcomers who were so clearly young and whose accents she had probably already taken in, and he was glad that both Anna and Elsa had been willing to be quickly coached in how to speak.

It was Anna who replied, with the poise of a Queen and an awful lot of practice saying the word Maruloet. “Maruloet’s leader inherits their title,” she replied. “We are here because we both speak good Northur.”
“Your native tongue is different, then.”

“Yes,” said Elsa, in crisp Marulosen. “It is quite different from yours.”

Hiccup cracked a smile at Elsa’s perfectly straight face, the low rounded tone of her words that made them sound so elegant when placed beside Northur. seatrude’s nod was part-acknowledgement, but perhaps part impressed as well, another piece of their carefully constructed story checking out.

“Not one I’ve heard before,” she said. “Further west than Berk?”

Anna nodded. It was true enough, Hiccup supposed, since Berk was not on the westernmost coast of the island.

“And under threat from Dagur as well.”

“He wants to outdo his predecessors, I think,” said Hiccup.

“You’re allies, then?” she turned back to Stoick. “Because if they have a treaty with you, then I’d rather see the one who signed it.”

They had a treaty with Arendelle which Anna was supposed to have signed and whose name had been forged, and were still waiting on response from the wildlings. It was a mess, Hiccup had to admit. “We are only in the early stages,” said Stoick. “We have spoken, to acknowledge our shared enemy, and there are more talks to come this winter. Elsa and Anna are the representatives.”

Another grunt, but the tone of it was less begrudging than before. “So what is it that you want of us, then? You know that we can’t provide you swords, and I doubt that you came looking for fish if you’ve that much yak meat to spare.”

Stoick folded his hands on the table. “Information,” he said. “We need to know what the Berserkers have been done in the last year and a half. And in return, we will be the first to raise our sword against them, and return them to what they were.”
“As soon as Ashblade left viking, we kept a wary eye,” Seatrude admitted, once she had called for more ale for them all. Hiccup had done his best to be sure that both Anna and Elsa would have the context for whatever Seatrude might say, but had promised to answer any other of their questions come evening. “Osvald had her treating with us, regularly. Didn’t make much secret that he’d admired Berk under Hulking and then Stoick,” she added, with a nod to Anna and Elsa, “and he’d ruled the better part of fifty years without anyone being able to best him by the sword. We were all quite sure he was grooming her to succeed him before old age finally took his strength, and she had a respect for a female chief that his son sure didn’t.

“But she’d have to go viking before she could do that. She waited to her twentieth summer, perhaps her one fool move.” Seatrude shook her head, and drummed her fingers against the table. “She told me she had plans to return in a year and a day, if she and her people had to wait out the last of it on a nearby island.”

“Did she head south, as she’d planned?” said Stoick. “She said she wanted to sail the whole year, not have to winter.”

“No. Don’t know if she changed her mind, or if it was to fool her brother, but she told me she was heading north in search of something. Said that she knew a way through those currents which are supposed to be impassable. I had my doubts, but,” a shrug, “she’d been on a boat since before she could walk, she’d find a way through or turn back safe.

“Within half a moon that she’d been gone, Dagur turned up on our shores. Said he’d become chief, put emphasis that he’d done it by the sword and not inherited. Made his demands, fish and fealty, and made a show of force.” At that, at least, Seatrude half-smiled. “We’ve seen more force than his. It’s the insanity that’s got me worried.”

“You say that this was the summer?” said Stoick.

“Yes. Just after the summer harvest.”

Stoick shook his head. “We were still in search of Dragon Island then. We did not see Dagur until the spring, by which time he must have been well-established.”

“Very much so. And claiming fish from us besides.”

“Other islands?”

“I asked what I could, when I oversaw the deliveries to their shores. Spoke to some of the women they had gutting the fish and mending the nets,” she added, with a pointed tilt of her heart and darkening of her voice. “More and more of their fishing boats are crewed by women, to free up their men for the swords, or to be training their boys. But they’ve gone to the Waterlands in search of men, and were talking of heading to the mainland to buy swords for a while. Intending to betray them some way down the line, I have no doubt; they’re spending their silver on iron, and they won’t be rich for long, that’s for sure. Not sure quite how they plan it, but…”

It was becoming clear that Dagur had been working at gathering an army for longer than they had thought. Hiccup caught his father’s eye across the table, and felt a terrible cold creep down his
“He was watching in spring,” said Hiccup. “When he came to sign the treaty again, he wanted to see whether he would find us likely allies for when he went to war.”

“And what did he find?” said Seatrude.

This time, it was Elsa that Hiccup looked at, although he immediately regretted it as his brain was dragged back to the farce that the visit had been.

“At the time, we remained the allies that he expected,” Stoick said, mercifully. “And we did not tell them about the dragons.”

“At the time?” Seatrude was no fool, could not have been and remained chief for a good decade now. The Quiet-Lifes’s manner of battling for power was more civilised than most, a duel to first blood only and a game of Maces and Talons played before as many people as they could gather.

“Come autumn, we met again,” Hiccup admitted. “Dagur found out about the dragons, and he decided that Berk had betrayed him. That was when he declared war against us. Perhaps… three moons ago, now. Then a little under two months ago, he took control of Outcast Island—”

“And made a preliminary attack on Berk,” Stoick finished. “We held them to Outcast Island, and inflicted casualties upon them, but as soon as the weather clears we have no doubt they will return. We wanted to know whether there were signs here that he meant to winter elsewhere.”

“From the sounds of things, he might well have meant to winter on Berk,” Seatrude said grimly. She wrapped both of her hands around her empty mug, fingers broad and scarred, tattoos reaching down to her right wrist. Tattoos were more prominent in this part of the Archipelago, Hiccup knew that, though they were much less common on Berk.

“Quite possibly,” said Stoick.

“The last fish that we sent for the winter was received by Vorg. He used to be a captain in Dagur’s fleet, not sure whether he fell out of grace or not to be left behind. But the others were answering to him.”

Then, most likely, Dagur had indeed been planning to conquer Berk and use their stores to feed his men for the winter. Hiccup had talked to him on Dragon Island about how well Berk was doing for supplies, and the guilt pooled in his stomach that not only had it been that day that Dagur decided to attack Berk, but it had guided more of his plans as well.

“So,” Seatrude continued. “They’re stuck on Outcast Island, then. Will they be able to survive the winter?”

“Outcast Island has survived for long enough. There might be sicknesses that sweep through them, but they’ll survive well enough.”

Once again, Seatrude filled her mug, then pushed the jug towards the rest of them pointedly. The ale was very weak, and bitter, but it was still better than nothing and Hiccup suspected he would have to get used to it for however long they were on the Islands. She sipped, eyes panning over them contemplatively, then shifted to lean on one arm of her chair.

“Now, then, if you’re planning to ask to stay for the night,” her stare hardened again, levelling on Stoick, “what is it that you’ve not said? I’ve been honest with you and yours, Stoick the Vast, but I can hear the gap in your words as clearly as I can hear the words themselves.”

Hiccup did his best not to give his father a look of alarm, his left hand rising from his lap to reach
back towards Toothless. He heard the silken shift of Toothless’s scales, not springing to his feet but moving far enough to be coiled for readiness.

But Stoick did not look surprised. He set down his own mug, and settled a steady gaze on Seatrude. “You’ll understand why I did not tell you at first, when I say that they have a Skrill again.”

Silence fell. At least, it felt that way, although Hiccup could still hear the popping of the fires and the low talking of the men at the far end of the Hall and, it seemed, his own heart hammering in his chest. Seconds passed, then Seatrude let out a long slow hiss of a breath and leant back in her chair, bringing up one hand to press her fist against her lips.

“When I was a child, the worst stories of the winter were what the Skrills had done to these lands,” she said, voice turned hoarse. “There are standing stones cracked from the blows of Skrills.”

“Aye,” said Stoick. “Berk is hardly the land to have forgotten them either.”

“You’ve seen it?” she said. Sadness flickered in Stoick’s eyes as he looked over to Hiccup.

“Yes,” Hiccup said. “We have. Alvin said it had been frozen which… I think was the truth. It had scars showing that it had been harnessed before, by the same methods.”

“One trained Skrill is not an army’s worth,” Stoick added, with a hint of warning. “No matter who holds its chains. And while the winter holds, they will not be able to reach us. We were concerned for here, or further east or south, where the waters might be clear enough for them to try to act against others. Dagur’s absence, the lack of a message of victory, must have been noticed on Berserker Island.”

“Yes, but they’ve not told us of it,” Seatrude replied. She sighed, again. “I’m sorry I don’t have more information that might be of help to you, Stoick. You could try speaking to the Waterlands, or the Mystery Isles, but the Waterlands were talking of pledging swords to him, and even Vor turns her eyes from the Mystery Isles. If Dagur has treated with them, good luck to him; they’re as likely to betray him as help him.”

“There is a reason that we came to your lands first,” said Stoick. “And as you can see, we have not brought gifts for more than one land. But believe me, your words have been of great help to us.”

Seatrude grunted, sounding rather less convinced of her own helpfulness. Hiccup would be the first to admit that he needed some time to turn the new knowledge over in his head, but his gut was saying that it was, on the whole, good news. That Dagur’s plans had probably been upset by Berk not falling at his first blow, that Berserker Island was not making some westward sweep with forces of its own.

He wondered whether Dagur had only decided to attack Berk first because of what he had seen on Dragon Island. Whether, just maybe, that could be the mistake that stopped it all.
Seatrude made sure that they were fed, hot stew that tasted a good deal better than it looked even if Hiccup did not dare to eat too much on his still-rocking stomach. The conversation between Seatrude and Stoick shifted to being less immediate, more talking about broad shifts in their islands over the past years, and it could almost have been a normal visit were it not for the tense looks still cast from the far end of the hall.

He was watching Joan try a piece of stewed carrot, pulling faces after each bite but still going back for more, when he realised that Seatrude had also fallen quiet and was watching with interest. He sat up straighter, clearing his throat, and when that did not work tapped Anna’s foot with his beneath the table. She looked up abruptly, like a child not paying attention in her lessons, and he hoped that to Seatrude it would only look like inexperience.

“You’re not Berkian,” said Seatrude, “but you handle dragons as well. How did that come about?”

“Oh, well,” Anna tucked her hair back behind her left ear, though Hiccup could not see that it had particularly come loose. “Once I came to Berk, it was a bit difficult to miss the dragons everywhere. So I just sort of gave it a go. And then we found this one,” she gestured to Joan, “when she was really little and pretty sick. Obviously she’s not so sick any more.”

Seatrude delicately speared a piece of meat from her stew with her knife, glanced at Anna as if she were unsure whether to ask for permission, then stretched out to offer the meat to Joan. Needing nothing so mundane as permission, Joan slipped out of Anna’s hands and ran over to the meat, plucking it neatly off and throwing her head back to swallow it whole.

Seatrude chuckled, and sat back again. “So the larger ones let you ride them. What about these?”

“Berk doesn’t really focus on Terrors right now,” said Hiccup, slowly. “This one is still young, it was more a matter of rescuing her. But our one from the Arena… well, he does a good job of eating up bones and scraps, by accounts. And providing entertainment in the winter,” he added, thinking of Astrid’s complaints about her father’s pranks. “But they’re pretty trainable. Oh,” he added, thinking of Arvindell’s Fire, “and she helped persuade a Marsh Tiger that we were safe to interact with.”

“But more of a pet than the others?” she said, and despite the light tone of her voice Hiccup could hear her working to put the pieces together.

But Hiccup could not think to describe Toothless, Meatlug, even Hookfang or Thornado, as somehow something lesser, or at least less close, than Joan. Joan might sleep in Anna’s bed, but Hiccup had a more than occasional habit of climbing into Toothess’s.

“But not quite,” he said, trying not to sound to cagy. She gave him a thoughtful look, and he suspected that he had failed.

Stoick cleared his throat. “The larger ones do not just let us ride,” he said. “They can help with lifting and hauling, digging, rock-moving, many things which require labour.” They had agreed not to mention what Meatlug could do with metals, the wonder that was Gronckle iron. “And the compost is surprisingly usable.”

Again, the image of giant cabbages rose unbidden in Hiccup’s mind, and he had to cover a smile in grabbing Joan before she tried to investigate Seatrude’s bowl further.

Unfortunately, there was not much that any of them could do to prevent conversation from turning to Maruloet, what the kingdom was supposedly like and how it had come to be treating with Berk. Mercifully, their story seemed to hold together well, and Hiccup hoped that it seemed natural
enough for all four of them, not just Elsa and Anna, to step in and answer questions at times.

“You know, there was a strange tale this spring,” said Seatrude, once all of them had eaten and as Joan was contentedly licking out the bowls. She fixed her eyes on Hiccup, the stormy grey-blue with which she shared her name. “Rumour on Berserker Island was that you had married some girl from the west.”

Hiccup felt his cheeks growing hot, and couldn’t quite meet anyone else’s gaze, but at least they had guessed that story might have spread as well. “Elsa was already on Berk at that time, and she was staying as part of our household. Dagur…”

“Made some assumptions, I’m sure;” she cut him off, sounding mercifully amused. “Never was the best reader of folks.” She clasped her hands loosely on the table. “Speaking of households, there is enough space for you all to sleep under my roof, if you prefer, but I’m afraid that one of you will have to take the upper attic space. We’ve one room we keep for envoys and guests, and Bjornside has gone south, sailing, for a while.”

Though Hiccup would not have dared bring up the edge to her voice, Stoick frowned, and did not hesitate in speaking. “I’ve never known your island to go viking.”

Seatrude’s lips pressed tightly together. “If he’d stayed, he’d have sought Dagur’s head. Mjorning was sailing anyway, we’re hoping this will cool Bjornside’s blood some.”

Unlike Berk, the Islands of the Quiet Life did not inherit their title. Some day, Seatrude would be challenged, but there would be no reason for it to be Bjornside. Mercifully, he had not seemed to resent Hiccup for the fact that Berk did, unlike some chiefs’ children, and did not torment him on the couple of occasions that they did meet. Being some seven years older had probably also helped.

“In any case,” said Seatrude, pressing onwards again. “His room is free. And the upper attic is clear as well, as good as any loft. I can find rooms elsewhere, if it’s not sufficient.”

“That’s fine,” said Hiccup. “I’ll take it.” He strongly suspected that he would have more luck with persuading Seatrude to let a dragon into her attic than into her son’s room.

He did not have the time to raise that, though, before Seatrude nodded. “Very well. Of course, that does not answer the matter of the dragons. They can stay in here, but I’ll need one of you here early to lead them aside so that my people can enter, and most likely there will need to be a guard overnight.”

“I don’t know about the guard,” said Stoick, with apology in his tone, “but I assure you they do not need anywhere so grand as this hall. A barn, an unused house, even a cave. They may be less wild than most, but they are still dragons, after all.”

“Including the small one?”

“Theoretically fine,” Hiccup said, “but she can escape from a closed room and prefers to act as a bedwarmer, so you may need some luck in trying.”

Seatrude eyed Joan, who was nibbling delicately on her claws. Or at least, it would have looked delicate if not for her permanently boss-eyed expression. “Well, at least she doesn’t shed, I suppose.”

She did, albeit scales not fur, but at least it was less often now that she was about half-grown. Hiccup held his tongue. Joan did not look as if she was going to be ready to shed any time soon, at least. “And, ah,” he half-cleared his throat, half-coughed, “Toothless is used to being in my room.
He can’t fly alone, unlike the other dragons, and…”

“They’re more inseparable than twins,” said Stoick, before Hiccup could quite put together a way to phrase it. He gave his father a look of deadpan annoyance, but Seatrude gave a single tight bark of laughter.

“Now there’s an image,” she said, with a shake of her head but a smile all the same. “And this hasn’t got your house burned down yet?”

Hiccup could not help feeling a little affronted on Toothless’s behalf. Before Hiccup had even woken up after the fight with the Red Death, Toothless had been in his room with no signs of difficulty, knowing without being told just how flammable the wooden floor would be. It was not until the slate had been brought in that he had breathed down fire for the heat on which to sleep at all.

Then again, when you were naturally capable of breathing fire, it was probably important to know instinctively what was flammable and what was not.

“No deaths to dragons, and no houses lost to fire,” said Stoick.

“In your room, then,” Seatrude accepted. “Very well. I’ll see to finding somewhere on the edge of town for the others. Come on, let’s get you settled in for the night, I doubt that riding can be much easier than sailing.”

“We’re not dead,” Hiccup mumbled, flopping onto his back on the bed. It wasn’t much, just a cot in the attic with some blankets hastily put over it, but gods it was a bed and an awful lot better than a stony cave floor. “Thank you, Odin, we’re not dead.”

Toothless came and rested his head on Hiccup’s lap and stomach, effectively pinning him down. He huffed, and Hiccup made a half-hearted attempt to wave away the smell of dragon breath but could not even particularly bring himself to care. There was a sort of hysterical lightness in his chest, relief and disbelief in a strange sort of combination, and even the knowledge that Ashblade might not be where they thought and that Dagur potentially had other allies could not quite dampen it.

They had stood before another village, before another chief, and the dragons had been, at least for now, accepted.

He almost wondered when he was due to wake up.

“Whaddya think, bud?” he said, propping himself up on his elbows. “You good to share your room with a few crates and sacks for the night?”

Toothless rumbled, tangible more than audible, and Hiccup smiled and stroked his forehead.
“Yeah, me too.”

The stairs creaked faintly, and he nudged Toothless aside so that he could sit up, in case it was one of the Quiet-Lifes. Instead, it was his father, also looking distinctly relieved and with his helmet tucked under one arm to run one hand through his hair.

“Hey, Dad.”

“Hiccup.” Stoick paused at the top of the stairs, far enough back that Hiccup did not get a crick in his neck while looking up. “You did well today.”

He wasn’t sure whether the heat in his chest was just comfortably warm, or whether it was starting to burn. “I learned chiefing from the best,” he said, weakly.

He couldn’t quite read his father’s expression. “What you did today wasn’t something that had precedent, Hiccup. It was the first time we’d taken dragons to others.”

It still felt a little strange sometimes to hear words like that from his father’s lips. To hear the Chief there, the man who negotiated treaties and signed them, and not the purely physical warrior that Hiccup had seen for so long. He wondered how much he had missed, in the years when he had not really been Stoick’s heir.

“I guess I learned some of what not to do when Dagur found out,” Hiccup admitted. “Lying to other islands… isn’t really an option, unless we want them to be angry further down the line.”

Justifiably angry, he was starting to think. Whether looking at the dragons as another ally or as a potential weapon, he could see why it was worrying; if Berk found out that one of their allies had been deliberately hiding a dozen new warships, or if they discovered that an ally had made an alliance with the Outcasts despite knowing Berk’s enmity with them, Stoick would be rightly furious.

Perhaps it was a good thing that Berk was isolated, then. They did not have visiting islands every few months, only infrequent appearances by the Bog Burglars and, previously, the annual meetings with the Berserkers. Arendelle was another matter, that had become very clear. But they had the choice of how and when they interacted with other islands, the knattleikr ball in the hands of their team, and Hiccup wondered whether maybe, when this matter with Dagur finally managed to be over, he could talk to his father about opening up the talk of dragons to other islands.

“It seems so,” Stoick said. He sounded… sadder, more tired, than he had done before Seatrude not all that long before. “I would not that the Berserkers forced our hand like this, but at least this has been managed well. And Seatrude, at least, I trust not to speak to other Chiefs about this.”

It settled in Hiccup’s gut, all over again, what it had to mean. Two great shifts to the delicate balance of the Archipelago at once: Dagur’s bid for power, and Berk popping up like a cork freed from the weight of the long-standing battle with the dragons.

Stoick had said it to Seatrude as if it were a mere example of peace, but no deaths to dragons and no homes lost meant so much more. It meant no lost hands, feet, cracked skulls, blindness; it meant more food than they could store, more undamaged weapons than they could wield, more standing houses than they could fill. And that was even without mentioning the terrible force that the dragons had been, when they had attacked Outcast Island and held over a hundred people captive with just half a dozen of them.

He understood a little more why the Berserker Empire had been so strong. In the wrong hands, the
power that Berk had suddenly found itself with could have done terrible things.

“We’ll stop them, Dad,” he said. “It sounds like we’ve already broken the first step of Dagur’s plan, and his people on Berserker Island or elsewhere won’t be able to act without his say. As long as we deal with them before the seas open fully, before they can get orders back here again… it’s just them we have to worry about.”

But Stoick leant back against the wall, still frowning. “Dagur was not meant to be Chief, but I have no doubt that he will have watched his father closely, and Osvald was a better tactician than this. I fear that Dagur may have left orders with his men, to attack other islands in this area. The Quiet-Lifes,” he nodded vaguely towards the town, on the far side of the sloping ceiling-roof with its small shuttered window, “were the first part of Dagur’s empire, not the Outcasts. Even if they acceded to him, they did so because of the threat.”

Survivors. He thought of Elsa, and what she had done; he thought, with a sick jolt, of Alvin, willing to hand over Berk to Weselton in return for weapons to fight the dragons in their worst years. But there was no judgement in Stoick’s voice when he spoke of the Quiet-Lifes and the political position which they had long taken.

“The only way to be sure would be to visit the other islands,” Hiccup said, and even as the words left his lips he knew that it was not possible. They did not have the time to run back and forth from Berk for the meat and offerings that would make such visits easier. They had been grandiose with the Quiet-Lifes, in a way, and even with their excellent stores it would not be an option for every island. And it would, of course, expose the dragons to every land, including ones which could be hostile to them.

It was no surprise when Stoick shook his head. “No. We cannot defend the whole Archipelago from Dagur’s swords. Once we have dealt with him, if we discover there have been other islands affected, we can go to their aid if they need it.”

“You asked about Ashblade,” said Hiccup. “You agree that we should find her?”

“I think that it is worth our time, as long as it does not endanger us,” Stoick said. “You can talk to Bucket, have some good likenesses drawn or painted. Seatrude or her men may have a better description of what arms she was carrying, or how she had taken to wearing her hair, if it has changed. But north is worse for sailing or flying, if the storms come in—”

“Dragons still have an advantage over boats,” said Hiccup. “We can land on any rock to sit out the worst storms, and won’t be wrecked on shores.”

“I don’t like putting you and your riders in danger,” said Stoick, more baldly than Hiccup had anticipated, and for a moment it left him speechless. “I never like to risk any of my people in this way, especially not when all of you have already faced so much.”

“We’ll be training a class of the adults after Snoggletog.” It wouldn’t be the same, they would not be as good as Hiccup and the other riders were, but at least they would be able to fly. And it would be better for the adults, who would at least have fought before, to face this sort of thing than it would be to expect Speedifist, Wartihog and Clueless to be able to fight. That was the problem with the academy, Hiccup supposed; it did not teach them how to deal with humans, while the old arena had been focused on dragons but still gave people the skills that they needed to fight humans as well. “And maybe… well, we know that Barf and Belch are large enough to tow a ship. The Scauldron could, as well. But it only gets people there, it makes it difficult to evacuate if something does go wrong.”
They had seen that, all so clearly.

“They need to be smarter than Dagur,” said Stoick. “And I do not see us struggling with that.”

It should have been reassuring, but Hiccup knew that Dagur had already fooled them once. He smiled, knowing that it did not reach his eyes. “I think that should be manageable. Are Anna and Elsa settled in?”

“Aye, the room’s plenty large enough for them. I’m not sure what Seatrude thinks of them or their position, but…”

Stoick shrugged. Seatrude was giving them equal weight and rank as she was Stoick and Hiccup, that much was clear. Perhaps there was an irony that she was treating Anna with something close to what she deserved, as Queen, while on Berk Anna was still just ‘Elsa’s sister’ to all of them, including the riders. She had said that she would rather have that than watch them bow and scrape and generally make fools of themselves at uncomfortably early hours of the morning, but it still did not sit right somehow.

Hiccup almost made a joke about having a larger bed made, then realised that there would not be room for it in the old workshop anyway.

“Anna knows the rules and niceties,” he said. “She just needs to get back in the swing of using them. I mean, she’s been hanging around with the riders all autumn.” He ruffled Toothless’s flaps. “We don’t make for the most refined of company.”

Vikings in general probably didn’t, but from what Hiccup remembered of his meeting with Anna when they were twelve and thirteen, she had not been great at remembering her etiquette even then. At least she only had to worry about Viking standards, he supposed, and not southern ones.

“We’ll be breakfasting with her and Slate tomorrow.” Probably seeing Hiccup beginning to frown, he added; “Orphan lad who runs errands and does chores while she’s chiefing. But she says that there’s already interest in the dragons, and we may have to speak to people about them. She asks if we can do that tomorrow afternoon, then there’ll be something of a meal – not a full feast, mind – in the evening. The morning after that, it will be good to be heading home.”

At least on the way back they could push on for the last few hours, even if it meant landing in the dark. They would not have to scout out a landing spot, nor worry about looking moderately fresh and fit to be seen on their arrival. Although Stoick would probably not go so far as to admit that they could all but land, remove the saddles from the dragons and fall into their respective beds, Hiccup was perfectly aware that it was an option.

Four days was not long, not matter how much it might seem it at times. Truth be told, it was a fantastically short time to be able to visit another island and return, shorter than they could even reach Arendelle by boat. A storm could come and go from Berk in that time, certainly, but not the worst ones of the sort about which Stoick would be particularly worried.

“A day and a half.” Hiccup shrugged. “I’m sure we can manage that. Anna and Elsa can’t be worse than I am for finding trouble, after all.”

For a moment, he thought that the joke had fallen completely flat, then Stoick gave a faint chuckle. “Aye, there’s that.”

“I mean,” Hiccup rapped the pottery bowl of water beside the bed, “I did spend a little too long wondering whether letting Toothless breathe fire on this would make it explode, because I have a
feeling that I am not going to enjoy going back to washing in cold water in the morning, but it’s probably a risk that it would be better not to take. And I do not want to have to explain to Seatrude why I’m asking for a metal bowl for water.”

“Probably for the best.” The tone was back, by then, indulgent father swelling through from behind the chief, and Hiccup knew that the glance he gave Stoick was still childishly hopeful in some ways. “Go on,” Stoick said, “get some sleep, and I’ll see you come morning. Without any risk of being woken by a Monstrous Nightmare, for once.”

“Don’t say that too much, or I’ll think about moving here.”

Chapter End Notes

The various islands mentioned from this chapter are from the book series.
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

Again, my apologies for this chapter being late in the day. Work continues apace for me.

Content notes that this chapter gets heavier psychologically, going into mental health issues (without, of course, having the words for it that we’d have nowadays) including self-hatred, grief, and depression. Because while some characters show their pain early on... some bottle it up for too long, before it all comes exploding out.

On that note, shoutout to Ozymandias42, who called a full 28 chapters ago that something was going wrong on that front.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Of course, Hiccup’s wild optimism about things proved to be completely unjustified. True, breakfast was quiet and unspectacular, and it did not surprise him to learn that Seatrude wanted to be shown how to meet the dragons and asked whether it would be possible to teach her people the same. Hiccup and Stoick had known before even flying out that, true to their name, the Quiet-Lifes with knowledge of dragons would only be likely to use it to avoid conflict, and Hiccup was more than happy to show Seatrude and a few representatives from larger families how to treat wild dragons in a way that would let them know violence was not meant.

He was really quite optimistic by the time that he cut back to Seatrude’s in the early afternoon, realising that he had left his bag of dragon nip there. It was snowing enough to buffet him sideways, and he grabbed at Toothless’s saddle for support, but the path to Seatrude’s house was gravel and easier than most things beneath his foot. He was looking forward to telling Anna and Elsa how well it had gone, as they had agreed to stay behind so that the focus was on Berk and so that Elsa’s skill with the dragons, in particular, did not raise eyebrows.

He fell against the door, cursed under his breath, and wrenched it open to a wave of cold air from the house.

And, rather more to his surprise, Elsa’s furious-sounding voice.

“– perhaps you should be grateful that I am not subject to Hiccup’s sexual magnetism.”

His first thought, absurd as it was, was that he had asked Elsa to forget that he had ever used that ridiculous phrase. But hot on its heels was the fact that he could not remember the last time that he had heard Elsa sound angry, and he wrenched the door shut before striding in the direction of her room.

“No!” said Anna back, and it was all too close to a shout for Hiccup’s liking. “Just your silly in-jokes, and your references, and stuff that I’m never going to get, am I?”

“I am my own person!” Elsa cried. Hiccup broke into a jog. “I am not yours to own!”

“And I am not some extension of you!” Anna shouted back, and yes, that was most definitely a
shout. Hiccup reached their door and flung it open to find the two of them standing on far sides of the room, both taut and bristling with anger, and the air so cold that his breath misted in front of him. It took him a moment longer to see the tears shining on Anna’s face. “I am not only here because you…”

She broke off into a sob, then looked wildly at Hiccup, who for all his intention to interrupt realised that he had not actually managed to get as far as planning what he was doing to do when he entered. Apparently, he was going to end up settling for staring helplessly, as she shoved past him and bolted from the room.

He looked at Elsa, who was wiping tears from beneath her own eyes with a shaking hand. “Go after her,” Elsa said, without pause. “Please.”

The front door slammed closed again. He had no time to think, no time to ask whether Elsa was sure or whether she needed him right then. His hand tightened on the doorframe as he tried to go through what he had seen, and as Elsa grabbed the cloak flung over the end of the bed. “It is cold. She needs to be inside. I do not. I will be…” she trailed off, and shook her head, and this time did not wipe the tears away fast enough. “Amee, melxaal!”

He could not untangle the Marulosen quickly enough to be sure of what she said, but he got the gist of it. Grateful that he had not paused to pull off his cloak or boots, Hiccup turned and ran back to the door. Toothless, still in the front room, looked at him curiously, then joined him in shouldering the door back open.

While it was far from the worst weather that Hiccup had seen, even this year, the wind was still northerly and biting-cold, and the stray wet flakes of snow were certainly not present. It did not take any skill to spot Anna, her hair a telltale shade of golden-red, and run as best he could after her.

As he got closer, though, it took all of his restraint not to curse, as he saw her bare feet, and realised that she was only in a thin shirt, skirt and leggings. He would like to have credited most Arendellens with having more sense than that, despite the jokes that Vikings tended to make at southerners’ expense, but it really was impressively stupid.

He caught up to her, as she was striding firmly away from the house but he suspected he had no idea where she was going, and swung round in front to grab her by both arms. “Anna!” he had to shout over the wind. Tears streaked her cheeks, and she was turning pink from the cold and the sting of the air. “Anna, come back, come on!”

She tried to shove out of his arms, but he kept hold as another sob shook her. “Let go of me!” she said, in Arendellen.

He swapped over to Arendellen with her. “Come on, it’s too cold out here. You need to come back inside.”

Making a sound that was half-growl, half-whimper, Anna swatted futilely at his shoulder, then fell still and clutched both hands to her face. Her shoulders were still shaking, though he couldn’t hear her over the wind, and he glanced down at her feet and winced again at the sight of them bare against the snow.

“Come on.” He wrapped an arm around her shoulders; she vaguely tried to shake him off, but only for a moment before allowing herself to be led back towards the house.
She said something that had the word *can’t* in it, and Elsa’s name.

Gods, he had no idea what he was doing. His heart was racing in his chest and all that he knew clearly was that he needed to get Anna back inside again before she fell prey to the cold as much as he almost had in the swamps. He could see a figure in the distance that he suspected was Elsa, and part of him wanted her back all the same in the hope that she might know what to do.

They had been fighting. He could barely wrap his mind around it; sure, he had seen Anna and Elsa disagree about things, but that had all been disappointed looks and quiet words. He had thought that it was settled, thought that they had talked things out between themselves after their disagreement over Heather. Had assumed that he would not be able to live in the same house as them without noticing if something was still wildly amiss.

Apparently, he had been wrong.

He tried to get the door open, and was inordinately grateful when Toothless used his head to lever it open wild enough for Hiccup to bundle Anna through the door and stumble through himself. Toothless was barely in behind them before the wind slammed it shut, and Toothless hopped out of the way with an offended look.

At any other time, it might have been funny. But Anna was shivering even in between the sobs that she blurted out, and Hiccup concentrated on steering her closer to the fire. At least until she threw his arms off her, more violently this time, and wiped her sleeve across her eyes before fixing her gaze on him.

Hiccup opened his mouth to say something, but was caught off-guard by the anger still pouring from her gaze.

“You!” her voice cracked, but her Arendellen held on. “Why didn’t you ask *me* about a house?”

For a moment, he looked at her in complete bewilderment. “What?”

“A house! You ask Elsa whether she wants a house, and neither of you even bother to ask me before she answers!”

It had been the better part of two moons, and it took him a moment to remember that he had made the offer at all. “What in Thor’s name does a house have to do with it?” said Hiccup.

“It’s not the house!” said Anna, with a fresh trickle of tears down her cheeks. “Don’t you get it? It’s the asking. I probably would have said no, as well, it’s not like we could handle a whole house between the two of us, but you didn’t even ask! Neither of you asked!”

“I’m sorry,” he said quickly, with a pang of guilt. It had been so offhand, and Elsa’s response so immediate, that he had not even thought about it at the time. “I – I know it’s too late to ask now, but I’ll do my best to remember.”

Perhaps it all came down to communication, as he had said to Astrid. More than ever that he needed fixing.

But Anna just gave another furious growl. “You *don’t get it*. Of course you asked her, it’s *her* that matters, it’s *her* that counts. You’re her brother, she says as such, and you’ve got all your little in-jokes and you know each other so well. And I’m just her hanger-on, in her room because she’s already here, in her–”

“Hey – hey!” Hiccup tried to balance gentleness with urgency in his voice, and wasn’t sure how
well he succeeded. Anna clutched at her bowed head, fingers digging into her scalp as her words became increasingly breathless and clogged with tears. He tried to take hold of one arm, even as she shook him off. “I didn’t offer you sanctuary in Berk just because of Elsa, all right? I would have done it for you, you’re my friend.”

She let out a brittle laugh. “A friend who you met three times, for three days at a time? Mothers and Fathers, I thought of you as my friend because you called me by my name when you wrote to me, did you know that? I got dozens of letters after my parents died, and it was all Your Majesty this and Your Majesty that, and you used my name and they said it was because you were a viking and didn’t know any better but I believed that it was because we were friends.”

“You are my friend,” Hiccup said. “You were my friend from the beginning, Anna, when we ran away from your nanny and climbed out of windows and played with swords. Of course you were my friend.” He didn’t say how short on friends he had been as well, how he had clung to their occasional meetings and their rare letters that had made him work furiously on his Arendellen.

Another sob escaped her. “But Elsa’s your sister. And I’m just her sister, I’m not your sister, I’m just this thing that comes attached to her and you were both happy before I was here.”

“Anna, Anna, I told you from the beginning how much you mean to Elsa,” he said quickly. She shook her head, but at least let him keep his hands on her arms. “It was – it was bad, Anna, Elsa was getting better but it was slow going. And you lit her up like a sunrise, you really did.”

“Lit her up?” Anna looked up at him, at least, but tears were still streaming down her face, her nose was dripping, and her arms were shaking from how hard she was pressing her fingers against her skin. “She – she’s been avoiding me, Hiccup. She’s been lying to me.” Her voice broke to a breathy whimper. “I don’t – I don’t want her to lie to me, I don’t want her to have to lie to me, I’m sick of people lying.”


At least Anna dropped her hands away from her head, but it was to give Hiccup another horrified, betrayed look. “You knew,” she accused. Even if it was true, Hiccup couldn’t help but feel the tone was sharper than needed. “You knew that she was visiting Heather, when she said she was going for those walks. You knew that she was lying to me.”

“I am not going to snitch on either of you,” he said, one word of Northur dropping in where he simply did not know an Arendellen word less terrible than betray. “Come on, you must think better of me than that.”

“Did she tell you?” Anna demanded.

He sighed. “No, I… I figured it out. From some of the things that she said about how she had spoken to Heather about things, which had to be a time when I wasn’t there. It had to be those evenings. Did – did she tell you?” From the shock still dripping from Anna’s voice, that was his main suspicion. “Today?”

Anna nodded, and her face crumpled again. Hiccup desperately wanted to be able to offer her a handkerchief, anything, other than her sleeve as she wiped her nose with it and left snotty streaks. “She said she thought she had to lie.”

And though Elsa was not a liar by nature, Hiccup of all people knew that she was a survivor. He swallowed, and tried to pick his words carefully. “She didn’t want to fight with you over seeing
Heather. And she knew that you wouldn’t be happy about it. Even I knew that you wouldn’t be happy about it.”

“She betrayed Berk,” Anna said, stubbornly. “She sold you out and she didn’t even think to ask you for help instead of doing it. And I don’t get why you’ve all forgiven her and you’re being so… so… pally-pally with her now. And now she knows about Elsa’s magic, and, and what if she just leaves come spring and tells someone? How can you believe that she won’t just do something else that hurts Berk in order to save herself?”

“Because we’re going to have her back so that she doesn’t have to,” Hiccup said. He told himself not to be angry, that Anna had not been raised like they had to consider the willingness to fight shoulder-to-shoulder above all, and that she had not been there to see the horrors that Heather had lived through, that she had been trying to prevent.

If Hiccup had thought that handing over the Book of Dragons would have prevented her mother’s death, her father’s injury, then he suspected that he might well have done it himself.

“Anna, we’ve made our peace with what Heather did. She fought with us, she declared for Berk. She – she thought her parents’ lives were in danger, and she was right.” Not from the person that she had originally thought, perhaps, but it had come to pass all the same. “Look, I know that you weren’t there–”

“No, I wasn’t,” she snapped, and he had to admit that it was probably not the right thing to have said. “Because you wouldn’t let me go. Because I’m just some kid to you, or something, because I’m not one of your group of Riders. Because I’m not like Elsa is.”

“Because I could only have one of you, or you would be a danger to yourselves and each other,” he said flatly, hoping that perhaps laying the bare truth before her might get through. “And if I could only have one of you, then yes, it did have to be Elsa.”

For her magic, he hoped that Anna understood, not their friendship. Because Gods, the things that he had asked Elsa to do, and the things that she had needed to do, were all but unspeakable. Hiccup had asked her to go from having killed one or two people, accidentally and just to survive, to killing dozens of Berserkers in cold blood.

“And you don’t want to be one of the Riders, Anna,” he added, wearily. “Because it isn’t about riding dragons. You ride dragons, Speedifist and Wartihog and Clueless ride dragons, my father rides a dragon. But we started learning to kill dragons and ended up learning how to keep them, and Odin’s eye I do not quite know how we managed to turn it around like that.” He could feel his own tiredness seeping into his bones. He and the Riders had fought and killed and struggled, with their own people in those first moons and then with other islands since. “They aren’t all good, the things which define us.”

“But you still have a definition,” she said. His hands were around her wrists, but she had fallen still in his hold, as if she did not notice. “What am I, Hiccup? What have I ever been? Some… spare child, in case something happened to Elsa, and it’s a good thing that I was there to be a spare, wasn’t it? Like some second-best spare button that’s only there if you can’t have the original, like–”

“Anna, that’s not–”

But her eyes were wide, frantic, almost staring through him as the words continued to tumble out. “And now I’m in Berk, and I’m not even a button, I’m not even a spare to you because you didn’t need me in the first place, you didn’t need anything like me, I’m more like some horseshoe that
you keep around for luck because you don’t need it, you’ve got plenty, even Berk doesn’t have five-legged horses—"

“Anna—"

“You don’t even have horses, you have dragons, they don’t need shoes. I’m just here, eating your food and living in your house and not even doing anything. I’m not doing anything for Berk, I’m not doing anything for Arendelle, I’m just some, some beggar queen living in the blacksmith’s apprentice’s old workshop, and it’s not even my room, it’s my sister’s room and I’m just sharing it.”

He wondered when it had worn off, the heady happiness that they had shared at first just over the thought of being together and sharing a room again. Especially for Anna. From a tent or a cave in the Wildlands, even Hiccup’s old workshop probably felt like luxury to Elsa, but Hiccup knew what Arendelle Castle was like. It had carpets, and glass windows, and little pulley systems built into the walls that could move things between floors.

“I miss home,” Anna said, voice dropping and eyes falling closed again. This time, there was no anger in her voice, just the echo of sorrow again, and another wave of tears seemed to overtake her. “I miss my bed, and my clothes, and I miss speaking Arendellen, and I miss those stupid evening prayers that were so boring but which there’s nobody for now, and I can’t even say them to myself because it makes Elsa uncomfortable. And I’ve tried to talk to her about how the Mothers and Fathers aren’t the Silver Priests, and she nods and smiles, but I know that she hates it and I stopped, I can’t even talk about them anymore. I miss Hans,” her voice cracked. “I miss my fiancé and it’s been nearly half a year and I haven’t even been able to see him.

“I know that there’s nothing I can do about it, I’m just, all I can use is what you have left over in Berk and you don’t have anything left over, because you’re fighting Dagur and because you’re just Berk, you’ve never been a rich kingdom. All that I can do is wait for you to have something that I can borrow because I don’t have anything, I don’t have my advisors or my title or my troops or my horse, I don’t even have my horse and I miss her too and it’s so stupid.”

She fell to sobbing again, and Hiccup tentatively wrapped his arms around her and pulled her into a hug. Her fists came to rest against his shoulders, trembling and clenched tight, but she allowed herself to cry into the crook of his neck in ugly, snotty sobs that came with broken choking sounds. Hiccup held her as tightly as he dared, closed his eyes against the prick of his own tears, and wished that he knew what he could say, or do, to even begin to fix it.

“I’m sorry,” he said, quietly. It was the least he could say, the barest of beginnings. “I’m so sorry, Anna, I didn’t…”

He hadn’t noticed the turmoil that must have been building in her for moons. Hadn’t seen her aches and pains as she tried to fit into Berk. He was so used to being attuned to Elsa, to watching for the subtle shifts in her mood and behaviour that might warn that she was about to crack, that he had not thought that cheery, optimistic Anna might be the one slowly falling apart.

“I just want to be her sister,” she said, voice muffled by his shirt and damp. “I just want to be her sister, but I want to help Arendelle, and it’s like I can’t do either.”

He rocked slightly from foot to foot, still with his arms around her, and what success the last couple of days might have represented faded away to bitter cold inside him. It was all very well making friends with the Quiet-Lifes if he had missed things in his own house.

“You are her sister,” he said. He blinked, and saw fragments of tears in his eyelashes, but he knew
that one of them had to keep control. And Anna was too far gone. “And gods, she loves you, Anna. But if I had to count every argument I’ve had with my father, or even with Gobber… just because you’re family doesn’t mean that everything is easy. That’s what family is.”

“She’s a stranger,” Anna whimpered. “She’s my sister and she’s a stranger.”

“Then you need to get to know her again,” said Hiccup, even with helplessness still flooding him. In half a year, he had no doubt that Anna knew Elsa a lot better than she was giving herself credit for, but that at the same time it still had to hurt for Elsa to not be the person that she expected. “Come on. You can use this to clear the air. Sit down and talk about things. It’ll be easier now that you know what’s going to be said.”

He still did not know what Elsa’s side of the story was, and knew that he would have to find her and ask her before he could really know how he could help. But getting Anna calm, and letting her see a way forward again, had to be a start.

“I know she’ll forgive me,” said Anna, with a snotty sniff. “She’d forgive me anything, she forgave Berk for hunting her, she forgave you for attacking her;” again, it stung to hear, but Hiccup bit the inside of his lip until he tasted blood and did not speak out. “She forgives our parents everything, she forgives our father for sending her away, and I…” she shook her head, bumping against him. “I can’t. I can’t forgive them, how can I forgive them for letting her be banished and for not trying to bring her back? How could they let their daughter go?”

That, he did not have a full answer for. But having seen how effortlessly the Silver Priests had taken over Arendelle, he had some idea of the shape of it. “They were trying to do what was right,” he said, and could all but taste how useless an explanation it was. “They made a mistake, but they tried.”

“And Elsa forgives them,” Anna said again, more bitter. “And she forgives me for not looking for all these years, she wouldn’t even think to not forgive me. After so much has happened, she still forgives everyone, I don’t understand it.”

She had to forgive, Hiccup suspected, or she would have nothing but hatred. But he suspected that Elsa hoped as well for forgiveness for what she had done, that by extending it she might receive it in return. That, at least, was something that Anna was probably beyond understanding at that moment.

“She shouldn’t forgive me,” Anna finished. “I believed the Silver Priests and I failed her, and I’m failing Arendelle, and I’m failing Hans. And she’s better off with you for a brother than with me for a sister, because you’ve saved her, and I just take up space in her room and I can’t even protect her like I want to.”

“You’re not failing anyone,” said Hiccup. He tried to ignore the irony of the feelings of failure washing over him, as well. “I’m sorry that I didn’t come up with a better plan. And when we get back to Berk,” he added, decision solidifying in his chest, “we’re going to visit Arendelle, just you and me and Toothless, and we’re going to see what we can scout out. Even if Kristoff hasn’t come back.” He had not told Anna about what Rosa had said, either, about the Trials. Now was not the time for that. “All right? We’re going to get through this visit, and then we’re going to get back, and we’re going to visit Arendelle. We’re going to do things. We’ve got until spring, after all.”

There was a long pause, and for a moment he thought he might have said completely the wrong thing, but then Anna gave a long sniff that managed to sound somehow grateful all by itself. “Thank you,” she half-whimpered.
“It’s all right.” He had never felt more like a brother, or more like a chief, and it was terrifying.
“We’ll make it all right.”

He wished that he knew how to. The best that he could do was let Anna cry until she was spent and suggest that she sleep for a while, Joan curled against her chest and cooing and headbutting in a concerned sort of way. Trying not to let Anna think that he was hurrying to get away from her, he still tried to be as quick and efficient as he could, knowing that he needed to find Elsa as well. She had been more under control, if not calm, but she was the one who had the magic and its ability to lash out.

Shoulder still damp, he let himself out of the house again, and gave Toothless a look which was meant to be hopeful but which might have tripped over into desperate.

“Come on, bud,” he said, “think you can find Elsa for me?” Toothless might not have had as sharp a nose as Stormfly did, but Stormfly had always been one-of-a-kind in her own way. “Elsa?”

Toothless sniffed at the ground, then at the air, flaps perked right up and flicking as he looked around. Then he set off in the direction in which Hiccup had last seen Elsa going, which he hoped was a good sign. The path led them back over to the edge of town where they had first landed, to the edge of the trees, then Toothless paused and sniffed around the treeline with his tail flicking back and forth as if in irritation.

“You all right there, bud?” said Hiccup. Toothless snorted into the snow-strewn long grass at the foot of one of the trees, which was even less eloquent than usual. Hiccup glanced around, then gave up and cupped his hands around his mouth.

He supposed that the worst that could happen would be that he would be caught by a Quiet-Life shouting at trees. After the dragons, that would probably only look like a minor eccentricity.

“Elsa? Elsa!”

He paused, waiting for a responding call, but there was none. Muttering a curse, Hiccup readied himself to continue into the trees and shout again, when Elsa stepped out from between two of the trees.

She was not wearing a cloak, this time, and was barefoot as Anna had been. Her tears glittered on her cheeks, frozen, and she was rubbing so hard at her wrists that it was leaving pink marks on her skin. “I’m sorry,” she said, before Hiccup could even get a word out. “I’m sorry, I just knew that Anna needed to be inside, but she would not have come inside if I were still in there.”

“It’s fine, it’s fine,” said Hiccup quickly. “She’s inside, she’s fine. She’s calmer now.”

Elsa nodded, but it was too fast, distracted. Her right hand stayed clasped about her left wrist, but at least stilled, while her left hand began to curl in and out of fists. One chainmail miton rolled in and out of existence on her hand as she did so, and Hiccup caught his breath all over again that
something so complex and beautiful could be nothing more than distracted fidgeting for her.

“I’m sorry that I didn’t realise,” he added. Elsa’s gaze finally snapped from the ground to him, brow still furrowed and eyes almost staring straight through him. “That you and Anna were… struggling. I knew it wasn’t easy but I didn’t realise…”

He trailed off as she shook her head, though at least she did not burst into a tumble of words in the way that Anna had. “I do not know how to be a sister, Hiccup,” she said, wearily. “But I thought… we were doing well. And then today I mentioned that you had talked to me about us moving into a different house, and I had said no, and…” pain flickered in her features, and her bare fist clenched so tightly that he could not help a stab of worry that her nails would cut into her palm. “It went wrong.”

“It won’t stay wrong. I spoke to Anna, and she…” He wished that he had words, better words. “There’s something not quite right, in her head, right now. What she said, she…”

He tried to put words around it. To say that Anna did not mean it was not quite true, because it was not fair to how much everything was paining her, and she understood it well, too.

“She’s not seeing things the same way as she usually would. So when we get back to Berk, yes, we need to talk about… everything. But please don’t think this is all your fault. Some of it… isn’t anyone’s fault at all.”

Everybody knew someone who had struggled with it, from time to time. The world not looking like it normally did, he’d heard it described as, or not feeling right. Gobber certainly had experience dealing with people, and at the forge Hiccup might as well have been invisible, another tool or piece of furniture, for all of the attention people usually paid him. Although it had meant that some of the things he had learned had been highly questionable, others of them had been useful.

Elsa finally released her hand from its clenched fist, but it was only to run it distractedly through her hair and take a few paces away, then back again. “I know, and I know I should not have lied to her about Heather, I just… I did not want to have to argue with Anna just to speak to someone. I did not want to have to ask her permission to be friends with someone.”

He thought of the amount of time that he had spent sneaking out of windows to talk to her, or to fly with Toothless, and could not help but feel sympathetic. “I know.”

“But it’s like the dragons, isn’t it?” she said, sounding tired. “The lies always catch up.”

Tentatively, he reached out and rubbed her arm. Perhaps it was a sign of how far things had come that she leaned into it, instead of away, even if she closed her eyes and her lips trembled for a moment. Hiccup stepped closer and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, knowing that for the second time in not long at all he was having to comfort one of the sisters. Elsa was shorter than Anna, her head tucking slightly lower on his shoulder, and she felt both colder and more fragile beneath his hands. But she did not cry against him, or at least not that he could feel or hear, and after a moment she drew away and wiped the tracks of ice from her cheeks with the back of her hand.

“We’ll fix this,” he promised. “When we get home, we’ll sit down and talk. Or… you can talk, without me there. I don’t mean to barge in,” he added, thinking of how Anna had felt about Hiccup and Elsa being so close.

Elsa shook her head. “This is very bad timing.”
She sounded disappointed, more than anything, and it was almost enough to make him laugh at the absurdity. A smile cracked through. “I guess. But hey, it could be worse. At least we’re not all snowed in the same building for half a moon.”

Elsa’s smile looked much less true. “I am never snowed in, remember?”

“Believe me, we’re very grateful of having someone who can reach the woodshed,” he deadpanned. It put a little bit of warmth into her gaze, at least. “And that might be even more true this winter, now that we have Thornado to deal with.”

“The sea, perhaps,” she said.

“True. Even if it freezes, it’ll have some cracks in it.”

It was a conversation about just about nothing, and they both knew it, but perhaps that was what Elsa needed. That, and Hiccup’s arm still on her shoulder, aware of how cold she was even through her thin shirt, the way that her breath was not the same cloud that his was.

“Seatrude has invited us to eat in the meade hall tonight,” he said, “but you don’t have to go. You can stay with the dragons, or in my room, if you don’t want to wake Anna.”

If she did not want to face Anna, yet, but he did not say that, either. But Elsa took a deep breath, then finally looked up and looked him firmly in the eye.

“No. I will come with you. It is important, how they see us.” She swallowed. “I am not just me, here. I am Marulose.”

Whether it was lingering memories of her time as a princess, or fast learning all over again, he did not know. But it was very clear that she understood what all of them were doing by being here, what it meant and how important it might be for Berk and for their dragons. “Well, it’s a good thing that my father is here to be Berk. I think I might be a bit of a disappointment otherwise.”

This time it was a relief to see the way that Elsa’s smile softened, to that expression which rather reminded him of Gobber at times and said that Hiccup was doing something vaguely silly. “You are the one who brought the dragons,” she said.

He wrinkled his nose. “They don’t need to know that part.” Better, perhaps, to think that it was all of Berk or even to ascribe it to Stoick himself. “But they’re accepting them. It’s… maybe this was just the right island to start with. But I don’t know. It kind of makes me hope.”

“That is good,” said Elsa. But her tender smile faltered for a moment, as she looked down at herself. “I need to get fresh clothes. We should go back, before one of the Quiet-Lifes notices that I am out here like this.”

“And I promised to take dragon nip up to the meade hall,” said Hiccup, with something of a grimace. “Do you think they’d believe me if I said that I tripped, fell in a bunch of mud, and had to get changed? And that’s why I took so long?”

“It worked last winter.”

“It was true last winter.”
This is one of my favourite chapters; I wrote most of it in one sitting and it was remarkably painful and cathartic at the same time. I have to say, I've never mind mapped an argument before.

Lots of references to the outtake song More Than Just The Spare in this chapter - but as a darker take. If anyone is wondering why Anna is babbling about five-legged horses and missing buttons, it's in no small part thanks to that. The "beggar queen" is a nod to A Song of Ice and Fire.

The house offer was back in chapter thirty-seven of How to Walk in Lightning. The "sexual magnetism" line is slightly older... chapter eighteen of How to Change a Way of Life. I've been waiting to use it, let's be honest.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Hopefully the next few chapters will have some fun for the book readers among you.

The Quiet-Lifes did not seem quite so inclined to raucous celebrations as the Berkians were. True, it might have been that it was a large meal thrown together in Stoick’s honour, and not a true feast, and it was not for any seasonal event. But a yak could go a long way, and even on an average evening Berk was prone to outbursts of song, inappropriate jokes, and raucous laughter.

Hiccup wondered how much of that had been to do with living on the edge of the dragons’ realm. With death all but in sight of their shores, perhaps they threw themselves more into life.

In any case, it made the meal much easier to deal with. The top table of the hall was given over to them as visitors, along with Seatrude and a few of the same heads of households who had greeted the dragons that morning. Hiccup did his best to keep track of names, reminded himself frequently that he was not on Berk and that he should keep his explanations about dragons simple and clear, and prayed to any deity that was listening that it would not look too odd that he was sitting beside Elsa on one side of the table while Stoick sat beside Anna on the other.

There was interest in Maruloet, of course, and they told the same lies. It was starting to feel almost glib now, he could not help but feel.

Joan, by some strange stroke of luck, was on her best behaviour. Even when there was food in front of her, she stayed on Anna’s shoulder until she was invited down onto the table for people to offer her treats and tidbits. Anna perked up, though her Northur occasionally still slipped and Hiccup had to discreetly offer a word here and there.

“How many dragons does Berk have, then?” said one of the men, as the meal was coming to a close. People were starting to drag tables around to the edges of the hall, and Hiccup suspected that music and more alcohol was not all that far behind. Hiccup was pretty sure that his name was Spire, and was impressed with how casual his tone almost was. “You had quite the number of them before.”

“We’re building gradually,” said Stoick, apparently unfazed. “But steadily.”

Other than Joan, only Toothless had joined them in the meade hall, and was curled up behind Hiccup and Elsa. At a slight hand movement from Hiccup, he sat up, cocking his head and giving a low murr. It probably sounded less endearing when you didn’t know Toothless so well.

“Oh course,” Stoick continued, horn of mead firmly in hand. “There is nothing that quite matches the power of the Night Fury. But I’m sure that the legends reached this part of the Archipelago as well.”

“For a settlement that bested Skrills to meet a dragon with which it struggled,” replied Seatrude, more than a hint of amusement in her voice, “there are legends indeed. But how many are true?”

Stoick looked over to Hiccup. Well, dragons, at least, he could do. “Toothless is faster than any
other dragon we’ve come across,” he said, keeping to himself that they mercifully had not had reason to fly against a Skrill. “And nimble, as well; he keeps the tight turns even at speed. His blasts are extremely powerful – enough to destroy a siege tower.”

“We may be speaking from experience,” added Stoick, just slightly wry. “They all have their quirks.” Hiccup watched people chuckle and lose interest in continuing the questioning, and tucked the thought away.

“Looks like the music is close to starting up,” said Seatrude, peering over Hiccup’s head and into the hall behind him. “Do you dance?”

It took Hiccup a split second to realise that he was being addressed. “Not unless you’ve got the pegleg polka on the Islands…” he said carefully. “And I’m afraid I’m only good to follow, not lead.”

Stoick only had to glance at Seatrude to communicate very clearly that he would not be strong-armed into dancing, and Hiccup felt more than a little jealous. There was nobody in the Archipelago who would be bold or foolish enough to throw Stoick the Vast over their shoulder and haul him into the dance floor, save for possibly Gobber at the end of a very long night. But by that time, Gobber would not be physically capable of it in any case.

He gave Anna what he hoped was an apologetic look, just as Seatrude’s eyes turned in that direction. “And you?”

“Uh…” Anna dragged the sound out for far too long to sound intelligent, then went pink. “I don’t really know many Viking dances. We don’t have the same... ones... in Maruloet.”

Honestly, he was surprised that she knew any Viking dances at all, and was not sure whether to be relieved or concerned that she might end up dancing before the evening was through. But he supposed that it made sense that Arendelle might teach their rulers one or two of the – probably tamer – dances of their northern neighbours.

“I do not dance, I am afraid,” said Elsa, before Seatrude could even ask her.

Considering she had been present last Snoggletog, and with her memory, it was an impressively bald lie. Unfortunately, Seatrude was smiling too warmly to look to be in the mood for a refusal. “Don’t worry, our steps are simple. None of the sword-waving that the Berserkers go in for, either.”

Hiccup had tried to suppress those memories.

“I’ll call over Lightspear, he dances well. Prefers dancing to drinking, if you can believe that of a Viking,” she added, with a nod and a quirk of a smile to Stoick and the other adults at the table. Even Hiccup found himself smiling. She patted the table, went to get to her feet, then paused and let her expression grow more serious. “Unless you’ve rules, in your land, about who you ought and oughtn’t dance with?”

“What? No. No,” said Anna quickly, and Hiccup did not have to look too hard at the way her hand clenched into a fist to suspect that she was thinking of Hans. “It’s fine.”

“Good.” Seatrude got to her feet, and strode down into the belly of the hall, calling out to some of her people. Tables and benches screeched on the wooden floors as they were pulled back, and talk was admittedly becoming rowdier and noisier as the wind outside became more of a howl around them.
Anna’s eyes went wide as a particularly large drum was rolled out, and Hiccup forcibly did not think about the fact that it could well have been dragon skin. There were other drums, though, and a horn which announced itself with a squawking sound and was given a burst of laughter in return.

He wondered how early he might be able to escape, or how much of the evening he would be able to spend introducing various people to Toothless instead. The latter, at least, would look like he was doing something useful with his time rather than just fleeing.

An older man approached their table, hair mostly white and pulled back into a sleek braid, and a crooked smile on his clean-shaven face. Bright white embroidery at the collar of his tunic shone to match, and he took the two steps to the top table with light steps that brought him into a fluid bow right at Anna’s elbow before he straightened up and extended his hand to her.

“My lady,” he said, and Hiccup caught a flicker of something too complex to easily read in Anna’s eyes. “My chief advises me that you find yourself in need of a partner for the first dance. May I offer my assistance?”

For a moment, Anna managed nothing more than looking surprised, then swung round in her seat in a manner that was more graceful than she had usually bothered with in Berk. Hiccup hoped that her words about her exile were not ringing as loud in her ears as they were in his. “You must be Lightspear,” she said, placing her hand delicately in his. “I would be honoured.”

“The honour is mine,” he replied, managing to make it sound sincere and not cloying.

Anna rose to her feet, knees together and posture regal, but if Lightspear was at all surprised then he hid it well. Nor did he hesitate over how Anna had placed her hand, over his in the southern way rather than more of a clasp, as he escorted her down the steps again to what was rapidly becoming an impromptu dance floor.

“She will be fine,” he said to Elsa, softly and in Marulosen, and was careful to use the language which meant something would be true, rather than that he merely hoped it.

“I know she will,” she replied, in the same manner but with sadness in her tone.

He patted her knee, out of sight, and was not sure what else he could say in either of their now-shared languages. For want of anything better to do, and more than aware that people were still eyeing the rest of them at the top table speculatively, he turned to one of the men still remaining at the table. The name Fullbrow rose up in his mind, although he did not know the name of the younger woman now leaning on his shoulder and speaking to him with laughter in her eyes.

Fullbrow seemed to realise that Hiccup was looking at him, and turned with a polite smile of his own. “Ah, Hiccup.” He gestured to the young woman. “This is my daughter, Dawnfall. Dawnfall, Hiccup showed us this morning how to greet those dragons Berk has brought.”

She smiled at him, red-brown curls swaying as she moved to lean one hand on the table instead. “Aye? It’s been the talk of the village, Berk appearing again, and with dragons no less. Greeting them?”

“It’s not as hard as it sounds,” Hiccup said. He turned, clicked his tongue, and gestured for Toothless to sit back up again. With a somewhat put-out rumble, Toothless did so, and Dawnfall straightened up again with fear sparkling in her eyes. He hastily stood as well. “Did you want to come round and…”

He gestured towards Toothless. He wasn’t sure how much influence the words Night Fury would
have to other islands, whether it would be worse for being even more of a legend and even less real, or whether it might be easier because they had not seen the destruction that he had inflicted upon them.

Dawnfall glanced at her father, then walked around the table. She smiled cautiously at Hiccup, who did his best to give her a reassuring smile in response, until Stoick cleared his throat and Hiccup looked round guiltily out of habit.

“Perhaps not right beside the table?” said Stoick. “Or perhaps it can wait until tomorrow.”

He had that slightly weary tone to his voice, as if he was getting tired of hearing about dragons all day again. True, considering they had come to talk about the Berserkers, it probably was somewhat galling to spend almost the entirety of the visit talking about dragons instead, but if he were honest Hiccup knew what he would rather be talking about. He glanced over to the end of the low stone dais, which was empty apart from a large fireplace, and then backed towards it, gesturing with a hand for Toothless to follow.

With a huff probably aimed at indecisive humans the world over, Toothless slunk to his feet and padded after him. Dawnfall stood back to let the dragon pass, looking almost in wonder as Toothless fluttered his wings a little and then furled them fully again as he sat down beside Hiccup.

Still looking a little cautious, she approached, in something of a semi-circle to bring her closer to Hiccup before she came too close to Toothless. She stood close enough for him to realise that she was a little taller than him, and smiled nervously all the while.

“It’s all right,” he said. “He’s been here all night, hasn’t he? Not done anything worse than ask for the bones.” It was gratifying to hear her laugh. “Now, it’s probably easier to stand sort of side-on, that makes it easier to look away.” She turned, putting her back to him, and Hiccup took a hasty half-step back so that her hair did not end up in his face. “Yeah, that works. All right, stretch out your hand, angled towards his face… nice and flat, that’s it.”

At least, he thought, she seemed to be doing better, her body language softening. Even if she did still seem to have a problem of trying to melt back towards Hiccup, only for him to respond by shuffling backwards slightly and for Toothless to look at both of them like they were idiots.

“And then – for him, for most breeds of dragons – you need to look away. Away, or down, or close your eyes, it doesn’t matter,” he said. It was a good thing that he had over a year of practice to stop his voice from falling into the breathless rush for which, even now, he could feel it aching. “It’s a trust thing. Monstrous Nightmares are sort of the odd one out, but… you don’t get many of those round here, right?”

He tried to keep his tone light, teasing, to keep away the tension that sometimes wound into people. Although Toothless was good about ignoring it, would stand patiently in front of even the most tightly-wound of humans. But Hiccup truly hoped that those to whom he showed the basic techniques would go on to use them on other dragons, rather than drawing weapons. That perhaps the peace could spread, even if it would never spread as easily or as quickly as the war had done.

“You’re sure it’s safe?” she peered back over her shoulder at him, through her lashes.

“Yes. You can trust him.”

Trusting Toothless had been easier than trusting just about anyone else in his life, and even now he would probably have to admit that Toothless was the one he trusted the most. The one he had to trust the most; a false move from either of them as they flew could mean the end of both of them,
and they had to trust their lives in each other. Compared to that, greeting a stranger, and a friendly one at that, was nothing.

She gave Hiccup a lingering look, and he tried to smile in a way that might dispel any nervousness that she had. Then he adjusted the angle of her hand, gently pressing against her fingers to get her to soften them rather than letting them stay so stiff, and nodded for her to turn her eyes away.

When she did so, Hiccup stepped back, and waited for Toothless to make the decision instead. The Night Fury waited for a moment, then reached forward and touched his nose to her palm gently.

Dawnfall squealed, a sound that made Hiccup jump, never mind the jerk back and affronted expression which it earned from Toothless. He stepped back between them, but Toothless did not seem inclined to do anything more than flick his flaps and huff. Eyes wide, Dawnfall had snatched her hand back to her, and was looking up in alarm; Hiccup found himself in the strange position of standing with his back to a dragon, holding out a hand to placate a human, and glancing worriedly over at the table where he had been eating not at all long before.

“It’s all right!” he said, though he was not sure for whose benefit. “It’s fine! It’s fine! You’re all right,” he looked at Dawnfall almost beseechingly. “Yeah?”

“Um, yeah,” she said, although she did not sound as if she were wholly convinced of the fact herself. “It’s just… it’s all dry and smooth. I didn’t… know what it was going to feel like.”

“You… don’t get so many dragons on the Islands of the Quiet Life,” he guessed, feeling a little sheepish. Coming from Berk, he could not remember a time before he knew what dragonskin felt like, although when he had touched it as a child it had either not been on the dragon at the time, or the dragon had already been dead.

Perhaps, before too long, there would be those for whom that was not the case.

“I, uh,” he gave a sheepish shrug, reaching up to rub the side of his neck. “I should have warned you about that, sorry.”

“No, it’s fine, I should have realised.” She took a deep breath, hands pressed to her chest. He eyed them cautiously, though he was quite sure that there was no way anything even could be wrong with them, then realised that it meant he had his eyes fixed at about chest level while she was wearing a dress that did not exactly go all the way up to her collarbones, and he averted his eyes hastily.

“So, that’s… dragons,” Dawnfall continued, eyeing Toothless carefully. Hiccup felt a huff against his back, and stepped out of the way once again. “I was going to ask more questions, but I don’t think it looks too happy with me right about now…”

“He’s, uh, sensitive to noise, sometimes,” said Hiccup. He ran a hand over Toothless’s forehead without looking down, in unspoken gratitude, and snuck another glance over at the table to see that the alarmed looks turned in their direction had mostly fallen away again. “Sharp ears.”

She smiled, somewhere between wholly true-looking and wholly fake-looking, and he supposed that he had to give her credit for trying. “Do you dance, then?”

There was something in the tilt of her head, and in the way that her hands were still pressed against her chest, and Hiccup felt as if a worrying realisation was dawning. “Not really,” he said, trying to make sure that he did not say it so hastily that it might cause offence. “Berk has developed a few dances specifically for…” he gestured vaguely towards his foot. “ Unless you have the Pegleg
Polka here, I don’t make for a good dance partner.”

“I could show you one of our simpler dances,” she said, in a slightly more hopeful tone. Or perhaps he was just slightly more aware.

On day, he hoped, he was going to look back and laugh at himself for this.

“Thank you, for the offer,” he said, “but it’s really not great on my foot. And I need it to work his tail system when we’re flying back tomorrow—” he wondered whether it counted as putting his blacksmithing knowledge to good use if he tried to bore somebody out of flirting with him “—since it’s designed to fit together, actually. There’s an alternate stirrup that can be adjusted,” and yup, there was the moment when her eyes started to glaze over, “to fit anyone. I could show you tomorrow morning, before we leave, if you’re free?”

“I can see if I am,” she said. “And, well, if you change your mind, feel free to come find me. Thank you for… introducing me to the dragon.”

“And thank you for greeting him,” Hiccup replied.

And that, at least, he knew that he was being honest about. Even if he sort of wanted to hide behind a tapestry until he stopped being embarrassed by the rest of the conversation.

Hiccup really hoped that he was wrong about why his father kept giving him pointed looks over the course of the evening. Or at least that Stoick would acknowledge that Hiccup had managed to extricate himself from the situation in the end, even if it was with very little grace. He busied himself with walking Toothless around the meade hall, and offering introductions to anyone who looked interested.

At least Anna seemed to enjoy herself. She admitted after the second horn of meade that dancing with Lightspear reminded her of dancing with her father; she danced with him several more times, and with others besides, seeming to genuinely smile and laugh more with each dance that she tried to learn as she went along. It seemed to endear her to the Quiet-Lifes, and Hiccup stopped to watch, smiling, as Anna twirled and clapped and nearly got left behind when the circle started to move onwards. Lightspear grabbed her hand and tugged her along, and she laughed, joining them.

Hopefully she would enjoy Snogletog as well, then. Especially if they could have news of Arendelle, and Hans, by that time.

He lost track of how many people who greeted Toothless, how many worried expressions he saw soften to acceptance, or even to a smile. Every so often, he would glance over to keep track of Elsa, who was keeping close to Stoick, minding Joan, and seemed to have taken it upon herself to fetch drinks for the table. While he was not sure he was happy with her acting like a serving girl, he supposed that it was one way to avoid having to dance or get involved in a lot of conversation.

When she caught his eyes one time, he smiled, and he knew her well enough to be fairly sure that it
was genuine. Probably a deliberate plan, then. He smiled back, and left her to it.

It was long dark before people started to filter away and the dancing petered out, and Hiccup figured that it was safe to take his leave without looking like he was trying to escape. Elsa seemed relieved to leave as well, while Anna looked a little more pouty. That might have had to do with the mead, however, which Berk had not really broken out since Slaughter Day. She flung her arms around Elsa and hugged her for rather too long, clinging to her on the front stoop of the meade hall in what was rapidly becoming driving snow. It was not until Toothless murred and headbutted her that she agreed to continue on the way home.

Hiccup fell onto the bed fully dressed, then groaned as he realised he had just flopped onto the damp, snotty-shouldered shirt which he had tossed there earlier in the evening. He pulled it out and threw it in the vague direction of the end of the bed, knowing that he should pack his things in the evening so that he was not hurrying in the morning but not quite able to bring himself to care. His back hurt from standing stiffly for so much of the evening, the soreness in his stump was suggesting that he should have put an extra layer of sock on, and his mouth felt furry. Gods, he hated mead.

At least he would not be hating mead in the morning; he had hardly drunk that much of it. He was not sure how Anna was going to feel.

Toothless snorted and butted his knee, and Hiccup craned his head up to peer down the length of the bed. In the dim light, candle unlit beside his bed, it was difficult to see much more than a faint greenish glitter in the darkness.

“You did great tonight, bud,” said Hiccup, though the angle of his neck made his voice creak. “I owe you a really good meal when we get back.”

Toothless rumbled.

Chuckling, Hiccup let his head fall back against the bed and closed his eyes for a moment. If he listened carefully, he could hear movement from the storey below where Anna and Elsa were presumably also preparing for bed. Listening that hard also made him feel uncomfortably like he was prying, though, and he put the thought aside as he rubbed a hand over his eyes and sighed.

First, they had to get back to Berk. Then he needed to speak to Elsa and Anna again, separately, and get them to talk to each other. And they needed to do something about visiting or getting information from Arendelle. If things got much worse, he might have to consider flying down to the mountains and looking for the valley that Kristoff had taken them too, although he had his suspicions that it would not be all that easy to find.

“I need to make a list,” he muttered to himself.

He hauled himself back to a sitting position, and pulled on a nightshirt but kept his leggings on underneath. It had proved cold the previous night, and if it got any colder then he was probably going to crawl under Toothless’s wing once again.

“Come on, bud,” he said. “Get a solid night’s sleep. At least Bashful won’t be carrying that weight in meat back tomorrow.”

And if Anna was too hungover, he supposed, she could always go home in the basket.

He only managed to fall halfway asleep, dozing and with his mind still trying to wrestle with the problems of Berk even though his body had turned heavy. When he heard a light knock, though, he
lurched awake so abruptly that he jerked in his bed, half-sitting up and rolling sideways all in the same movement. He blinked through eyes that did not much want to be open, but could only make out a sense of a pale figure in the darkness.

“Elsa?” he guessed. It was usually her who came to his room when she was troubled.

“Sorry,” she replied, easily confirming it. “You were asleep.”

“No. Well, sort of.” He shrugged. “Not good sleep. Don’t worry.” He sat up on the bed, dragging the blankets with him, as Toothless chirped from the far side of the room. “What’s up?”

“I would ask how it is that obvious,” said Elsa, something darkly humorous in her voice. She sat down on the end of the bed. “But it seems that I often come to you with problems.”

Hiccup caught his sleepy tongue just before he replied that it was what siblings were for, considering what he thought the current worries would be about. “It’s not like you don’t get to hear about mine,” he replied, instead. He tried to surreptitiously rub the sleep out of the corner of his eyes, and knew that he probably only got away with it because of the darkness. “It’s either you or Toothless, and you have a chance of actually giving me a helpful response.”

In the darkness, Toothless chuffed. It was probably only in response to his name, but Hiccup could not help a smile, and heard Elsa huff a laugh.

“I just… can’t sleep,” Elsa said, finally. “I pretended to, until Anna was asleep, but… I don’t know what to say to her. How to act.”

Hiccup bent his right leg and wrapped his arms around his knee. “If there’s one thing I have experience with, it’s coming back after arguments,” he replied. At least the last year had been long enough for it to be vaguely amusing, and not bitter. “Though mostly I know what not to do, which is to try and start up the argument again. Tomorrow, just… focus on getting home. Ask about the dancing, maybe. She seemed to enjoy herself.”

“She did,” said Elsa, sounding vaguely wistful. Hiccup heard her shift, though it was still too dark to see clearly, and then she gave a small grunt of pain.

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“Elsa?”

“My shoulder,” she said, and he thought that he saw a wave of her right hand. “It is just stiff, tonight.”

“We can have Gothi look at it when we get back, if you want. If it still feels off,” he offered.

A movement that sounded like a shrug. “I will see. It is not that bad.”

Hiccup ran a hand over his hair and wrapped it around the back of his neck. He wanted to invite her to stay in his room, in the hope that perhaps one or both of them would sleep better from it. Even if he thought that Stoick’s disapproval was absurd while they were at home, it might make sense on another island for the son of the chief to not be found with unrelated young women in his bedroom. Especially only a day after he had been reassuring Seatrude that he was not married and that Dagur had misconstrued things.

There would doubtless be questions as to what exactly Dagur had seen to misconstrue. And, unfortunately, they would not be all that wrong.

“I will not ask to stay,” said Elsa, before he could even be the one to say it. He reached out instead,
and took her left hand, but he heard her give another soft sigh of pain and, he suspected, rub at her shoulder once again. “It is not… what did your father say? Appropriate.”

“And do you think you’ll sleep, if you go back?” said Hiccup. He did not receive an answer, and it sealed his decision. Elsa was his sister, on Berk or off it. “Look, sleep under Toothless’s wing. You’re always the one up before anyone else, but if they’re somehow up very early here then you can just… pretend that you went to the outhouse or something.”

“Do you really think that will work?”

“I am too tired to particularly care,” he admitted, squeezing her hand, “and honestly, you getting some sleep is better than my reputation. If I have one.” He thought of Dawnfall, trying to press back against him when he thought that she was just looking to greet Toothless, and felt his cheeks grow hot in the darkness. “Which… I have a story to tell you, when we get back to Berk”.

“Really?”

“I can hear you looking dubious, you know!” he said, and this time Elsa did giggle faintly. “I… yeah, it’s a story. Go on.” He patted her hand. “Sleep next to Toothless. At least it’ll be warm.”

He paused, then realised what he had just said. Or, more accurately, to whom he had said it.

“That was the most muttonheaded thing I have said in a long time.”

Elsa giggled again, then leaned over and kissed him on the forehead. “Thank you,” she said, quietly, and stood upright again. She clicked her tongue, and Toothless murred in response.

Hopefully Stoick was not going to find out about this. He already had too much to worry about.

As it turned out, he did not manage to make it all the way to morning to worry about Stoick. In the middle of the night, there was a double thud, a growl from Toothless, and a shriek of, “Freyja’s tits!” in the darkness.

Hiccup jerked to a sitting position again, scrabbling for the Gronckle iron knife at his bedside table as Toothless growled again, long and low and carrying. There was a sharp crack, like a breaking branch, and the blue-white light of Elsa’s magic spread out across the floor, picking out each hollow and knot in light. By it, Hiccup could just about make out a figure crouching in front of Toothless, right underneath the window.

“Oh, for the love of…” Hiccup pointed at the candle beside his bed. “Toothless! Light!”

Toothless spat a tight puff of fire across the room, so small that it was barely more than a wisp as it shot across. It wrapped the candle in flame for a moment, but once the flash was gone the candle was lit. Hiccup, who had known better than to look right at the flame, grabbed it and looked at the figure.
It was hard to say anything more than that. They were swathed in dark grey clothing, with only wide, scared eyes visible beneath the scarf that wrapped around their face. Their first glance at Hiccup was little more than a flick of the eyes, perhaps not surprising when there was also a dragon in the room to contend with, but then they stopped and stared at him.

“Hiccup Haddock?”

Although it was muffled by the scarf, he was pretty sure that the voice was female. That did not mean that he recognised it, however, and considering he was sitting in bed Hiccup did not feel too bad about responding with a look of confusion of his own.

Elsa rose up from where she had been kneeling, grabbed the figure’s scarf, and pulled it free. They yelped, but more to the point the move revealed a shock of messy, golden-blonde hair, and Hiccup groaned as realisation dawned.

“Camicazi,” he said, “what in Thor’s name are you doing here?”

There was just enough time for Elsa to give him a look of disbelief – which probably had everything to do with wondering how he knew the person dressed for burglary and breaking into someone else’s attic in the middle of the night – before there were thundering footsteps on the stairs and his father appeared. Stoick had a sword in one hand and a lantern in the other, and came to a sudden halt to look around the scene in bewilderment about as complete as Hiccup’s.

Grateful that he had slept in leggings, Hiccup put down the candle and grabbed his foot. Pulling it onto the bare stump was not the best of ideas, but at least it would allow him to stand up.

“Camicazi?” said Stoick.

“You weren’t here before!” Camicazi protested, looking at Hiccup as if this were somehow his fault. “And the dragon certainly wasn’t. Why is there a dragon here?”

“The dragon’s supposed to be here,” he retorted. “Why are you here?”

“I suspect,” said Seatrude grimly, as she appeared at Stoick’s shoulder, “that the answer to that has something to do with the food that keeps going missing from people’s houses.”

For a moment, Camicazi looked sheepish. Then she set her jaw and glared defiantly, and Stoick sighed the sigh of someone who had been stuck trying to keep track of both Hiccup and Camicazi rather too often when they had both been children.

“Should we maybe do this in the main room, and not the attic?” said Hiccup, getting to his feet. He saw Camicazi give his prosthetic a curious glance. “It would help if we could all see what’s going on.”

“It would,” said Seatrude. She sounded more irritated than anything else. “Come on, hands where I can see them, Bog Burglar. I think it’s about time I got to speak to you.”
“Elsa!” Anna was at the bottom of the stairs, and relief flooded her face as she saw them begin to emerge again. “Are you all right? Who is that?”

Stoick had Camicazi by the shoulder, and was escorting both her and her mutinous scowl down the stairs. Hiccup trotted down behind them, tucking his nightshirt into his leggings and pulling on his belt, with Elsa beside him.

“Camicazi, meet Anna,” said Hiccup. “Anna, meet a long and annoying story.”

Camicazi turned around and poked out her tongue at him.

“I am fine,” said Elsa, apparently refusing to acknowledge the bickering around her. “I was just awake, and heard the noise from upstairs.”

And already developing a better lie for why she was in his room than Hiccup had managed to come up with. He rubbed his eyes as the strange party continued on downwards, until they were around the low, banked fire.

“I’ll get Slate,” Seatrude said. She too had an axe in hand, Hiccup noticed belatedly, though it was a plain one clearly meant for chopping wood, and not a battleaxe like Stoick’s. “We need that fire built up.”

“I will do it,” Elsa said. Her hands were trembling slightly, and Hiccup knew that at least some of the sharp chill in the air was her magic, and not at all the lack of fire. Mercifully, Seatrude nodded, and Elsa managed to sweep quite regally, even in her nightdress, to the woodpile.

Camicazi, standing in the centre of the room, went to fold her arms. Stoick caught her wrist, and gave her a pointed look.

“Come on,” said Hiccup, with a sigh. He gestured to Camicazi. “Hands outstretched.”

“You’re such a boring boy,” she said, with a scrunch of her nose. Hiccup ignored it, knowing full well that it was aimed at his gender and not his age, and undid the cuff of her right sleeve.

He rolled it up to above her elbow, extracting two lockpicks, a tiny knife no longer than his thumb, a corked quill of ink, and a small metal object which he honestly could not identify.

“Have you ever had to hold a Bog Burglar?” said Stoick. Hiccup held out his right hand as an offer to take the axe, and caught Camicazi looking over the scar in his palm curiously in the moment before the axe was pressed into it. He set both the axe and the first half of Camicazi’s tools – he had no doubt there would be an equal number up the other sleeve – down on the table, and started on her other hand.

Seatrude gave a disbelieving snort. “This far east? Not even in the summer. But I know the get-up when I see it.”

“Who wants to bet that the chief’s daughter gets sent a little further afield for her test of adulthood?” said Hiccup, as his brain began to properly catch up with proceedings. The precise form of the scowl which Camicazi gave him told him that he had hit the nail on the head. He turned to Anna. “Berserkers send someone viking for a year before they’re counted an adult. Berk used to have the arena – now we have the academy. Bog Burglars drop people off on someone
else’s island for a summer to survive on their wits and burglary skills.”

He rolled up Camicazi’s other sleeve, producing another lockpick, two unidentified metal items, a tiny steel and flint, and several stiff plant stalks. She poked out her tongue at him again, and he ignored it.

“Do you have a pole?” said Hiccup, turning to Seatrude again. “Metal, wood, doesn’t matter. Just a plain…” he gestured vaguely, hands about three feet apart. “And some rope?”

Seatrude looked between them, then walked over to the far side of the room and picked up a broom. Admiring the practicality, Hiccup nodded, accepted it, and dragged two tables close enough together that he could lay the broom across the gap. Stoick steered Camicazi up to the broom, despite her heavy and pointed sigh, and when Seatrude produced rope in turn Hiccup quickly and firmly tied her wrists to it, far apart enough that she could not touch her fingers together.

“Right, then.” Hiccup hopped up and sat on one of the tables, partially to spare his stump but also so that he could lean on one end of the broom. Stoick put a hand over the other end. “Shall we start this over?”

“Are you that scared of the Bog Burglars that you have to do this?” said Camicazi, gaze fixed firmly on Hiccup. She waggled her fingers. “Ooooh, big scary girl’s gonna get you!”

The room grew warmer, probably both as the fire built up again and as Elsa got a better hold on her magic. Elsa straightened up from beside the hearth, brushing off her knees, and looked round with some curiosity in her expression. Her mistake, though, was probably looking Camicazi in the eye.

“Hey, gorgeous.” Camicazi winked. “What’re you doing around here? It’s got to be boring hanging around with this one.” She jerked her head towards Hiccup. “Though from the looks of that foot he’s gained a few better stories in the last few years. Wanna hear some from me?”

“Camicazi,” said Hiccup, wearily. “It wasn’t funny when we were kids, and it’s not funny now.” Camicazi was still grinning, though, as Elsa looked confused by the abrupt turn in the conversation. He shook his head. “Anna, Elsa, this is Camicazi, daughter of Chief Bertha of the Bog Burglars. Anna, you’ll probably like her, she used to beat me over the head with wooden swords when we were kids.”

He did not add the ‘as well’, considering that Seatrude did not know who Anna and Elsa really were, let alone just how long Hiccup and Anna had truly known each other.

“She also thinks this is funny.” He looked back to Camicazi, who was wearing a whimsical smile, as if being caught breaking into a chief’s house and now being tied up in the front room was a great adventure. If he looked closely, though, he could see the way that her cheekbones were a little too sharp, her eyes a little too hollow. She had been going hungry, and for quite some time. But he also knew Camicazi well enough to know that she was far too proud to accept food offered like this. “Camicazi, what are you still doing here? Initiation is only supposed to last a summer.”

Her smile turned towards a smirk, an expression he knew full well to be fake on her. “Why should I tell you?” she said.

Hiccup glanced at Stoick, but his father was not giving any signs of being close to intervening or warning. Indeed, he seemed quite content with letting Hiccup take the lead on talking to Camicazi, and at a time that was not the middle of the night he might have stopped to question that. “Well,” he said instead, “because if it turns out you’re not supposed to still be here, then we might be able
“to get you back home rather than leaving you here to face punishment for all the thieving.” He glanced over at Seatrude, who looked a little more dubious. “If that’s an acceptable alternative to the effort of keeping her locked up and the cost of keeping her fed.”

“Hah!” said Camicaizi. “There’s not a prison in the Archipelago that could hold a Bog Burglar!”

“So you told me when you were six,” said Hiccup, without missing a beat. He had been seven, had hoped that Camicaizi might be as easy to befriend as Anna and more frequently appearing in his life, and had instead ended up stuck up a tree with her while several wild boars regarded them from the foot of it. He was not sure that either of their dignities had ever fully recovered.

Seatrude looked between them, then groaned. She set her axe aside as well, and folded her arms, glaring down at them as pointedly as any parent could ever manage. “Tell me this: are there more of your tribe here? Because if you say no, and things continue to be stolen after you’re gone, they’ll bear both the punishments,” she added, when Camicaizi went to open her mouth for what would doubtless be an impertinent reply.

It was a clever twist, he knew. Bog Burglars were, if anything, even more clannish than Berk. Any of them would take punishment for a fellow tribe member before allowing a skilaan of their own debt to fall to someone else. Camicaizi more than most, but even without knowing that Seatrude had made a pretty shrewd guess.

Camicaizi deflated slightly, although it was really only the equivalent of a hedgehog lowering its spines. The wild tangle of her hair even gave her something of the look. “It’s just me,” she said sullenly. “The weather turned, just as I was supposed to be leaving. The boat couldn’t get in. I figured they’d be back come spring.” She glanced over at Toothless, who was standing behind Hiccup with his eyes slightly narrowed and his shoulders still taut with attention. “You still haven’t explained why you have a dragon, you know.”

Hiccup was not feeling particularly hungry, but neither was he particularly feeling like bickering his way through the entire explanation. And even Camicaizi’s pride would not stretch so far as turning down food when others were eating as well.

Besides, he might actually be able to get a word in edgeways if she was trying to eat.

“If I ask for porridge now, does it count as a really late supper, or a really early breakfast?” he asked his father. Stoick looked bewildered, and Hiccup suspected that his glance at Seatrude was hope for some sort of explanation, but she just laughed.

“Growing boys,” she said. Stoick muttered something beneath his breath again, casting his eyes skywards, and Hiccup resisted the urge to point out that even Odin All-Father struggled with his brood sometimes. “I think porridge can be managed.”

Despite the way that they grumbled about each other, Berk and the Bog-Burglars were longstanding allies, a friendship so secure that they did not even need to bother with a treaty.
Technically, they did have one, a couple of scrawled signatures on a piece of parchment which Berk kept safely stored, but the story that went with it indicated that the chiefs who had signed it had been abysmally drunk at the time and probably had not even remembered it the next day. Still, they had been allies since Berk had been settled, and Hiccup only had to glance at his father for Stoick to nod and begin explaining how Berk had come to be allied with the dragons.

It did not stop Camicazi from laughing until her cheeks were red at the idea that Hiccup had been the one to bring down the Red Death, but he had been expecting that. At least from her, there was a tone of pleased surprise rather than plain disbelief, a sense that Hiccup had outperformed her admittedly low expectations of him. He would have been insulted if he hadn’t known she had low expectations of just about everyone.

She demanded to see his foot, looked it over, and declared it to be ‘not bad, for a boy’s work’. Then suggested he put a false side onto the socket so that he could hide things in it.

“I’ll take that under advisement,” he said, dryly.

Toothless continued to stare at her for much of the conversation, as if he were trying to work out why the human who had fallen on him in the middle of the night was now happily chatting away with Hiccup and the others. But Camicazi looked him over fearlessly, and even went to steal a spoon out of habit as her eyes traced over him.

Stoick caught her hand, retrieved the spoon, and put it back on the table. Camicazi rolled her eyes.

“So, you ride dragons now, then? I never imagined anyone would do that, blimey. I would say that it’s a sort of cool idea, but now I’m starting to suspect that it was Hiccup who started it, so I’m sure that he did it for a rather silly reason.”

With a good meal in her belly, it also seemed that her voice was back in full force. Hiccup was not at all surprised, and doubtless his father was either, but Seatrude’s eyebrows had not ceased to be raised and Anna and Elsa both looked more than a little confused by the situation. He considered telling Elsa in Marulosen, and Anna in Arendellen, that their expressions would only be encouraging her, but he knew that she would pick up on the languages and not stop until she got a proper explanation for those, as well. And they could not afford to explain why the two spoke different languages.

“You’re just jealous you didn’t think of it first,” he said, tapping his spoon against the bottom of his bowl. A small portion, eaten slowly; Camicazi had managed to devour an entire bowl while he and Stoick had been speaking, and had been eyeing up a second when she had decided that talking sounded more satisfying instead.

“Well, you did tell me about that time you saw horses while you were in Arendelle,” she said, “so maybe it isn’t that much of a leap for you. Did it take you long to work out that you would be better off with a saddle and bridle, or did you try to climb on bareback at first?”

He hesitated one guilty second too long.

“Ha! I thought so. I saw you fall in a lot of bushes while I was teaching you how to climb trees, you can’t have been any better at riding at first. Though I suppose you might be all right by now, if it’s been over a year.” Another scrunch of her nose. She had been ordered to keep both hands above the table, and her sleeves still rolled up, and when she went to fiddle with her hair Hiccup gave his father a quick, desperate look. Goodness only knew how many strange things Camicazi had hidden in how many strange places. Stoick caught hold of Camicazi’s wrist and gently guided it back to the table again. “What?” she said. “And if I need to scratch my nose, will you do that for me as
She thrust her nose towards him, as if to ask there and then. Stoick responded by raising one eyebrow.

“Well?”

“Urgh, whatever. So is it any dragon you can ride, or do you have to break them in, like you break in horses?” Hiccup had honestly not known that Camicazi knew this much about horseriding, although the Bog Burglars were also fairly literate. She must have been really bored to resort to reading something instead of practicing her fighting. “Hey! What about I come to Berk with you, and learn how to ride? That way you can just send me home on the dragon, you don’t need to worry about sailing me back.” She paused. “How did you sail out here in this weather, anyway?”

“We didn’t,” said Hiccup.

She looked from him, over to Toothless, and delight flashed in her eyes before she fought to school her expression into a sort of nonchalance. “Not bad, for a boy,” she said, which was about the highest praise most people ever got out of her.

There was a faint chirp beneath the table, and Anna glanced down before dipping out of sight for a moment. Hiccup recognised the gesture as she settled Joan on her lap, then reached up to push her hair back off her face on the left side where it had pulled mostly loose of its braid.

“So,” said Camicazi, impertinence back in her voice again as she smiled wickedly at Anna. “What do I get if I climb in your bedroom window, huh?”

Elsa’s expression turned stony, but Anna beat her to the response. Scooping Joan up onto the table in full view, she deadpanned: “One fewer finger.”

“Camicazi, don’t flirt with two sisters in quick succession,” said Hiccup, in what he hoped was a low enough voice that the entire table would not have heard it. When she opened her mouth, mischief in her eyes, he quickly spoke over her. “And whatever you’re thinking of saying, don’t you dare, or you will not be spending the ride back to Berk on a dragon so much as slung under one.”

Camicazi did not say anything, but she did wink at Anna. Hiccup rubbed his forehead, and wished that this could at least happen when he’d had more than a handful of hours’ sleep in a strange bed.

“We’ll leave as soon as it’s light enough out to make out the horizon,” said Stoick, loudly. “Until then, I suggest that we take it in turns to stay with Camicazi, while the others of us prepare ourselves and the dragons for flight.”

“So, you come from this place Marulosen, huh?” said Camicazi. Her cheeriness had not flickered since the porridge, and Hiccup was not sure whether he regretted suggesting food or not. He was checking and repacking Toothless’s saddle bags at the table, while Camicazi was tied to the broom again and Elsa was keeping an eye on her. “Sounds interesting. Never heard of it before. Where did
“You say it was?”

“The land is Maruloet; the language is Marulosen,” said Elsa, with a sort of vague, parent-like patience. “And it is to the west of Berk.”

“Pssh, Berk is west of everywhere. It’s all fog beyond that, and compasses that go,” she pointed both of her index fingers, and made circles in the air with them. “That’s how it took them so long to find Dragon Island. Or, I mean, they didn’t, the dragons did, you said.”

“Now that the Red Death is gone, the volcano in Dragon Island has settled.” Elsa refolded Hiccup’s shirt for him and passed it across. “The seas can be sailed.”

“So, can you speak some Marulosen for me?” said Camicazi. Elsa looked at her, expression slightly cautious. Hiccup could see why. “Oh, come on, I’m tied to a cleaning implement watching you fold shirts, this is boring. Languages are interesting!”

“I’m sorry that you find it boring to watch us packing, having broken into a chief’s house in the middle of the night,” said Hiccup.

“You know that attic was some kind of storage space, right? Is that a demotion for you?”

Hiccup sighed, looked over to Elsa, and switched to Marulosen. At least, he hoped it was Marulosen, after a long conversation with Anna in Arendellen just the day before. “Yes,” he said. “She is always like this.”

“I thought it was the porridge,” said Elsa dryly. She handed Hiccup Toothless’s tailfin, then followed it up with his vest. It felt good to shrug it on, another reminder of Toothless always at his back. Her own things had, of course, been perfectly packed already; Anna had privacy to swear at and struggle with her own packing.

“Well, the porridge let her go back to normal.”

“See?” exclaimed Camicazi. “You talk another language, you can have whole other conversations without anyone knowing! I mean, how useful would that be, if you were captured or something, and you had to plan your escape.”

Hiccup hid his minute flinch in the action of turning over Toothless’s tailfin to check that it was perfectly in place. Of course, it was entirely logical for Camicazi to think of it, but that had not been what Hiccup had wanted to use Marulosen for when he first started to learn it. Alvin had simply forced his hand. “Well, you remember the twins,” he said. “They can have conversations nobody else understands without even leaving Northur.”

She laughed, a brash, fearless sound. “True! Hey, can Ruffnut still beat you up as well? Was that Ruffnut? The blonde girl with the axe.” Before Hiccup could correct the names, and hope he was not blushing, he was for once saved by her continuing chatter. “Pssh, who am I kidding? Of course she can. There’s probably a whole new generation of people can beat you up now.”

“Probably,” he said mildly. He clicked his tongue, and Toothless looked up from where he had been resting forelegs and chin on the table and, more to the point, the end of the broom to which Camicazi was tied. Hiccup glanced over to Elsa, who nodded and stepped round to take hold of the other end again before Hiccup waved for Toothless to climb down. “And Astrid had the axe, by the way. Ruffnut just used her fists.”

“Do they ride dragons as well, then? I bet their dragons are cooler than your…” for Camicazi to trail off was quite something, but Hiccup was honestly not sure whether it was because she was
groping for Toothless’s species or watching as Hiccup slung the saddle into place and set about doing up the buckles. “Your whatever-that-is,” she finished, finally.

Hiccup let the unspoken question linger. A little petty, perhaps, but he knew how curious Camicazi got, and he knew that it would be annoying her significantly that Hiccup – that anyone, but especially Hiccup – knew something which she didn’t. He did up the last buckle, then straightened up to take Toothless’s tail from the table. His smile might have been a little cocky; he did not often get one up on Camicazi.

“Night Fury,” he prompted.

Camicazi blew a raspberry. “Bullshit.”

“No, he’s the Night Fury.”

“You found a random new dragon and called it the Night Fury, and nobody can call you out on it because nobody’s seen one,” she said.

Hiccup found himself entertaining wistful thoughts of destroying a small islet or two on the way back. Toothless was certainly powerful enough. “Sure,” he said, “if you don’t want to admit that you don’t know what a Night Fury looks like. Or what its fire looks like. Or how fast it can go.”

Camicazi glared at him for a moment. “You,” she said finally, and Hiccup was already grateful that Anna was not present to hear what was about to follow, “are a total, lily-livered, codswallop-sucking–”

“Here we go,” said Hiccup, bending down to attach Toothless’s tail.

“– yak-bothering shitstick of a–”

He stuck his head back over the table. “Are you done yet?”

“–useless polyp of an–”

Apparently not. He went back to making sure that Toothless’s tail was in place, tugged on the rod to make sure that it still moved smoothly, and straightened up again.

“–boil on your father’s arse–”

“You know,” he interrupted, “I honestly can’t decide whether you or Heather are more entertaining to hear curse. And no, you don’t know Heather, but if you manage to be less annoying than usual on the way back to Berk then I’ll introduce you.” For all that heaven only knew what insults would spill forth were the two of them worked together, or for that matter how bad the bluff of flirting could get.

Camicazi rolled her eyes again, this time with a toss of her head, but he knew her well enough to suspect that she had been running out of steam anyway.

“In any case,” said Hiccup, “the rest of Berk will confirm that Toothless is the Night Fury, but you can meet the other dragons to decide which one you might prefer.” With only the three of them in the room, and the Bog Burglar’s some of Berk’s closest allies, he felt more comfortable in throwing out options to see whether Camicazi – and by extension the other Bog Burglars, most of whom were various levels of overenthusiastically bold – would be interested in learning to ride as well. “There’s differences in speed, agility, firepower, the type of fire they produce, temperament…”
“You keep saying the Night Fury,” said Camicazi. Hiccup had hoped that, with shadows under her eyes, she might not be as sharp as usual. It was not pleasant to be proven wrong again. “I thought Berk had, like, a massive Night Fury problem. You sure complained about it enough.”

“You would be amazed what one Night Fury can do,” said Elsa, cool and clear although her accent seemed a little stronger than usual to Hiccup. He wondered whether that was in the face of Camicazi’s Northur ramblings.

“Like the light thing?” Camicazi added. “The blue-white bit?”

Hiccup managed not to look over at Elsa, but unfortunately from the corner of his eye he saw her sneak a glance in his direction. And if he had seen it, then Camicazi definitely had; sure enough, she grinned as if she had caught them out on a grand secret.

He swallowed, but looked her in the eye. “There’s a whole lot of things that Berk is learning about. Dragons.” He grabbed the saddlebags and bent down to strap them into place. “The fact that Dagur the Deranged is now Chief of the Berserkers and wants to re-establish their empire.”

Another scornful noise. “Oh, come on. Last time they tried that, Berk wiped out their Skrills and then Arendelle kicked the shit out of them. Surely he can’t be stupid enough to think he’s got a chance.”

“He’s already started,” said Hiccup. For once, Camicazi’s expression grew more serious. “The Quiet-Lifes pay him tribute, he’s in talks with some of the other islands, and he’s conquered Outcast Island. He tried to hit Berk, but we hit back.”

The pause that followed would not have been that long from most people, but compared to Camicazi’s usual breakneck flood of words it was a lot. “Well, the Bog Burglars will be up for a fight,” she said finally, with a shrug. “You know we always enjoy a chance to knock those Berserkers back on their arses.”

It had, in fact, been one of the earliest things that Hiccup remembered understand of his father’s headaches about maintaining peace around the archipelago. Some balances were a lot easier than others to maintain. As he had grown older, he had come to understand that Osvald’s willingness to make up for his predecessors’ actions had gone a long way to helping keep the Berserkers more broadly integrated. Like the still surface of a pool, allowing ice to form across its surface.

He was not going to enjoy watching the ice break.

“Come on. Let’s see if it’s close enough to light to justify a second breakfast before we get in the air. And see whether Anna has managed to actually pack her things without falling asleep again.”

Anna was, in fact, asleep again. But luckily, she had managed to pack her things and change back into travelling clothes before doing so, and once she had washed her face and put on her boots at the second attempt she looked about as collected as she ever did early in the mornings. At least
until the sight of food made her look uncomfortable, and Hiccup just pushed milk in her direction instead.

Camicazi, on the other hand, did not hesitate about taking the opportunity for a second breakfast, and proceeded to eat about as much as Hiccup and Elsa put together. How she was capable of doing anything other than sleeping afterwards, Hiccup was not quite sure, but she proceeded to explain to Seatrude in embarrassingly great detail where she had broken in, what she had taken, and how she really hoped that Seatrude did understand, it was part of her initiation to adulthood after all. She had only taken food and other small supplies, though, and even gave back the fire steel and explained where her campsite could be found. All that she had been given to start with was a knife and whatever she could hide among her clothes without the adults who dropped her off seeing, and everything at the site would be from the Quiet-Lifes.

Seatrude shook her head more than once, but did not raise the matter of punishment or repayment. Hiccup had a strong suspicion that getting Camicazi off the island sounded a lot better than trying to imprison her, as she talked about how she had picked locks and opened latches from the outside in order to get food.

Once they returned to the dragons, Stoick watched Camicazi while the others set about putting the saddles on the other Gronckles, and Hiccup was inordinately glad that he had brought a spare saddle along as part of Bashful’s harness. He had kept the ring in all of the harnesses other than those for the riders’ dragons, anticipating or perhaps just hoping that at some point or another he would get the chance to introduce people to the wonder that was dragon riding.

To that point, he had also brought the safety harness with him, and he produced it with something of a flourish before taking it to Camicazi.

She eyed it warily. “And where are you expecting me to put that?”

“You’re hilarious,” he said. “Put it on like a reverse vest – ring in the centre of your chest. That way, if you fall off, you stay attached to the dragon rather than us having to explain to your mother how you died from falling off a Gronckle.”

“Yeah. You totally designed this because you kept falling off the dragon,” said Camicazi, but she did at least begin pulling it on. She grimaced at the brown leather against her dark clothes. “Sure, let’s just put a target over where my heart is, that wouldn’t be a bad idea in front of archers or anything like that at all. I know that it was you who designed this, it’s got your handiwork written all over it.”

“If you fall off, you get hurt,” he replied. “If I fall off, Toothless gets hurt.” He went to reach out and affix the leather strap himself, but Camicazi had already fitted the harness tightly to her chest and there was no way that he was going to give her that ammunition. He handed it over. “Loop this through the ring, then itself. That clip at the end goes on the saddle – come on, I’ll show you.”

“Trust you to make something like dragon riding sound like a lesson in putting your socks on,” she said, in her usual cheerily insulting tone, but she did at least follow him over to the dragon. “Always remember to wear the right clothing when climbing onto your two tonnes of fire-breathing monster, boys and girls!”

“Gronckles weigh three tonnes,” he said, as they reached Bashful’s side.

Bashful snorted a greeting, and Camicazi held out a hand without even having to be prompted. She tilted her head away more than fully averting her eyes, but it was good enough for a Gronckle, and Bashful nudged against her hand in an over-optimistic search for dragon nip. Hiccup did not bother
offering his hands to boost her into the saddle, knowing that she would ignore them anyway, and let her vault in under her own power instead, settling into place then grimacing and squirming back and forth.

“Yeah, I know, it isn’t perfectly shaped to your backside. Should be halfway there by the time we get back to Berk.” He grabbed the end of the safety strap, and clipped it into place. “There. Now the worst that happens is that you dangle embarrassingly below Bashful’s feet, so try not to do that. You fiddle with the saddle,” he added, pointing to one of the buckles, “you end up dangling. You fiddle with the harness, you end up dangling.”

She groaned, looking up at the ceiling almost beseechingly. “This is going to be more boring than sailing!” Her attention snapped back to Hiccup again. “Do you get dragonsick? I bet you do, that would be hilarious.”

“Unfortunately for you, I do not,” he said. He could not help frowning, though, at the sight of her exposed hands. “You’re going to have to keep… hang on, give me a moment.”

He glanced over to check that Seatrude and Stoick were talking in the door of the barn, and hurried over to Elsa. She was wearing her cloak and gloves again, and he was abruptly grateful that they had brought spare ones for her. Camicazi’s clothes were still more suitable for summer than for winter, and he could not help a shiver running through him at the thought that she had been planning to try to wait out the worst of the freeze rather than turning herself in to somewhere that she did not risk death from the cold.

“Hey, Elsa.” Elsa turned, having helped Anna into the saddle already. There was a little fear around her eyes, a slight tightness, but her hands were still, at least. “You reckon Camicazi could borrow your gloves and cloak?”

She nodded, before he even had to explain. “I will say that Anna and I can fit under the same cloak,” she said. He did not even know whether that would be true, but doubted that sharing a cloak with Elsa would be all that good for keeping in the warmth.

“I don’t deserve you,” he muttered, rubbing his cheek as she peeled off her gloves and cloak in turn, and slipped them into his hands. She was still dressed sensibly beneath, long sleeves and layers, but it was particular noticeable with the clouds of everyone’s breath and the way that everyone else was all but cocooned against the snow.

She smiled, shaking her head. “Where have I heard that before?”

Hiccup’s smile lasted about halfway back, or at least until he realised Anna had remained grimly silent throughout the morning in a way that might have been more than just tiredness and mead-related regret. They had picked about the worst time and place to argue, he could say that; if it had not been for Camicazi, they would have at least been able to ride separate Gronckles home, but he did not want Stoick to know that anything was up by inviting one of them to ride with him and did not intend to subject anyone to a full day of Camicazi’s chatter.

He folded his worries away before he reached Camicazi, though, and pushed the gloves and cloak into her hands, half-prepared for them to be dumped back on his head in return.

She did pull a face, though. “I don’t need your castoffs.”

“It’s going to be even colder in the air than it is on the ground, and nobody could have expected you to have to prepare for that,” he added, in a way which he hoped might mollify her pride. “Besides, Elsa doesn’t need them.” He paused just long enough to see her curiosity piqued. “She’ll
be fine.”

He turned away, ignored the, “Oi! Oi! Hiccup!” that followed him, and felt more confident about crossing to his father’s elbow.

“Good to go?” he said breathlessly, over the sound of Camicazi cursing him out again.

“I apologise for imposing upon you for so long,” said Stoick, with an inclination of his head in Seatrude’s direction.

She shrugged, with a faint smile about her lips. Despite the early hours, Hiccup could see people out in the streets or peering from windows in their direction. “Don’t. The yak would have been more than enough payment, but it looks like you’ve rid us of a thief as well.”

“Oh, we’ll deal with that one.”

They clasped hands and shook, warmly, Seatrude patting Stoick’s wrist with her other hand along the way. “I wish you fair winds, Stoick.”

“And you, fair days,” he replied, just in time for a particularly brisk flurry of snow to scatter itself across his beard and, to judge by his expression, into his mouth. Seatrude laughed and backed away as Hiccup turned and whistled, waving for the Gronckles to exit.

They did so, somewhere between lumbering and graceful in a way that probably depended on how new to the eye they were. And how biased by time with Toothless the viewer was, Hiccup had to admit. He moved like a dream, on land or in the air, as easy and as fluid as a thought. Thornado followed at a steady plod, and Toothless padded out behind with a huff that Hiccup would like to believe was a report that the barn was clear.

Hiccup waited, hand on Toothless’s shoulder, while Stoick took off first under the watchful eyes of the Quiet-Life and as Camicazi, perhaps forgetting herself, leant forward in the saddle to watch with open curiosity. Hiccup waved to Anna and Elsa to take off next, then repeated the gesture to Bashful to get him into the air as well. Camicazi grabbed at the saddle, lurching in place, but Bashful rose smoothly into the air and there was, at least, no repeat outburst of cursing.

Finally, he swung into the saddle in turn, clipping his foot into place, and paused to turn to Seatrude one more time. “Thank you.”

“Your father’s already taken care of that, lad.”

He pressed his hand to the centre of Toothless’s back, feeling the warmth even through his gloves. They had been here about the Berserkers, but Hiccup could not help his feeling of gratitude being far more about the dragons. “Men turning to monsters is one thing,” he said. “Monsters becoming dragons, becoming this,” a pat to Toothless’s shoulder, “is something else.”

“I doubt we’ll take that path,” she said, with a nod to Toothless. “Into the skies. But we’ll not begrudge the peace, if it comes.”

“I know you’ll still defend yourselves if you need to,” he said, though there was a weight in his heart. “But they learn quick that they don’t need to fight either.”

“Faster than some people, I’ll wager,” she said.

He almost wished that he had more time to speak to her, one-on-one, but as chief Stoick had of course needed to take the lead. And he knew how desperately inexperienced in the world of chiefs
and treating he was, how much he had not learned in the years when he had frankly not acted as befit an heir. But for now, he gave one last grateful smile, then with just a movement of his foot sent Toothless bounding into the air.

This time, he heard some gasps and shouts, as Toothless’s wings spread like a thundercloud and sent them sharp and sure into the air. The cold air was bracing in his lungs, and he always forgot how the air above villages was different from the air in them until he was breathing it again. It felt clearer, almost aching-bright, and seemed to wake him up more kindly and more completely than Camicazi crashing through his window had.

“Ready?” called Stoick. Camicazi was already talking again, gesticulating with her hands, but she did not seem to have realised that the wind would carry her words away and Hiccup did not get more than the odd syllable here and there.

He grinned. “Ready. Let’s go home.”
Chapter 19

Camicazi talked all the way back to Berk.

It didn’t surprise Hiccup, and truth be told he did not hear all that much of what she said over the wind and sound of Toothless’s wings around him. Although that didn’t stop him from having to stifle laughter when Thornado barked at her hard enough to buffet Bashful sideways in the air, as if he could actually hear anything that she was saying and was annoyed at it. When they stopped midway through the day, Anna had fallen asleep against Elsa, snorted awake only as their Gronckle landed, and Camicazi furiously unclipped her harness and jumped down, complaining very loudly about how saddlesore she was.

“–do you even do this?” she was saying, by the time that Hiccup dismounted. On the way to the Islands of the Quiet Life, he had readily admitted how stiff he was, but had no intention of doing the same on the way back. “It starts off feeling like leather and ends up feeling like granite, I swear to…”

She gave up on rubbing her backside, and flung herself into a cartwheel instead, landing and shaking out her shoulders as if it were some sort of normal stretch. Anna was looking at her like she were some sort of new, strange dragon.

“That’s a bit better. But really, I can’t think how you can stand flying for so long with nothing to do and no space to move!”

“Well, we normally go for shorter flights,” said Hiccup. He adjusted his cloak around his shoulders; the snow was getting heavier, although mercifully the wind was not getting any worse. Stoick was still looking grim about their agreed break, though. “You need to build up to stuff like this.”

“This is ab-suuumuuurd,” she said. She went into a handstand, and Anna still had that look of confusion and slight fear on her face but the only thing that concerned Hiccup was that he hadn’t seen Camicazi try her acrobatics in gloves before. Camicazi kept going, and Elsa’s eyes went wide as if she were considering trying to leap in and help, but then one of Camicazi’s feet came to rest delicately on the ground and she paused, stretching into the bridge that she formed, at least until she yelped and snapped upright, clutching her clothes back together over her stomach. “Good gods in the gleaming great sky, you didn’t say that riding dragons could get so boring!”

For all that he had started to experience it on the way out, Hiccup kept a straight face. “It’s not my fault if you can’t appreciate the beauty and majesty of dragonflight.”

“Beauty and majesty, my bruised arse,” Camicazi retorted. She finally seemed to notice that Anna and Elsa were standing separately, and that Elsa did not seem discomfited in the falling snow. “Are you sure you’re all right in the cold?” she added.

“Fine,” said Elsa, simply, and kept a perfectly neutral expression as Camicazi squinted at her.

Hiccup, on the other hand, was grateful to have his face out of the freezing air for a while. “Well, I am personally more interested in eating lunch than in throwing myself through the air like a lunatic;” he ignored the glare that Camicazi gave him; “and in giving the dragons a chance to stretch properly. We’re only about a third of the way back, so I want to treat this as a warm-up stint for them.”
Toothless most of all, since he was far more built to be a sprinter than the other dragons, but he was handling the longer journeys admirably. And it was almost worth it just to hear Camicazi’s disbeliefing, over-dramatic groan at the news.

From time to time throughout the rest of the journey her voice grew louder, and he caught snatches of insults aimed in his direction, but his only responses were in the occasional hand gesture. Mostly cupping his hand to his ear, which only caused her to redouble her efforts for a few minutes and then go sulkily quiet for what must have been almost a half-hour before she could not contain herself and started up again.

If this was what he had been like a year ago, he could no longer blame anybody for not wanting to be in his presence. Even if he had only talked half this much.

Night fell, the air got colder, and Hiccup spent what he privately considered to be an impressive amount of time wondering whether the warmth in his legs made up for the stinging cold wind against his face. But his thoughts returned repeatedly and readily to Anna and Elsa’s fight, Anna’s despair, and how on earth he could try to begin to help them fix things.

They needed to know how things were going in Arendelle. Hans in particular, but Arendelle generally. The lack of knowing must have been tearing up her thoughts, and even if they knew that something was wrong they might at least have an idea of what they needed to do.

And he needed to get them to talk, without fighting again. Which was admittedly rather less among his strengths, but he could only try.

They flew into the night, Hiccup pulling the white scarf out from his bag and draping it around his shoulders before moving to the front of the group. He had to trust Toothless’s sense of direction more than the compass that he could barely see in his hand, the clouds far too thick to use the stars. It grew so dark that peering over his shoulders, he could just about glimpse Elsa and not even be totally sure that the others were there. At least, until he caught a snippet of Camicazi’s names for him through the darkness. If she were going to try to go rogue, he supposed she would have a rather difficult job of persuading Bashful to assist her.

By the time that Berk came into view, flickering lights on the horizon, he felt as if he had ice in his stomach and could no long feel his backside. He gave a groan of relief, and had to hold back Toothless from surging underneath him and totally outstripping the other dragons.

He was more surprised that there were torches around the village green, waiting for them. Of course, they had promised a strict schedule for their return, something that had never been possible while sailing, but it was still strange to have their return met with ceremony, and with a few dozen people, including all of the riders and their dragons, waiting to see them in.

Hiccup landed first, stumbling from the saddle in a way that probably did not befit the leader of the dragon riders, but it was probably not all that noticeable before Gobber scooped him into a one-armed hug. He probably appreciated the warmth as much as he did the hug, as Gobber hooked the scarf away and frowned at it.

“You surrendering at last?”

To what, Hiccup knew better than to ask. “Come on, Gobber,” he said, “you know me. Surrender wouldn’t accept my application.”

Gobber snorted, patted him on the shoulders, and softened to a smile as Stoick came in to land as well. At least Stoick would have been warm beneath his cloak and beard, Hiccup could not help
but think with a little jealousy. Elsa and Anna managed a clean landing on their Gronckle; Bashful – and Hiccup could not help but wonder whether it was possible to talk the ear off a Gronckle after all – landed next to a snowbank with a jolt that knocked Camicazi off his back and into the snow with a shriek.

Well, he supposed, they probably would have had to find her a spare set of clothes for a night anyway.

He was about to head over and drag her out when Astrid managed to slip out of the crowd. He almost felt guilty about how quickly his interest in doing anything other than talking to her evaporated, were it not that he did not really have the mental space to do so as she smiled, and the rest of the world slipped away just for a moment.

She sauntered over, the motion distinctive even beneath her cloak, and ran a hand over Toothless’s head. “Came back in one piece, then?”

There was a wild urge in his chest to kiss her cheek hello, to at least take her hand, but the best that he could do was smile and not blurt out, there and then, what had happened with Dawnfall. He brushed the frost off the collar of his cloak instead, feeling warmer for seeing her, and reminded himself that a reply to the question would probably be appreciated.

“Well, in as much as one piece as I left in,” he added, with a wave to his foot. Astrid shook her head fondly. “Er, I should probably get Camicazi out of that snowbank, though…”

“Camicazi?” Astrid raised her eyebrows, and from the movement of her cloak put a hand to her hip. Whether it was to reach for a knife, or check that Camicazi had not already managed to steal something, Hiccup would not hazard a guess. “How–”

“She’d been stranded there,” he said with a sigh, starting over. Camicazi had mostly pulled herself out of the snowbank, although she seemed to be struggling with her safety harness. “Chief Seatrude seemed glad to be rid of her, to judge by the amount of thefts that got explained when we found her. She’s only going to be here a day or two, then we’re sending her home.”

“Frisking her first, I hope,” said Astrid grimly.

Camicazi looked up at they approached, pointing with one gloved finger. “I should have known that you wouldn’t be able to train them to land properly,” she said. “You’re lucky that it’s me! Other people would have lost their balance far worse!”

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“Worse than falling into a snowbank,” Hiccup deadpanned. He reached out and undid the harness one-handed, to another scowl from Camicazi at the show of competence. “Of course. Besides, all the other dragons landed perfectly. You must have thrown his balance off, squirming.”

“I do not squirm!”

“You squirm like you’ve got Itchyworms in your pants,” he retorted. “Now, are you going to come and get some warm dinner and a comfortable bed, or are we going to have to lock you in one of the dragon pens? Those aren’t a jail, there’s no Bog Burglar propensity to get out of them.”

A couple of the pens still had solid doors, although they were never closed, just in case they needed them. Hiccup had no actual intention of putting Camicazi in them; he had no intention of putting anyone in them, but knew that Camicazi in particular would probably be crawling out of the trapdoors before the night was out. But it at least got her attention as she tried to stiffly wrestle her
way out of the harness.

It might have been easier had she remembered to loosen it before doing so.

“Ruffnut, right?” she said to Astrid, who looked unimpressed. “Hit that boy for me, I’m – Hel’s pits!” she tried to tug the harness back over one shoulder, and nearly pulled herself sideways instead.

“Yeah, I’m not Ruffnut,” said Astrid.

“Let me,” said Elsa wearily, seeming to appear out of the snow beside them. She reached out with her pale, gloveless hands and loosened both sides of the harness, letting it slide easily off Camicazi’s shoulders. “I saw how this was made.”

“How are you just standing about in this snow?” Camicazi exclaimed. Elsa’s hair was windblown, but there was no flush to her cheeks or pink on her nose, and she tilted her head as if politely confused by Camicazi’s question. “How cold is Maruloet that Berk seems normal to you?”

“Yeah, Berk’s weird, we know,” said Hiccup, before Camicazi could try to actually get an answer. “Come on, do you want that dinner or not?”

Camicazi thrust the harness into his hands and started off across the green, tromping through the ankle-deep snow. It had grown noticeably colder than when they had left, he had to admit, but hoped that the gentle winds meant that there was no great storm coming.

“Well, at least she knows her way around the village,” he said.

“Reckon I could get her to sniff out my mother’s axe?” Astrid added, with just enough of an edge to her voice to make it clear that she was still sore on the matter. “Get her to find it, then retrieve it when we see her off…”

“I want to show her how to handle dragons,” he said, hoping that it was not too obvious why exactly he wanted the topic changed. “The Bog Burglars are adaptive, you know that, and they’ve been our allies so long that nobody pays attention to it any more. She already knows about Dagur, we’ve told her that, and I don’t doubt that she’s right that the Bog Burglars would help us out. I think they’re a good choice to try to get into working with dragons as well.”

“And who’s going to deal with the problems there?” said Astrid. “Like you did, last winter?”

Berk, more than any other island, had seen losses to dragons. But all of the tribes had known pain. “What, you think Camicazi wouldn’t enjoy the challenge?”

“Could put her propensity to argue to some use,” Astrid admitted. Both of them, Hiccup suspected, were keeping a wary eye on Camicazi as she marched straight towards Hiccup’s house through the village, keeping to the well-trodden paths either because it was easier or because her footprints would not be so visible.

“I’m sorry I didn’t have a chance to discuss it before we put her on dragonback,” he said.

Astrid shook her head. “We know her, and the Bog Burglars. And you’re talking as soon as you get back, so—”

She was interrupted by Snotlout appearing at her shoulder, one of the Nightmare shortwings clinging to his shoulders and chirping away as if it were having great fun. He pointed at Camicazi. “Really? No Nightmare this time, to go with the girl?”
“That’s Camicazi,” said Hiccup. “Call her a girl and she take it as an inherent compliment, then punch you anyway.”

“Oh gods, not her.” Snotlout groaned. Camicazi’s casual derision of anything male within ten yards had never sat well with his ego; Hiccup, strangely, had found that she derided him less than most. He had never been sure whether to consider that a compliment or an insult. “She talks worse than the twins put together!”

“He has a point,” said Elsa. “You are sure that it is safe to tell her about dragons?”

“She talks more, but says less,” Hiccup replied. “You notice that all she’s done today is complain about dragon riding, insult me, and flirt with you? There was nothing in any of it that would be useful to someone else. Even her more incisive comments were just telling me what I already knew.”

Like picking up rather too much of what it had taken him to learn how to fly in the first place.

“Heather and I will check she hasn’t stolen too much before we see her off,” Astrid said, perhaps before Snotlout could offer to do so. Even if such an offer would be mostly out of habit, as Snotlout probably had no intention of coming within range of Camicazi’s curled fists or light fingers. “I know her, and Heather has an eye for hiding things.”

Less of a judgement, and more of a compliment, than it used to be. He did not comment.

“Speaking of which,” said Hiccup, grinning, “I’ve thought of a way to keep that to a minimum.”

“Oh?” Astrid raised an eyebrow, looking unconvinced already.

“If we deliver her home, she fails her initiation to adulthood. If we bring her here, but then she steals a dragon – and coincidentally, a set of notes about taking care of dragons, which Fishlegs and I may have left carelessly lying around – and flies home, then she’s passed better than anyone before. Bluster or not, I think she’s smart enough to agree to that.”

That did not mean that he was allowing Camicazi to stay in his room unattended. Elsa caught Hiccup’s eye from across the table, then mildly explained to Camicazi that as a light sleeper, she would be the best choice, and that if Camicazi were somehow unable to sleep then Elsa would be happy to teach her some small amount of Marulosen.

Camicazi lit up into a wicked grin, and Hiccup narrowly resisted the urge to just rest his head on the tabletop until the night could be over. He had hoped that after at least two days awake, she might not be so determined to wind up anyone in the vicinity, but was not fully surprised to find himself wrong.

“You and me alone in his room, huh?” she began reaching over to put her hand on Elsa’s.
Elsa’s hand shot out, snake-first, wrapping around Camicazi’s wrist and pinning it to the table. A sharp gasp escaped Camicazi; though Elsa’s grip did not look tight, Camicazi’s skin began to turn pink around it, and Hiccup caught the sharp drop in the temperature of the air.

“Elsa,” he said quickly. She looked back at him abruptly, like coming out of a trance, and snatched her hand away from Camicazi’s again. “Camicazi, for Frigg’s sake, it’s too late for this nonsense. We’ve got you out of probably freezing to death on the Islands of the Quiet Life, and I think I’ve figured out a way for you to still pass your initiation. Of course, I’m sure you’ve thought of that yourself, being a girl and all,” he added, leaning one elbow on the table and waving his hand aimlessly. “But if you really want to take advantage of all the opportunities before you, it’s probably best staying on my good side. And Elsa’s.”

Camicazi hesitated for a moment, then pulled a face at him. He resisted the urge to pull one back, and wished that he had been this able to argue around her three or four years ago, or whenever it was the Bog Burglars had last visited Berk. They never bothered with warning or with plans, just turned up with some meat and a few barrels of mead, although they had twice managed to arrive in time for Thawfest just within Hiccup’s lifetime.

He did remember Camicazi trying to lie about her age to join the rock climbing, though, and being furious when she was told that she was ten, they knew that she was ten, and that was not old enough to be competing. But then the Bog Burglars team had destroyed the Berkian one in skin-throwing, and all had been well with her ego again.

They managed to get through dinner with relatively little fanfare, just more stories about the dragons, even if Hiccup slipped in a few extra details about how he had managed the difficulties that had come from the change. Camicazi seemed more interested in the food than the conversation, but he knew that she would be taking it in anyway, and she did finally deign to look up when he added that he was taking her to the academy the following morning.

“Academy?” She wiped her mouth with the back of her hand. “You have an academy for this stuff?”

“Well, there’s a lot to learn about dragons. Fishlegs and I have put together a lot of information to be copied into the Book of Dragons.”

“You Berkians are all mad about that book,” she said, grabbing another thick slice of bread and taking a huge bite. “And now you’ve gone and made it useless?”

He felt a spike of anger, and pushed it down quickly. Whether Camicazi was deliberately trying to rile him up or not, it was not worth rising to it. They were not children any more – or at least, once they got her back home she would not be a child. “We’ve learned more to add to it,” he said. “And anyway, I told you that there are more dragons for you to meet. More species.”

Not counting the dragons who already had riders, or Hnoss and Gersemi who were settled at Heather’s, they had four Gronckles, two Nightmares and a Nadder. There was no way that Hiccup was even telling Camicazi about the Scauldron, and they had not seen the Hobblegrunt for several days.

There was only one more thing that he had to consider telling the Bog Burglars, and that needed discussing with Stoick and Elsa first.

He grabbed the opportunity to ask Anna to find Camicazi some nightclothes, with a look which he hoped communicated that he was not dismissing her but he really wasn’t sure was that eloquent. He would apologise once Camicazi was safely in his room. Indeed, Anna did not look too happy as she
got to her feet and waved for Camicazi to follow her, prompting a rambling commentary about how that room had been a workshop when Camicazi had last visited. True, she did not know that Anna and Elsa already knew that, but it was not the most tactful thing in the world.

Hiccup sighed, dragged his attention away, and leaned in towards Elsa. “The Bog Burglars are Berk’s oldest ally,” he said, quietly. “We’re showing them dragons. Do you want to tell Camicazi about your magic? Either to tell the Bog Burglars, or just her mother the Chief, or nobody else at all.”

“Do you trust her?” said Elsa, just as soft.

Glancing over, Hiccup could see that his father was watching, more than intervening. The Bog Burglars did not demand tribute or agreements the way that the Berserkers did, and would likely continue to accept Berk no matter what. He wished that he had time to discuss it at length, roll the ideas and the options back and forth, but this had to at least be better than what had happened with Heather.

“Against my better judgement,” Hiccup said, voice dry. Then he saw Elsa start to look uncertain, and reined himself in. “Yes, I do. The Bog Burglars are… they’re Berk’s sibling.” He shrugged. “We squabble, but we’re always there for each other. And they’ll keep Berk’s secrets, if we ask them to.”

“I will think about it, overnight, if I may,” she said, with a flicker of a look to Stoick as well. Stoick simply nodded, serenely. “I am… still not sure.”

She was not able to say more as the door swung open again and Camicazi reappeared, wearing what had to be a spare set of clothes and with her hair still wild. Anna followed her, comb in hand and a stubborn set to her jaw, but Hiccup caught her gaze and simply shook his head. Trying to tame Camicazi’s hair was a battle that had been lost years ago.

“Well, as long as you’re fine with annoyance-sitting, we’re good.”

She gave him an impressively unimpressed look. “I’m not sure I’ve heard that word before.”

By morning, Camicazi’s clothes were dry, although there was not enough time to clean them, and she stubbornly insisted on putting them back on even if she did have to accept the loan of a cloak. The settled snow outside was fresher, but at least no deeper, and to Hiccup’s relief it was not still snowing as they made their way outside in the early morning light.

“One, two, three, four, five,” Camicazi was reciting, in Marulosen. There were shadows beneath her eyes and something of a wildness in them, and Hiccup wondered just why she had stayed awake. “Six, eight, seven, nine, ten.”

“Seven, eight, nine, ten,” Elsa corrected her. She was wearing short sleeves and light boots, and even with the distraction of Marulosen Camicazi had been giving her curious looks. Hiccup
wondered whether there was anything to it at all, or whether he should simply stop trying to second-guess her. She would make her choice, and that would be the end of it.

He had to admit, though, that Elsa seemed to have hit on a good system, as repeating lists of nouns and forming verbs of various tenses and persons kept Camicazi occupied most of the way to the arena. Hiccup pulled forwards a few yards, with a touch to Anna’s elbow to draw her along with him, and tried to lower his voice enough for Camicazi to not hear without drawing attention to the fact that he was doing so.

“Sorry about last night. I needed to ask Elsa about her magic.”

“I get it,” said Anna. He would have thought that it was fine, bright and cheery, but a glance across now told that the smile did not quite reach her eyes.

“We didn’t have any other time to talk,” he said, unable to help a wince. “Anyway, it’s Elsa’s choice what she says, or shows, or doesn’t.”

“Who are the Bog Burglars?” said Anna. “I feel like I’ve heard of them, but…” She trailed off, shaking her head. Her plaits were back in place, even if her parting was a little crooked this morning.

“Might have been from me,” he said. “Or overhearing my father? They’re Berk’s… such a longstanding ally, honestly. Some of Berk’s first settlers were from there, they see us like an annoying younger brother or something.”

“Do they really call themselves Bog Burglars? I can’t imagine that it’s great to be known for that…”

He shrugged. “Depends. They take great pride in the skill involved in stealing from other tribes. And it’s very… well, individual people don’t really own things. You might have a few bits, like a ring or a knife or something, which has sentimental value, and you make it publicly known that it’s yours. Other than that, it’s all sort of… jointly owned. They keep in practice by stealing things from each other after they’ve made them.”

“That sounds so weird,” Anna mumbled, sounding even more sick of mornings than usual.

“So did Arendelle’s way of life, when I was a kid,” Hiccup said, with a look that he hoped managed to be pointed without being too annoyed. “They’re still Vikings. They farm, they fish, they craft, they raid when they can get away with it and trade when they can’t. But if they can steal from other islands, they will, and they keep sharp by practicing on each other.”

“And she’s their chief’s daughter?”

“She’s very good at what they do.”

Anna reached up, fiddling with the string of the pendant around her neck, then ran her fingers down to the pendant itself. The shape of the bulge made it clear that her engagement ring was still looped around it as well.

“Camicazi will be heading home tomorrow morning,” he said. “And Astrid has volunteered to see to it that she isn’t stealing anything. Other than the dragon, and associated notes, which we plan for her to steal.” At Anna’s surprised look, he smiled, and rubbed her arm again. “I’ve got plans. We can do this.”
“She’s better than I expected,” said Astrid, slightly begrudgingly, as Camicazi successfully put a saddle on the younger Nadder from Outcast Island, before vaulting up into it.

“That’s because she’s half wild animal herself,” Hiccup replied. He had to admit, though, that Camicazi had taken well to all of the dragons that they had shown her, and he probably would have considered letting her meet the Hobblegrunt if there had been any sign of the dragon. “But yeah, she’s doing well. Fishlegs and I found an old set of notes for her to steal, as well.” The wind howled through the bars above them, and he grimaced. “Not sure how much more time we’re going to get out here, though.”

“As long as it doesn’t turn into a storm overnight.”

Hopefully, the weather was not likely to turn that bad, but Hiccup could appreciate the concern. He was still squinting at the ceiling thoughtfully as Heather wandered across the arena to join them, one of the Nightmare shortwings having attached itself to her hip. It was snuffling at her ear.

“Looks like you’ve got a fan today,” said Astrid.

“Yeah…” Heather glanced down at the Nightmare, then dodged a lick to the nose. “Heavy, but warm. I’ll deal. So.” She leaned against the wall on Astrid’s other side, shifting the weight of the dragon on her hip. “I’m beginning to see what Snotlout means when he says that whenever you leave Berk, you bring a girl back with you.”

Hiccup groaned, and Astrid laughed. “I swear, if he says that one more time…”

“This one’s got somewhere to go tomorrow,” Astrid said. “Just make sure she doesn’t steal any of your smokebombs first. Camicazi with smokebombs is not something I want to imagine.”

“I don’t know,” said Hiccup. “Give her just the one, and don’t warn her what it does, and it would at least provide for an entertaining afternoon… oh, come on.”

The snow turned rapidly to hail around them, striking stinging-hard against his cheek, and he raised an arm to shield himself without even thinking. The young Nadder shook himself free of Camicazi’s hands and bolted straight into one of the pens, leaving her looking bewildered in the middle of the academy floor.

“All right, under cover!” shouted Hiccup, cupping his hands around his mouth. Snotlout had not even waited for that, tucking himself straight into a pen with the Nightmare from Outcast Island and a Gronckle, while Tuffnut grabbed Ruffnut by the arm to haul her away from Camicazi with a roll of his eyes that was visible from even where Hiccup was standing.

Hiccup had not, unfortunately, anticipated how bad it would get putting Camicazi and Ruffnut together.

He peeled upright and turned towards the closest door, but glanced around in time to see Elsa close in on Camicazi and stop her with a hand to the chest. Camicazi paused, looking confused, and Hiccup immediately jogged in their direction instead.
“–you should know about Berk,” Elsa said, accent thicker than usual and voice trembling slightly. Hiccup skidded to a halt beside them, digging in his metal heel so as not to fall, just as Elsa rolled one hand over the other to bring the glowing sphere of her magic into her hands again.

Camicazi jumped back, grabbing Hiccup’s arm so hard that it hurt, but he saw the flash of metal in her hand and just about managed to grab her wrist as she brandished his Gronckle iron knife.

“Hretha’s cunt, you–”

He forced the knife downwards, heart pounding in his chest, as Elsa took one step back and threw the light into the air. It seemed to go through the bars, though he knew that it was more likely that the light flowed around it with the ease of a falling drop of rain, to an apex high above them. There, it exploded into shards of ice that grew as they fell until they settled perfectly into the gaps between the bars that made up the roof of the academy, the sound of the hail thundering at first then dulling as the ice misted over and the surface grew opaque.

It took all of Hiccup’s strength to keep the knife pointing down, arms shaking with the effort of fighting Camicazi. The colour had drained from her face, her eyes fixed on Elsa in something between terror and awe, and Elsa looked almost haughtily at her as they stood in their aching tableau.

Astrid waded in, grabbed Camicazi’s right arm, and did something to the inside of her wrist that made her yelp and drop the knife. Hiccup quickly tossed it aside, knowing that it would not damage the blade, and resisted the urge to grab Camicazi by the chin and force her to look away.

“Camicazi. Cami.” When she did not respond to her much-hated childhood nickname, he knew that she had been struck dumb. Gods, at least in Berk they had always known that there were magic-users in the Wildlands to be dealt with. “Hey, speak to me, or I’m going to assume you’re not actually Camicazi but an imposter who doesn’t talk as annoyingly much.”

She swatted at him without looking, which was at least an improvement. “That wasn’t the dragon,” she said, eyes not leaving Elsa’s.

Elsa shook her head.

“Shit, that was never the dragon, I asked you if it was the dragon, no,” she turned to Hiccup, “I asked you if it was the dragon and you just gave me that vague non-answer and I assumed that you were just trying to act like you had some secret there. But you did have a secret.” Back to Elsa. “You had a secret. Is this a Marulosen thing? Is that why Berk is allied with you now?”

He had to admit, Elsa almost managed not to flinch. “It is not Maruloet. It is me.”

“And our decision to ally with Elsa is not to do with her powers,” said Hiccup, which was almost an over-simplification but close enough, true enough. It had been in spite of her powers that he had seen her as human and reached out in those earliest days, had searched for meaning in her words and humanity in her eyes. “She is my friend, and Anna is too. And yes, they will be standing with us against Dagur.”

“And you still want the Bog Burglars against him as well?” said Camicazi. “I mean, we’ll happily give them another good kicking, but are you even going to…” it was about as close to speechless as he had ever seen her, and she seemed to realise it as she frowned at herself for trilling off mid-sentence. She shook her head. “You guys are all insane! Berk is insane!”

She twisted her hand out of Hiccup’s grasp and walked away, not even towards the exit of the
arena but just far enough that she had her back to all of them. The temperature of the air dipped around them and he saw Elsa’s hand tremble. Reaching across, he touched the back of her elbow gently, and found her skin almost scaldingly cold to the touch but did not pull away.

Camicazi stood there for a few breaths, so deep that he could see her shoulders moving even from behind her. A couple of the Nightmare shortwings started wrestling on the arena floor behind Hiccup, with the associated squeaking and hissing, and Hiccup heard Fishlegs trying to break it up.

Finally, Camicazi spun back around again, and fixed her gaze on Hiccup. The terror seemed to have gone, although there was still something manic-bright there. “You realise that if you had a magic artefact, I’d be honour-bound as a Bog Burglar to steal it, right?”

“That goes without saying,” he said.

“Stealing people gets a bit harder.” She looked over Elsa with a new sort of appreciation in her expression, the same way that Astrid gauged people before sparring with them. “And now I’m kind of regretting flirting with you. Not least because she,” she jerked a thumb towards Ruffnut, “is way better at it. So what, then? Do you want me to tell the island about this?”

“No,” said Elsa, before Hiccup could wonder whether he should try to answer. “Not unless they need to fight. But then, they need to know, so that they do not think I am their enemy.”

He had not even thought that far, and his heart clenched in his chest. It had been easy to see her as human when she had been fighting alongside Berk and against the dragons, but if it came to open battle against Dagur it would be harder to tell exactly what was happening. Especially when dragons would be taking to the air on both sides.

“All right.” Camicazi nodded, and Hiccup had to remind himself that she had grown up, as well. Even if her position as future chief was not assured, not in the way that his was supposed to be, there was a chance that she would challenge her mother, or her mother’s successor, one day. “My mother? Chief Bertha?”

“May be a good idea,” said Elsa, with enough of a tone in her voice that Hiccup knew she was still conflicted. “But it still stands. Berk cannot have this be known. I cannot have this power be known. Especially to the southern kingdoms.”

“You mean south of Berk, right? Arendelle and all that lot?”

He thanked the gods that Camicazi was not looking towards Anna right then, as she hesitated. Astrid started in Anna’s direction, stepping carefully and quietly.

“Their gods do not like magic,” Elsa said.

He thought of Anna’s words, and the bitterness in Elsa’s voice hurt in his chest.

Camicazi paused for a moment more, then shrugged again. “Ours practise it,” she said. “Don’t know about yours.”

There was a ghost of a question about it, but Elsa ignored the words, and for once Camicazi did not press against them. Instead she reached up and ran a hand through her hair, which did not seem to make all that much difference, and then abruptly burst out laughing. She laughed harder and harder, eventually doubling over and putting her hands on her knees, breathless and pink-cheeked from the cold and mirth both.

“Wait,” said Tuffnut, “I don’t get it. What did they do this time?”
“I used to think Berk was so boring!” Camicazi managed, between her laughter. “Then suddenly you have dragons and magic! Odin’s arse, I wish that I’d known before that you’d turn out like this, I would have paid more attention when I visited as a child!”

“Good to hear,” said Hiccup. “Now, you want to hear about how we want you to steal a dragon, or not?”

“That might be the coolest sentence I’ve ever heard you say.”
Chapter 20

Chapter Notes

Shoutout to darkstar1991 for helping me with the list of random shit that Camicazi steals.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Right.” Hiccup put down the pile of papers, wrapped in a fold of leather, on the crate in front of Camicazi. “Those are the papers you need to steal. There’s a few crossings-out, and doodles, but all your information should be there.

“I’m offended that you call this stealing,” said Camicazi, scooping them up immediately and stuffing them down her shirt.

Hiccup sighed, but supposed that it at least it would help to keep her warm. “Look, you need the most recent saddle so that you get our best design – yes,” he added, as she opened her mouth again, “I’m sure that the Bog Burglars will be able to improve on it, but this is the best starting point for that. There’s sketches of saddles for various other dragons in those papers as well. And a list of the dragons which have proven too dangerous to approach so far which, for Freya’s sake, at least get some experience with the easier ones before you start messing with anything worse.”

She looked dubious.

“Yeah, I know, I might as well lecture the wall. Come on.”

He had done his best to leave at home, with his father, anything which might be of value and which he would not want stolen. His Gronckle iron knife, his helmet from his mother’s breastplate, anything else which might seem tempting for Camicazi to divest him of. He had double-checked that the Bewilderbeast buckle, fake though it was, was still at home as well.

“How do you manage to make dragons sound so dull,” said Camicazi, as he grabbed her by the arm and tugged her back over to the Monstrous Nightmare. The dragon already had his saddle in place, had been fed and watered, and had responded better to Camicazi than any of the other dragons. Hiccup could make a comment about overly dramatic personalities, but it would probably earn him a clip round the ear. “Seriously, you are flying! On dragons! And you’re giving lectures about safety!”

“Because I would like to remain alive to enjoy my flying on dragons, and not get myself killed before I am able to do so.”

“Urgh, when did you get so boring?”

Honestly, he would have said that things had turned out to be quite the opposite of boring in the last year and a half, but he let Camicazi grumble as he finally managed to get her over to by the dragon. He stepped back, checked to see that he had not lost his belt or his boot or something ridiculous in doing so, and was not in the slightest bit surprised when Astrid stepped up and gestured to Camicazi.
“Come on. Cloak off.”

“It’s snowing!” said Camicazi.

She had not even finished speaking when there was the glint of Elsa’s magic in the periphery of Hiccup’s vision, and he couldn’t help a slightly cocky smile. This time, there was less show, her magic striking the bars and spreading out across them, filling them up and turning misted white as they went. The air cleared, and Hiccup reached up to brush snow out of his hair.

“Come on.” Astrid tapped the Nightmare on the wing, and he snorted and looked at them flatly. “Really? Come on, wing up, you know this one.”

Hiccup stepped in, pressed at a point beneath the Nightmare’s wing, and with a snort he obliged by partially spreading it so that it rose up like a screen. From the far side, Camicazi started laughing, as Heather ran down the entrance to the academy and almost slipped on the icy floor. Elsa managed to catch her, and Hiccup managed a moment of gratitude that Anna was not present to see Camicazi off even if it had been no more than chance who had done the catching.

“Sorry,” she said, breathlessly, straightening up. She shot Elsa a brief, grateful smile. “I got called by Duskhowl, my father was asking for me. It’s fine,” she added, with just enough force to make it clear to Hiccup that she did not want more questions asked. She glanced up at the roof, then over at the Nightmare’s raised wing. “I’m guessing we’re behind there?”

A cloak was flicked up to drape over the Nightmare’s wing. He looked bored.

“What, you trying to get my clothes off already? Bit early in the morning for that,” said Camicazi, a little more loudly than necessary.

Heather raised an eyebrow. “You want me to warn her off Astrid for you?”

Unable to quite manage a proper answer, he shook his head and simply mouthed ‘no’.

“No sweat.” She punched him on the shoulder, or more precisely tapped him on the shoulder with her fist but in a way that was such an uncanny imitation of Astrid that Hiccup had braced himself for a punch anyway. “I’ll tell her I’m the one doing the courting.”

“You’re hilarious.”

And even if he was not Anna, and did not share her hatred of mornings, it was definitely still too early in the morning for him to be able to handle jokes like that. Heather grinned at him, although he was not quite sure whether it was one of her legitimate ones or one of those that she wore to distract people from her eyes. Before he had time to really check, she slipped away and around the edge of the Nightmare’s wing, and Hiccup settled for shaking his head and pulling off one glove so that he could wipe his face with a bare hand instead of a damp glove.

His scar was aching. The left hand probably would have been a better idea.

“Where did you even get that?” said Astrid incredulously, loud enough to carry past the Nightmare’s wing. “And how did you guess to look there?”

“Do you want to take bets on what they’ve found?” said Hiccup, putting his glove back on. Elsa shook her head. “Yeah, me neither. I just hope it’s not a smokebomb. We could be here a while.”

He stretched out his shoulders, and thought wistfully of a night in his own bed.
“So,” said Elsa. He heard a suspiciously teasing edge to her voice, and looked at her suspiciously. “Did you not make your move quickly enough?”

“Oh, gods.” He groaned, closing his eyes for a moment as Elsa giggled. “You’re as bad as the others.” He supposed that it did at least confirm what he had said to Astrid about his suspicions that Elsa knew about them. “How do you know that phrase – no, don’t answer that, it was probably Ruffnut.”

“The others?” she said, in a way that was definitely teasing.

He tried to give her a look of annoyance, but only managed a couple of seconds before it faded into a rueful smile. Astrid had a point that talking about it made it all feel more real, and there was honestly something warm in his chest at the thought of Elsa – of anyone – knowing and not simply laughing in his face. “Gobber and Heather, then,” he said. “On separate occasions.”

It wasn’t as if he dared to tease her in return about her flirting with Heather, either. Even before it had come up and become a sore spot between her and Anna. He’d never really known how to tease about that sort of thing, though to be fair he had never really been teased about it either, or at least beyond mocking of the very idea that there would even be something there to tease about. He was quite sure that he was blushing, but the aching thought of being able to look at Astrid in public the way that he did in private made his stomach turn over on itself.

“I’m not giving Camicazi the opportunity,” he concluded.

“That does sound wise.”

The cloak disappeared from view again, which Hiccup hoped was a good sign. “Come on, let’s see what they’ve managed to rediscover.”

The dragon’s wing folded back again to reveal Camicazi, rearranging her cloak around herself, Astrid with a knife in one hand and trying to hold a block of cheese and a spyglass in the other, and Heather juggling Gobber’s fork hand, some dangling strips of leather, a troll pendant in one hand and dangling a soft toy stuffed yak in the other.

“Do I even want to know?” said Heather.

Hiccup groaned. “I think that’s Yakkity. When did you even get into Snotlout’s house? He’s going to go spare. Or blame the twins.” Which was fairly often a safe bet, but less so when a Bog Burglar had visited the island. Let alone ones with fingers as clever as Camicazi’s. “The spyglass you can have, we’ve got plenty of those…”

“Well, I don’t want it if you’re offering it,” Camicazi retorted.

Hiccup looked around for what they could do with the rest of the items, and was about to consider using his cloak to make a sling when Elsa gave another flourish of her hand and a perfect replica of a bucket, in ice, appeared at his feet. He knew there were buckets in the old armoury, wondered just how deliberately she was showing off, and held it out for Heather and then Astrid to drop everything into. Astrid also turned out to be holding several small bolts and ball bearings, but kept the knife.

“Where did you even get my third-favourite knife, for that matter?” she said. “And why my third-favourite?”

Camicazi gestured vaguely at Astrid’s shoulders. “You’d have missed your first- or second-favourite more quickly.”
“And yet, no axe,” Astrid added, in Hiccup’s direction. Truth be told, he was more and more starting to worry that he was going to earn her ire come Snoggletog, rather than her actually liking her present in any real way. He still needed to get the Changewing acid, as well, and gods only knew he was making that flight alone with how the weather was going.

“All right,” he said, as everything was in. He set the bucket down, then stretched out his hand to Camicazi. “The ring, as well.”

“What?”

“Anna’s engagement ring. That’s her pendant,” he pointed into the bucket, “and she keeps her engagement ring on it as well, so hand it over or you’re not going anywhere.”

“I guessed it had some importance,” said Camicazi. “So I put it on her hand. I’m not an animal.”

Anna was going to be very confused on waking up. But for all Camicazi’s glib comments and more than occasional lies, he suspected that she was telling the truth this time around. “If it turns up missing,” he said, untucking a spare safety harness from his belt and handing it over to her, “I will know exactly where it is. And if you can fly home in half a day, I can be there in about two hours.”

“You take away the fun things, you give me boring things,” said Camicazi, but at least started putting on the harness.

“Really? A block of cheese is fun?” Goat’s cheese, no less. “We put food in your saddlebags.”

“It was there, you weren’t looking,” she said, like he was an idiot. Perhaps he was, sometimes, but he was fairly sure that this was not one of those occasions.

“Just get on the dragon.”

“Fine.” She turned, grabbed hold of the edge of the saddle, and vaulted up in one smooth movement. “What’s her name, anyway?”

“Hey! Wait!” Of all the people that Hiccup was expecting to join them that morning, he would not have counted Snotlout among them. He turned, frowning, just in time to see Snotlout leap out of Hookfang’s saddle, or at least launch himself out of the saddle and slip somewhat on landing, and hurry down the slope. “I need to say goodbye!”

Hiccup looked at Camicazi, only to see that she was looking just as bewildered as he felt. Well, that explained absolutely nothing.

At least, until Snotlout ignored every human in the academy, ran straight over to the Monstrous Nightmare, and flung himself to his knees at the dragon’s nose. The Nightmare huffed, but allowed Snotlout to drape himself over his snout and press his cheek to the dragon’s scaly skin.

Complete silence reigned in the arena, as they all stared at Snotlout. Then Heather bent down, scooped up the stuffed yak out of the bucket, and before Hiccup could string together enough of his thoughts to stop her had walked over and dangled the toy in front of Snotlout. He knelt up in the snow, looking as if somehow had just dangled his own testicles in front of him – and Hiccup knew that he had been spending too much time with Ruffnut when that phrase ran through his mind – and then snatched the yak out of Heather’s hand and clutched it to his chest.

“I’m not going to ask for the whole story,” said Heather.

“You came to say goodbye to the dragon?” said Camicazi, finally. It was one of the longest periods
that Hiccup had ever seen her go before responding to something, and she wasn’t even managing to
look anything other than confused.

Snotlout glared at her. ‘He’s had a lot of disruption in his formative years!’

“I didn’t know Snotlout knew the word ‘formative’,” Astrid muttered.

“Snotlout, I know he came from Outcast Island, but—”

“Wait, you gave me a male dragon?” said Camicazi. Hiccup looked at her dumbly for a moment.

“Seriously? You gave me a male dragon?”

“I gave you a Monstrous Nightmare, who does not have four shortwings to take care of,” said
Hiccup. “You want a Gronckle? They’re great dragons. Very agile. Incredibly loyal, as well; once
they’ve found their rider they’re not going anywhere.”

And any of them would accept her, he knew that, even if it would mostly be politeness at first. But
it was the Nightmare who had liked her the most, and he knew Camicazi well enough to know that
she would put up with a more volatile temper, not to mention an awkwardly larger size, in return
for the drama and prestige of a Monstrous Nightmare.

“Can’t I at least have the female one?” said Camicazi, with a hint of a whine. “I can’t take him
back! It’ll ruin my reputation.”

Hiccup looked at her flatly for a couple of seconds, then heaved a sigh and walked over to the
dragon. He dropped down on one knee, took hold of the dragon’s snout, and put on a voice that
most people only used for small children.


The dragon simply snorted and tilted his chin, a clear demand to be scratched. Hiccup obliged for a
moment, then rose to his feet and let his voice go back to normal.

“You see? He doesn’t care.”

“But—”

“She doesn’t care, if you want to say she. They don’t care. Believe me when I tell you that this
dragon only cares about whether you show respect when you ride, and care when you land. Or
would you rather embrace motherhood at the grand old age of fourteen, and take the female
Nightmare and the four shortwings which are going to be with her for at least another year, if not
two?”

He was guessing, from the size of the dragons and how dependent they still were, but he was sure
that he was at least not wildly wrong. He also hoped that the Nightmare would not fly off at
Snoggletog, although he had told Camicazi that any dragons probably would.

It earned another entirely unnecessary groan, and Hiccup wondered how much luck he would have
with just clipping Camicazi’s harness to the saddle and getting the Nightmare to start flying
already. “You can get on the dragon, or you can swim home,” he said.

Camicazi scowled, but walked round to the side away from Snotlout and jumped into the saddle.
Her boot almost clipped Snotlout around the ear, and he got up hastily. “Fine,” she said. “But if he
causes trouble, I’m holding you personally responsible.”
Hiccup retreated out of the way and waved towards the academy entrance; with a happier-sounding snort, the Nightmare started to scuttle over, and Camicazi yelped and grabbed hold.

“Did you give her a Nightmare because she is a nightmare?” Snotlout groused, as the Nightmare ducked out through the entrance with his tail swishing behind him.

“You realise you ride a Nightmare as well?” said Astrid flatly.

Hiccup ignored them, and followed the dragon outside. He glanced back just long enough to see Elsa with her hands stretched upwards, and her magic seeming to pour back down into them. The snow followed back down into the academy, with a flutter of wind that caught curls of snow from the edge of the stone and sent them fluttering down as well.

“Hey, Hiccup,” called Camicazi, from atop the Nightmare. She had wrapped her scarf over her hair and face again, but he could hear that she was grinning. “You’d better have dragon races come Thawfest. I’m gonna be back to give you all a thrashing.”

“You’re going to need some practice, first,” he shouted back. “Now get going, before Gobber figures out who stole his hook. You know which way you’re flying?”

She glared at him.

“That’s less effective behind a scarf,” he advised her. She pulled it down just long enough to stick her tongue out at him, then yanked it back up again.

She patted the Nightmare on the neck. “Come on, Princess!” she shouted; her voice was muffled behind the scarf, but the word was more than clear enough, and Hiccup burst out laughing as the Nightmare took off, rose into the air, and paused for a moment while Camicazi got her bearings before taking off in a vaguely eastwards direction.

He let the laughter fade away and shook his head as Astrid stepped up next to him and dropped the ice bucket at his feet. In her other hand, she had a real bucket, which she dangled from one finger as she raised an eyebrow.

Hiccup spun round to Elsa, who had Toothless on one side of her and Heather on the other as she made her way back up out of the arena. Toothless broke away and bounded across the distance to Hiccup, lolloping around him in a circle and then stopping, tongue lolling out of his mouth and snow on his nose. Chuckling, Hiccup reached over to brush it off.

“Well, I’m glad that someone’s enjoying the early start,” he said. There was only just enough light in the sky for Camicazi to be able to make a good heading home, and they had already been up a couple of hours to be sure that she was ready. He glanced over to Elsa. “You want me to switch to the normal bucket?”

“I can take them back,” she said, holding out a hand. “I will walk.”

“I need accompaniment before midday, what can I say?” said Heather, with a shrug. Hiccup wondered if that was heading off anyone’s questions, either.

“I’ve got room on Stormfly,” Astrid said, patting Stormfly’s saddle as the Nadder padded over to her through the snow. “And don’t even say it, Snotlout.”

“The second space on Hookfang’s saddle is already claimed,” Snotlout said, still clutching Yakkity protectively.
“I’m good, thanks,” said Heather, with another of those smiles where Hiccup was not sure whether it was real or not. She unfolded her scarf like a hood, pulling it up to cover her hair. “I’m in a walking mood today.”

“I’ll see you back in the village, then,” said Hiccup. He gave Toothless’s saddle a quick half-shake, to see if it moved, and was relieved that it did not. Looking up, he caught Astrid’s eye unexpectedly, and was quite sure that half the blood in his body rushed to his face as he blushed to see her smile. He smiled back all the same, feeling the snow melting as it hit his cheeks, then looked away hastily as if someone was going to see him doing so. “I’ll, uh, I’ll take the bucket, though. The wooden bucket.” He hastily bent down to move things from one or the other, hoping that it would hide the look on his face. “I recognise most of… that might be a part of my spare foot, for Loki’s sake…”

“Well, I am heading home with my property,” Snotlout put in, sounding more than a little put out. He grunted as he swung into the saddle, still muttering about Bog Burglars as if he were honestly surprised that one of them had proceeded to steal things.

Hiccup finished moving everything to the wooden bucket and straightened up, brushing the worst of the snow off his gloves again. It was snowing heavily enough to already be settling in the bucket, but there was almost no wind, and that would be the most important part for Camicazi handling her first solo flight.

He paused, and straightened up. “I can’t believe we just gave a Bog Burglar a dragon,” he said, as it slowly sank in. He had known Camicazi for years, and even if he had only met her a handful of times and they had spent most of them arguing, it was still strange to realise that she was a Bog Burglar. Turning, he caught Astrid’s gaze again, and this time there was no room for blushing as he felt something open up in his chest and fill up with warmth. “We just gave a Bog Burglar a dragon,” he repeated.

“You did,” said Astrid.

A messy, uncontained grin spread across his face, and laughter bubbled up through him. “We put a viking on a dragon. Not a Berkian. Another viking.” He spread his arms, a giddying realisation rushing through him, suddenly feeling as if he were the one that could fly. “It’s not just Berk any more. It’s the archipelago. It’s the start of the archipelago. We did it.”

Astrid rolled her eyes. “You did it,” she said again, and he knew what she was trying to say but it didn’t make sense, not when he could not have done it without the academy, and Berk, and even Elsa being willing to show her magic and her hand and be honest about what Berk was. About how this damp lump of rock in the middle of the half-frozen seas could become the home of dragons and magic, and how they weren’t even anything unusual except for their stubbornness and it didn’t even matter.

Because any island could do it. And that was what made it so amazing, so wonderful, and he was still laughing to himself even though Astrid was giving him that fond smile, with a hint of confusion, which meant that she did not understand what was going through his head but she was happy for him all the same. He didn’t even know when he had come to recognise the expression. But before he knew it, she was standing right in front of him, and his heart felt too big in his chest with the amazement that someone who was not a Berkian had seen dragons, and understood them, and climbed onto the back of one.

The Quiet-Lifes had been one thing, and perhaps it would have felt something like this when it had sunk in what they had done. But Camicazi had been too much at the forefront of his thoughts for him to take it in, and it hit him like a wave that dragons were moving outside Berk. That one more
island, soon to be two more islands, wanted to stop fighting.

He cupped Astrid’s jaw, looking at her in wonder, unable to put words to the joy bursting through him, unable to find words to thank her properly for being there through it all. Instead he kissed her, and she gave a muffled squeak of surprise at his lips against hers but then kissed him back, warm lips and cold nose and her breath hot and damp against his skin. His heart was racing in his chest, so fast that it felt like he was flying again, and he was still smiling against her mouth as her glove brushed his cheek.

“Thank you,” he breathed, as she pulled away. Even in the depths of winter, with her lips slightly chapped with cold and her hair scraped back more fiercely than usual, he did not want to stop drinking in each detail of her features.

She half-frowned. “For what?”

“For… you.” He gave up, and then Astrid was laughing as well. He kissed her again, leaning into the warm touch of her lips, just able to catch the scent of her skin despite the snow trying to get up his nose again, until another burst of laughter broke from her and she pulled back, glanced over to their side, and coughed pointedly.

It dawned, far, far too late, that Elsa and Heather were still standing outside the academy with them. Elsa had her eyes averted, and was fiddling with her hair, while Heather looked amused.

“You two are adorable,” Heather said.

Hiccup tried to come up with something that represented an answer, and only managed an indignant splutter instead. Which, when Astrid was already laughing, did not help. She punched him in the shoulder, hard enough to catch him off-guard, and he rested his fist against his lips as if that would somehow hide what he had been doing. Even though they had seen, and they knew, and Astrid was not even walking away from him, did not seemed ashamed or embarrassed to have been seen with him kissing her.

“I object to the word adorable, by the way,” said Astrid, pointing at Heather. She whistled her tune for Stormfly, and the Nadder walked across to rub her cheek to Astrid’s outstretched hand. “And I retract my offer of a ride back to Berk.”

“Looks like I missed my chance, then.” Heather made an airy gesture with her hands, looking straight at Hiccup, and it took his mind a moment to piece together her teasing tone with what she had said right before going to deal with Camicazi.

He tried for a retort, and found himself wagging a finger at her instead. “You…”

“Are walking home,” she finished for him. “I get it. See you back in Berk!”

Rather than face any further teasing, Hiccup pulled himself Toothless’s saddle, and with a tilt of his weight took them into the air. The bright sound of Astrid’s laughter hit him just as they took off, though, and another sheepish smile spread across his face even as the cold wind squirrelled through every crack in his clothes. He wrapped his cloak as tightly around himself and the bucket as he could, but let the smile be.
Unfortunately, that smile was starting to fade by the time that he pulled into land outside his house. As huge as it was to see Camicazi, a Bog Burglar, on a dragon, it had been an almost spur-of-the-moment move and was not one of the things with which he had been struggling for moons.

“So,” said Astrid, landing not that far away and sliding to the ground as well. “What’s next on your list?”

He couldn’t help laughing. There was an edge of hysteria to it, he knew that, but there was something about the absurdity that was like a blow to the chest.

Astrid frowned. “Are you all right?”

“I have a list,” Hiccup said, getting control of himself again. He could feel the humourlessness of his own smile. “I actually have a list, but I made it before Camicazi fell through the ceiling, so she wasn’t even on it when it started. So I have yet to get started on my list.”

She crossed her arms and cocked her hip. “Well… what’s first on your list then?”

“Well, it was going to be speaking to Elsa about why she and Anna were arguing, but since she’s not home I think it’s going to be talking to Anna about why she and Elsa were arguing.”

That made the playfulness on Astrid’s face slip away. “They were arguing?”

“Yeah, I walked into the middle of it. And I got one version from Anna, but it wasn’t all that coherent, so I need to speak to her again. And to Elsa. It sounded complicated.” He rubbed the back of his neck, brushing at snow-damp hair. It was starting to get long again. “Never realised having siblings would be this much work.”

At least Astrid understood that one. She smiled ruefully. “At least I dodged that fireball. You want a hand with that?”

“I think I’ve got it. I might ask if it’s… girl stuff,” he added, and Astrid raised an eyebrow. “I don’t know! I mean… stuff that I can’t handle. As a guy.”

“I might object to adorable, but it fits you perfectly,” said Astrid.

“You’re hilarious. Look, I’ll do the religion and Anna not liking Heather and her feeling…” he waved a hand, but knew that it was not his place to go into detail about everything that she had said. “Like things are complicated.”

“Heather’s still a problem for her?” A flicker of guilt crossed Astrid’s expression, but Hiccup shook his head.

“It’s not your fault. You were worried, with reason. But we saw Heather fight with us, and Anna didn’t.” Which was a whole other kettle of Itchyworms. But maybe, after so long living under the lies of the Silver Priests, Anna was becoming suspicious of anything that she did not see with her own eyes. He could not wholly blame her, but he was not going to start another war just so that Anna could see Heather’s true colours. “I have… bits of a plan. Almost a plan.”

“Sounds about right.”
“So first, I’m going to persuade my father to let me go looking for trolls.”

“Of course you are.” That, of all things, did not surprise her. He felt another swell of warmth in his chest, felt again that urge to kiss her, and put it firmly aside. There were too many things going on for him to be worrying about something that seemed… stable. Safe. Something that made him feel like the world wasn’t on the brink of unravelling around him.

In lieu of the kiss, he gave her a smile, and turned back home.

The weather was not too bad, but he still did not intend to leave the door open any longer than was necessary, and wrestled it closed behind Toothless before turning to survey the room. He only made it halfway around, however, before spotting the virulently green, adult Terrible Terror sitting on the table.

“That’s not Joan,” he said, and then regretted it because honestly, he did not know why he bothered sometimes. He pointed at the Terrible Terror, then realised that they had a bandage round their tail and that one of their wings was held stiffly. “Gobber, did you find a Terror in a trap?”

“Gobber is at the forge,” said his father, appearing out of the back room. His expression said that it had already been a long day, even though it was barely daylight.

Anna appeared from the bedroom, looking more awake than Hiccup would have expected at this time in the morning. She held fabric which had been a blanket, until Joan got hold of it, and was now the somewhat singed remains of a blanket, and proceeded to scoop the Terror up in it. They squawked, but did not squirm much. “Your father thought that it was you who found the dragon,” she said, sitting down at the table with the bundle in her arms.

“I can’t think why.” He made a wide gesture with his hands. “Why is there another Terror in the house?”

“He’s hurt!” said Anna. She tweaked the edge of the blanket so that the Terror could look out more easily. “Or she’s hurt. I haven’t checked yet. Thought it might be best to leave that a while.”

“Where did you find them?” Giving up on any semblance of normality today, Hiccup suspected that he was starting to better understand why Astrid just went along with his rambling so often.

“Next to the privy. I think the wind made him crash. His tail might be broken, I’m not sure. I wanted to check with Gobber.”

“They look pretty docile.” Hiccup shrugged. “I can check them over for you.”

Anna smiled. He hoped that she would forgive him for the way in which he intended to turn the conversation as he did so. But perhaps a dragon would be a better distraction than half-frozen feet on a foreign island.

It could not be a worse one, after all.

Chapter End Notes

Heather and Elsa’s side of the walk back to the town can be seen in an outtake, Snowfall.
“I’m going to talk to Elsa,” he said, once the Terror was back on the table and Anna was engaged in holding their shoulders down. She stiffened, but at least did not run away, as Hiccup started to undo the bandages on the dragon’s tail. Stoick had returned to the back room, but Hiccup kept his voice low all the same. “I haven’t yet, but I will. I, uh, was wondering if you wanted to talk again, first.

She shrugged, stiffly. “Not sure how much else there is to say.”

He slipped the bandage out from underneath, and the Terror squirmed slightly but stayed still. He was particularly worried by the lack of tail-wagging, compared to what usually went on. The Terror squeaked as he put even gentle pressure on their hips, and Hiccup frowned, but kept half of his attention on Anna out of the corner of his eye.

“How can I ask questions, then?” he hazarded.

“All right.”

It was not exactly the most effusive of replies, but it was better than nothing, he supposed. He carefully straightened out the tip of the Terror’s tail from its curve, only to be met with a yelp and an attempt to lunge away. Anna managed to keep a hold on them, and Hiccup caught them by the haunches until they stilled again.


“Is this really the best time?” said Anna.

“I figured that you wouldn’t want to run away from the Terror,” said Hiccup, honesty breaking through before he had a chance to really think about whether it was a good idea or not. Anna huffed. “Look, I just… how did the fight start?”

Anna paused for a moment, and he heard her breath out so heavily it was almost a sigh, then her hands relaxed slightly on the Terror’s shoulders. “She said something about the house that you’d offered,” she said. “I just remember realising that you must have offered us a house like you’d found one for Heather, and I just…”

Hiccup carefully touched his fingers to the Terror’s tail, about a third of the way down, little more than a brush against the hide. There was no reaction. He started to inch the touch up, delicately as he ran the wrong way over rows of scales.

“I was jealous,” Anna said finally, sounding as much embarrassed as miserable. “Because after everything that she did, you found her a house. And I know that she lost…” she hung her head, and her voice wobbled for a moment; Hiccup’s hands stilled before he found anything and the Terror broke the moment. “I know that she lost so much. But when I came here, I… I lost Arendelle. I lost my kingdom. I lost everything except Elsa. And it was worth it, I… I was sure it was worth it.”

There was pain in the way that her voice trailed off, and embarrassment again. “It’s all right to feel like you’ve lost things,” said Hiccup. “I know that you did.”

“I can’t lose Elsa as well.”

“You won’t.”
Anna laughed, though the sound was bitter. “I know that she didn’t just go to your room because she heard a noise. The other side of our bed hadn’t even been slept in.”

“Anna–”

“I know it’s not like,” she caught herself, and lowered her voice again. “I know it’s not like that. I mean, you and Astrid…” Another shrug. “And I don’t quite know where Elsa learned the phrase ‘sexual magnetism’, but I know her imitating you when I hear it.”

“That would have been over a year ago,” he admitted. “When my father tried to tell me that it wasn’t appropriate for Elsa to be in my room at night. I made a sarcastic comment about his belief in my sexual magnetism, and… then told Elsa to forget that I’d ever used such a phrase.”

“Sounds about right.” Anna shifted her hands so that she could stroke her thumb along the centre of the Terror’s back, and Hiccup took that as a cue to start moving his hands again. “Her memory can be so good, but… she says that she doesn’t remember things from when we were kids.”

“Kids forget things,” he said. The further anyone went back, the less that there was, although to judge by Anna’s sigh that was the last thing that she had wanted to hear. “But… they taught her to, as well. In the Wildlands. They told her to forget about things.”

“I know, I know. I just…” she reached up to rub at her right temple, and Hiccup did pause and look sharply at her for a moment. He could not help the glimmer of fear that there might be ice at her temple again, or glinting blue in the pupil of her eye. “It’s like, everything gets hazier back to when I’m five, and then suddenly everything is crystal clear beforehand. Like, I can’t remember what my parents were wearing the day that they left, and that was only two years ago, but I remember the dress my mother wore when she sat for the first portrait of our family all together.”

“That’s what the trolls gave you back.” He was not quite sure what else to said; he certainly had no idea what he should suggest for her to do. It did remind him, though, of the bucket at his feet, and he ducked away for a moment to retrieve the troll pendant from it and dangle it. “Which, by the way, this was retrieved from Camicazi this morning.”

Anna went to grab at the base of her throat worriedly, then released the Terrible Terror to lunge towards the bucket. Hiccup just about managed to catch the dragon before they bolted, and did his best not to make it too much of a jolt. “My ring!”

“On your hand!” he yelped, as her shoulder struck his ribs on the way down. Anna paused, left hand still on the table as she had bent down, and looked at her own hand in bewilderment. Hiccup coughed as she straightened back up again, but was at least relieved that she had not bent down further. “Hand, Anna.”

“How did it get…”

“Camicazi stole the pendant, but she guessed that the ring was important,” he explained, as Anna mercifully stepped away before straightening back up again. “So she put it on your hand. Luckily she didn’t realise that the pendant was magical, otherwise she probably would have made more of an attempt to keep hold of it.”

Although, to be fair, he did not know how thoroughly she had needed to be searched in the first place.

Anna slipped the pendant back out of his hands, undid the knots to put her ring back on, and then tied it back around her neck. “Menace,” she muttered.
“She’s been called that and worse,” he said. He nodded his head to the Terror, and waited until Anna took over the hold on their shoulders before moving back to their tail and trying to remember exactly where he had reached. He barely had to slide his touch any distance before the Terror shrieked and tried to yank away again. “All right! I think we’ve found the problem bit…”

He did not much want to try to work further on it while the Terror was still conscious, but he was not sure whether getting a Terrible Terror drunk was the worst idea that he’d ever had, or just right up there on the list.

“I think I need to ask Gobber whether he’s ever given a dragon henbane or poppyblack,” he admitted. He did not remember seeing it in any of the notes which he and Fishlegs had worked through, but he suspected it was the sort of thing that Gobber would not have bothered writing down, before. There was a grim suspicion in the back of his mind that it would have been more about keeping the dragon manageable, and not about preventing it from feeling pain. “Sorry. I think it might be broken.”

“Can something be done about it?”

“We can probably work out some way to splint it or strap it. If all else fails, amputate the tail and they can get on like Smokey does. As long as it’s below the legs, there’s no reason for it to be fatal.” Anna winced, though whether it was at the idea or at the casual way in which he put it forwards, he was not quite sure, and he reminded himself again that she was an Arendellen, not a Berkian, no matter how she dressed or what language she spoke.

With a chirp, Joan jumped up, caught the edge of the table, and scrabbled up while beating her wings frantically. She made it over, paused to look with one eye and then the other at the new Terror, then scuttled over with a curious chirruping sound. The Terror rumbled, or at least the closest and deepest equivalent that a Terror could manage, but allowed Joan to come closer and sniff curiously about their face.

“That’s better than I expected,” said Hiccup, as the Terror sniffed back, then dropped their chin to the table and Joan kept sniffing. He stroked one of the dragon’s legs in what he hoped was a vaguely apologetic, or at least soothing, way. “I can see if Gobber is needed at the forge or whether he’s just taking the opportunity,” he offered. “Or we can wait for him to get back.”

Anna looked across at him. There were shadows beneath her eyes, and he was not sure whether he was just noticing them more or whether they really were more pronounced than he had seen them before. He was about to suggest that he stay, and they talk further, when the door opened and Elsa hurried in, a whirl of snow about her.

She went through much the same routine of closing the door and scanning the room as Hiccup had, and her eyes as well landed on the Terrible Terror and stayed there, brow furrowing as she frowned. Then her gaze settled straight on Hiccup, and she tilted her head pointedly.

“It wasn’t me!” Hiccup protested.

“I’m going to take it down to see Gobber,” Anna announced. She scooped the Terror up and wrapped them into the blanket in one sweep, arranged them in her arms so that their tail was supported, and swept straight over to the door. She was still dragging her cloak around her as she hurried in, a whirl of snow about her.

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Elsa half-reached after her, then the door swung closed between them again and Elsa drew back, confusion turning to pain in her eyes. It was like seeing her fold in on herself, her shoulders falling and her hands curling into her chest, and Hiccup realised again just how much change he had seen
in her.

He hurried across, closed the door the rest of the way, and turned to face Elsa. When he took a
deep breath to speak, he felt the chill of cold, and only tentatively put his hand on her bare upper
arm. At least she did not pull away again.

“She is still angry,” Elsa said, turning her head sharply away to look towards the fire.

Hiccup dared to squeeze her arm gently. “She doesn’t… know how to argue,” he said. That earned
him a vaguely annoyed glance. “All right, she doesn’t know what to do after arguing.” Not that
Elsa was doing all that much better, if he were completely honest, but he could see at least why
neither of them really knew what they were doing. “Which I at least have a certain amount of
practice with, so I was hoping to help with that.”

Elsa sighed.

“All right, come on.” He grabbed his cloak again, very aware that he had not even managed to sit
down since entering the house. “Let’s go find a clearing.”

“What?”

“I know that some of your evenings, you have been practising your magic, right?” The fact that she
did not protest, just watched him pull back on his cloak and retrieve his gloves from the shelf, was
a clear enough answer. “So I’m guessing that there’s a clearing or two that you usually use for
that.”

“Yes,” said Elsa, faintly.

“Come on, then.” He hauled the door open, and ignored the snow that immediately seemed to find
its way into his ear. “First tip: don’t argue in the same place you want to have dinner with
someone. And don’t sit there to mull on those arguments, either. Let’s go stand in a clearing and
talk about it, that normally works better.”

Why in Thor’s name anybody ever listened to him about things, Hiccup still had no idea. But
somehow Elsa did, and within no time at all she had shown him to a clearing in the woods, not far
from Berk but behind a stretch of firethorn bushes which she held apart with a sheet of ice to walk
easily through, where there was not a footprint to mar the snow and barely an axe-scar on any of
the nearby trees. Toothless sniffed at the narrow path through the thorns that Elsa’s ice had
opened, snorted derisively, and then launched himself through the tree branches after them instead,
slamming down and immediately making a mess of the pristine snowy surface.

There was no likely-looking rock or log, so Hiccup gestured for Toothless to lie down at the edge
of the clearing, and then sat sideways on his saddle. He gave Toothless’s shoulder a grateful rub,
but kept his attention on Elsa as she stood in the centre of the clearing. Sure enough, this time the fall of her shoulders was something towards being relaxed, and the snow fell around them in a natural, unhurried way.

“How’s the magic been going?”

She held up her left hand, and light rolled down it to end neatly at her wrist. This time the ice looked quite different from usual, though, and Hiccup squinted slightly at the pale blue before Elsa took pity and walked closer to him, holding out her hand in a delicate offer.

“Is that… fabric?” He took her hand carefully, turning it over to examine the palm. Her gloves had been delicate and fitted enough, but the glove she now wore looked as fine as linen, felt as soft in his hand.

“I think so. Or… close to it. I just made the links smaller and smaller.”

It wholly covered her hand. Hiccup smiled, running his fingers over the delicate surface and tugging at faint memories of blocky, jagged ice shapes against her skin.

“And it does not eat fabric any more,” Elsa added. “At least, unless I want it to.”

At that, he looked up in surprise. “It doesn’t?”

She passed her other hand over his, in a light wave and with fluttering fingers, and in a roll of pale blue ice covered his hand as well. Before Hiccup knew it, his leather glove was covered in an ice one, and he peered at his own hand to see that, indeed, the leather was still perfectly in place beneath.

“Congratulations.”

He suspected that there had been more, and was fairly sure that he was right when Elsa managed something of a smile in response and stepped away. As her hand slipped from his, both gloves faded away, and as Elsa reached the centre of the circle and fell still, the air stopped moving around her.

It took Hiccup a moment to spot it, the way that the snow hung perfectly in the air. He reached up and touched a snowflake gently; it crumbled away on his fingertip. The effect was a little eerie, and beautiful, but he wondered exactly what it meant for her powers that she could stop snow that was not even hers to have created.

He realised that Elsa was looking at him as if she were waiting for approval, and he made sure to let her see his smile. Relief flickered in her eyes, and she raised her left hand, watching her own movements carefully as she drew a first, and then a second, elegant circle in the air. Fine pins of ice glittered into being within the swirl of her hand, glittering like shards of diamonds, and then she flourished her hand to the left. The spines flashed in the air, so fast that Hiccup could barely follow them with his eyes until they were cutting pinecones from their branches, one each, with tight little snapping sounds.

The pinecones fell softly into the snow, half a dozen in a tidy row, and Hiccup saw in his mind the huge spray of spines that had consumed the arena and cut men to shreds on Outcast Island. But it was so much more controlled, so much more delicate, and it was easy to see the difference between a delicate flick of Elsa’s hand and the wrench of her body that it had once been.

“You could swat flies with that,” he said. “In the summer.”
Still looking relieved, Elsa warmed to her movements, gesturing to him almost playfully. “Throw something,” she said. He frowned. “Anything, it does not matter. Throw something in the air.”

Hiccup went to pat himself down, then remembered that he had been sure not to take anything with him to the arena in case Camicazi had stolen it. He rifled through Toothless’s saddlebags instead, and after a few embarrassingly long seconds found himself holding half of a dried fish and with no other real options.

Toothless raised his head and looked round at the smell of the fish, and Hiccup hastily held it as far away as he could. “Don’t you dare,” said Hiccup.

Toothless licked his lips hopefully.

“Er…” Hiccup waved the fish by the tail. “Will this do?”

He had to credit Elsa for keeping a straight face at that one, and nodding. He tossed the fish gently in her direction, a shallow lob, expecting her to pluck it from the air. Instead, Elsa swept her hand round and up, and ice formed beneath the fish, catching it in the air. For a moment it held there, long enough that Hiccup was sure that the fish was resting on the surface of the ice, and not frozen into it, then Elsa allowed her hand to drift to the right, still palm-up, and the fish followed.

It was like watching a platter being carried by an invisible person. The ice moved smoothly along, and the fish with it, and Hiccup found himself laughing softly from pure delight as Elsa guided it to trace a path curving upwards, and then down again. She made a flicking motion; the fish was tossed into the air, and as Elsa turned over her hand the sheet of ice which she was guiding flipped as well, just in time for the fish to land on the reverse of it instead.

She traced another wave through the air, bringing the ice and the fish back again, before tilting her hand and the ice to let the fish slip into the snow right in front of Toothless’s nose. He opened his mouth eagerly, then paused and looked round at Hiccup.

“Yeah, go on, bud.” He patted Toothless’s shoulder.

With a pleased rumble, Toothless gulped the fish down, and Hiccup shook his head fondly. When he turned back to Elsa, he could see that she was more relaxed, and was just wondering whether it would be better or worse to ask her about Anna when her eyes went wide.

“Wait!” she said. “There is one more!”

Eagerness shone in her voice, and he could not have brought himself to interrupt her for the world. Elsa centred herself in the clearing, glanced around the snow about her now marked with the occasional footprint, and made a deep scooping motion with both of her hands. She bit her lip, but was still smiling, and Hiccup gasped as he realised that a rectangular floor of ice was emerging from the snow beneath her feet, smooth and shining blue. Beams stretched upwards, bowing like the ribs of a giant beast, until they met above her in a perfect row of arches and he recognised the bones of a house. The ice flowed and spread, reaching between the crucks and forming the frame, and then Elsa clenched her hands and snatched them down again, and tiles flowed down the roof like drops seeding one into another.

The roof flowered down, then with a flick of her wrists the short walls beneath rose up to reach it. The ice was clear and blue, enough that he could see the outline of Elsa barely distorted as she turned, gestured for the back wall of the house to rise with her right hand, and then looked back to bring up the front wall with her left. The ice formed the doorway as it rose, thickening into a doorframe, then squares seemed to melt away to form the windows.
Hiccup got to his feet as he finally remembered that he had the capacity to do so, and ran to the open doorway to peer inside. Elsa’s hand curved in an elegant wave from beside the door to along the left side, and Hiccup laughed as stairs flowed out from the walls at her gesture and beams flowed up from the ground to meet them. Her hand dropped again, and the wall that separated the front and back rooms of the house formed to her gesture, still clear and fine, doorways coming into being apparently automatically. He could see the slightly deeper, shimmering blue where the walls of the workshop were closing as well.

With a final turn back to him, eyes bright and cheeks pink, Elsa made one last flourish with her hand in the middle of the floor. The shape of a hearth rose up out of it, a perfect rectangle within a rectangle and just within the place that it was at home, and as a final touch it was so wonderful and so small that Hiccup leaned on the doorway and smiled, uselessly, feeling another wave of awe break in his chest.

Because he remembered her palace of thorns so clearly. He had not seen her build it, but he had seen results, the hideous briars and the spines and the pillars of light that had turned dark and cracked around them. But now he stood in a replica of his own house, formed in ice and with an aura of wonder and hope, not of fear, about it.

“What do you think?” said Elsa, breathlessly, as his eyes were still tracing around it.

Toothless stuck his head through the doorway, looked around, and snorted in a way that very much sounded like confusion.

“It’s beautiful,” he said, resting a hand on Toothless’s head. At least, until Toothless barged him out of the way to enter the house completely, sniffing about the floor with his flaps back but shoulders relaxed. “It’s… you must have been practising for moons!”

“Not quite that long.” Elsa folded her hands in front of her again. “But… since I have been able to use both arms again. I made smaller versions at first, to feel how the structure worked, until finally…” Again she gestured around herself, the movement so airy and almost inconsequential compared to the enormity of what she was using it to gesture to.

He wasn’t sure what to say, how to wrap words around his amazement. “That was faster than putting up a tent, as well,” was what he found himself saying, and Elsa pursed her lips and looked and him in confusion until he started laughing at his own foolish words. Then she giggled as well, one hand to her lips and shaking her head as she looked at him, and he held up one finger as he tried to muster something better. “That… that was not meant to be aloud. And that was also not the first time I’ve done that today, oh gods.” He really needed to get a proper night’s sleep. “What I meant is that you did that very fluidly, and… planned.” He met her eyes again. “You knew what you were doing. And that was the best part to see.”

Her smile faltered. “I… some of the times that I said I was going to practise my magic, I visited Heather,” she said. Her eyes traced Hiccup’s features, though he was not sure how he was supposed to react. “Yes, I thought that you might know. But it was not often – I did come to practise.”

“I don’t mind that you went to visit Heather sometimes,” said Hiccup.

Elsa sighed, and turned half-away from him, wrapping her right arm across her chest. “It is not you who I thought would.”

Unfortunately, he knew exactly what she meant by that. For all that he did not want to see her grow this serious, the drawing together of her brows and the way that her body language stiffened again,
he knew that he had to speak to her about it. Sooner or later.

“I just… I did not want to fight Anna each time that I spoke to Heather. Or see the look of disapproval even if she did not speak up. And I knew that she would disapprove. I do not want…” she let out a heavy, angry breath, as her right hand curled around her left shoulder. “I do not want to choose between my sister or my friendships. Because I will choose Anna, but I do not want to resent her for it. Not after everything.”

“I’ll be talking to her,” said Hiccup, reaching up to rub the back of his neck. “She wants to protect you, but… I know she’s going about it wrong.” He wondered whether she was trying to cling to their relationship as the one thing that she could protect, and turning it into something she was trying to own in her fear. “It looks like she and Heather just… clash.”

“I am–” Elsa cut herself off abruptly, biting her lip so hard that it turned pale, and snapped her gaze away. The silence stretched out as Hiccup hesitated, then finally stepped over to beside her and put his right hand beside hers.

“Elsa?”

Her gaze stayed firmly on the wall behind him, but her jaw seemed to set, until she spoke. “I am not a wildling to her,” she said. “Even though I have said I used to be. I am not an outsider.”

“You aren’t–” Hiccup began to say, but it was reflexive and he realised with a pang that perhaps she was still far more of an outsider than he wanted to admit.

She spoke straight over him. “I am not an eight-year-old girl whose world revolves around her younger sister. She sees… me.” Finally, Elsa met Hiccup’s eyes again. “She sees now. And I think that it helps her, to show me how to work with those southern numbers, or to talk about where she has been. She is more likely to cook and to eat if I am there, I know that much. She is…”

This time the words trailed away, and Hiccup was not sure how to end them even in his own mind. Whether Elsa knew how, either. “Her friendship means a lot to you,” he settled for.

A nod. “She does.”

Not quite the question that he had asked, but he did not push it. “Anna had never been to Berk before,” he said, instead, and it was clear in Elsa’s gaze that she did not know where he was going, but she waited patiently. “I knew her, but we’d only met a handful of times, and written a few letters. Even after all this time, you’re still the person she knows best. I’m going to try to make her feel more secure, and I hope that will help.” His tongue traced his lower lip, and he waited until Elsa slowly nodded, either in realisation or acceptance. “And… I want to offer her fiancé shelter in Berk, as well. We’re going to go and rescue him, in a few days.”

“As soon as the weather was on their side, and he had something more of a plan.

“He is the one who would not burn me,” said Elsa, slowly and cautiously. He nodded. “Do you think that he would come?”

Considering Hans spoke no Northur, had never visited Berk, and had only very briefly met Hiccup right before everything had fallen apart and Hiccup had dragged Anna away, Hiccup was not entirely sure either. But on the other hand, he was not sure where Hans was currently being kept. “I think I’d choose even Berk over a cell in the Silver Priest’s Temple,” he said, honestly. And Hiccup, at least, could apologise for his part in what had happened.

“And you are sure that they have not made him face the Trials?” she added, softer and more grim.
The thought had not crossed his mind, and Hiccup flinched bodily, remembering too well the sight of Elsa with wood piled at her feet. He could not help but be impressed that Elsa stayed strong before him, although he was aware of a darker tone spreading through the ice at their feet.

“Considering we haven’t heard from Kristoff in nearly two moons? No,” he admitted. “But we have to try, at least.”

“To meet the man my sister wants to marry…” Elsa rubbed her shoulder, the heel of her hand just over where the scar must have been, and her eyes traced down to rest at about Hiccup’s shoulder-height again. “I would like that chance. I wish it were not like this.”

“He’ll definitely need his own house. We’ve run out of rooms,” said Hiccup, and Elsa made a sound somewhere between a cough and a laugh. “Unless he wants to share mine, or something, but he probably won’t want pre-dawn breakfast pawing from a needy dragon.” He also would doubtless not be so interested in spending time around dragons, but hopefully he would be able to pick up Northur quickly. As for what he could do with his days, Hiccup had not yet figured that one out, but if Hans was at all knowledgeable about Arendelle’s military tactics and skills then he could give useful information on that front.

Maybe then they could start to make some progress on Arendelle, even with the Riders still needing to keep eyes on Dagur. Anna and Hans between them would be able to give them a tactical side.

“Look, I’ll be talking to Anna about everything with Heather. Not just Heather,” he added. He finally let his hand fall away from her shoulder, although when he eyed the walls he could still see the darker tone that had shaded through them. “About the fact that she doesn’t get to tell you where to go, or who to be friends with. Is there anything else you want me to bring up?” He saw Elsa hesitate, and made sure his voice was gentle. “Religion?”

“I… I do not resent her gods,” said Elsa, but her tone was still pained. “But if—” she caught herself, but he did not miss the word. “But her gods, they are not there for me. I cannot pray with her, I cannot…” her voice cracked, shook slightly, and he went to take her arm again but she waved him away, swallowing hard. It was a moment before she could speak again, it seemed. “Your gods are also not mine, but you have never asked me to pray to them. Anna tells me that they were comforting to her after our parents were lost,” the word lost had a bitter edge to it, and he suspected that it was Anna’s, and not Elsa’s, choice to use it, “but they were not for me.”

“All right,” he said quietly. He made a note to be sure, as well, that any attempt which Anna made to patch things up with Heather did not involve religion.

“And,” Elsa added abruptly, “not Anna – Heather. She is, well, it is not mine to say. But I said that you would help, if she spoke to you.”

“If she comes, I’ll be ready to listen,” he said.

“Thank you.”

He glanced around them again, but the ice was not growing any darker and there were no cracks appearing. “So, uh, is there anything else that you wanted to show me?”

Elsa still looked uncertain for a moment, and it ached in his chest, but then she smiled. Slow at first, then sure with a hint of wickedness, and she backed up a few dance-light steps with a double-circle of her left hand that ended in a flick. Hiccup had just enough time to register the spark of light above his head before her hand dropped again, and the next that Hiccup knew he was
staggering beneath a net of ice.

“What the!” the strands were finer than his little finger, spread like a spiderweb weighted at its corners, and he looked around wildly to see that the net was large enough to have covered both him and Toothless. “That is not what I meant!” he spluttered.

Elsa started giggling. Toothless cocked his head and tried to nibble on the ice, then confusion spread across his face and he licked at it instead. Hiccup tried to disentangle himself, ended up with an arm sticking out through the holes, and already knew that his Gronckle iron knife would not work but had to try anyway just for the sake of his dignity.

It was a lost cause.

With a sigh, he gave up, trying to keep a straight face as he looked at Elsa but all too aware of how ridiculous he looked with one arm stuck through the net and his hair sticking up at odd angles. Toothless sneezed.

“All right. I give in. Can I come out now?”

“Since you ask so nicely.”
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

Warning: Hans. There's some red flag behaviour from him, skeevy but nothing overt, because whatever else is going on... Hans will be Hans.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Talking to Anna was like trying to dig a hole in sand. Every time that he thought he was getting somewhere in the conversation, every time he thought that he had gotten as far as he needed to, something would slip and crash back in and there would be tears in her eyes again. She acknowledged that Elsa needed to have her own freedom and agency, of course she did, with a pained tone in her voice that she had ever not been allowing it. But within a few sentences she would be back worrying and fretting, and Hiccup found it exhausting just to listen to, never mind to experience.

Elsa was not much easier, certainly not as much as Hiccup might have hoped. She was more defiant over the fact that she had been lying, even when Hiccup tried to emphasise that they would both need to work on this, and when he tried to bring up the fact that sooner or later they would be returning to Arendelle, the air turned cold around them. He had not thought about how much that might trouble her, and cursed himself all over again.

Stoick, unsurprisingly, was not impressed with the idea of looking for trolls. He was probably correct in pointing out that Hiccup did not even know exactly where he was looking, as the tunnels meant he did not know where the Lost Valley was, and with the clouds low and thick the sides of the mountains themselves were swathed. On a clear, still night, perhaps he would have been better able to figure things out. But for now, Stoick flatly forbade it.

Perhaps it was progress that Hiccup only took to the sky to shout his frustration to the clouds, rather than taking it out on his father. He knew, in a cold and rational way, that Stoick was right, but it did not really make it any easier.

After a couple of days, though, he knew that he could not delay it any longer, and for lack of any other source of information sat down with Anna in the quietest moment that he could find.

“Of the people you know in Arendelle,” he said, side-by-side on the upper part of the stairs and looking over the attempts to cook that were going on below, “is there anyone that you trust who would know where Hans is?”

Anna bit her lip, and ran a hand down the back of the green Terrible Terror in her lap. Gobber had knocked the dragon out with a few drops of poppyblack, set the broken tail with a sound that made Anna go pale, and strapped it up firmly. Joan, back to dangling around Anna’s shoulders, did not seem to mind their presence. “I think… Kai, or Gerda, would be the most likely to know,” she said. She traced a scar on the dragon’s shoulder, old and faded. “And they’ve been at the Castle since before I was even born… if I trusted anybody, I’d trust them.”

Hiccup had been worried about what names she might offer, but having met Kai he was a little more reassured. Kai had been willing to warn them that it looked like the Trial of Fire was being readied, and had not stopped them from going after Hans. “All right,” he said. “Do you know
where their rooms are, in the Castle?"

"Kai is on the first floor," Anna said, without even hesitating. At least a lifetime spent in the Castle
meant that she knew her way around it well. "Facing inwards, towards the gardens. It’s so that he
can keep an eye on some of the other servants’ quarters that are around there."

Less than ideal, then. Hiccup frowned.

"But Gerda lives on the top floor, just below the attics," she added, grabbing his wrist with one
hand and sounding almost desperately optimistic. "Because a lot of the servant girls are up there,
instead. She’s on the end of the gallery."

"You think we could get there from the roof?" he said, bluntly. She nodded. "Right. Then Gerda it
is. We’ll need dark clothes, and Toothless’s dark tail. But Gerda should give us a chance. Can you
be ready to go tonight?"

Anna’s eyes went wide, but to her credit she did not pull away from him. There was just a
moment’s hesitation, as he held carefully to the crystal of an idea within him lest it crumble in his
hold, and then she caught herself, set her jaw, and nodded.

"Good." He patted her knee. "Then let’s get back to Arendelle."

By the time that the gentle, warm dark of evening had turned to the cold dark of night, of course, it
did not feel half as simple a decision as it had on hearing Anna’s words. Nobody looked too happy
with Hiccup’s plan, but he was not challenged, and he took it as tacit permission as he wrapped up
in warm, dark grey layers, having told Anna to do the same thing, and changed Toothless’s
distinctive red tail for a plain near-black one.

Elsa hugged Anna very tightly, face wan and lips pressed tightly together. She breathed something
against Anna’s hair, but Hiccup certainly could not hear it, and looked as if she was only
reluctantly letting go again.

"We’ll be back before sunrise," Anna said, even as fear continued to flicker in Elsa’s eyes. She
stroked Elsa’s cheek. "All of us."

Elsa nodded, but did not speak. Hiccup simply nodded to Stoick, then to Gobber, and hastily
climbed into the saddle. He had a safety harness with him, but was intending to simply sit Hans in
the middle of them, where they could both help him stay in place. Though Toothless would not be
able to hit his top speeds with all three of them, if he could carry Stoick and Hiccup then he would
certainly be able to cope with adding Hans to the mix. It would just be a matter of making sure that
Hans sat still enough for Toothless to fly cleanly back.

Anna’s arms were tight on Hiccup’s waist as she climbed into the saddle behind him and they took
off. The clouds were low and thick, and Hiccup knew that they did not have to fly too high to be all
but invisible against them.
He considered saying something, but was not sure what he could offer Anna that could make what they were about to do any better, any easier. Instead, he concentrated on flying them south as fast and as smoothly as was reasonable, though he could not help glancing down to see the momentary specks of fire in the forest below which, he now knew, had to be wildlings.

They followed the spine of the mountains, south-south-west, below the clouds and where the air was not so thin. Even so, he could feel it in the way that his heart beat a little faster, in the way that he had to drag in air through the scarf keeping the cold wind from his face. If he was feeling it, he knew that Anna would have it worse, and he dropped them lower again even though it put them all but in the shoulders of the mountains. There were several passes that were low enough to march through, or would be in a less dangerous land, and he steered them through one of them with fingers aching from the cold and thighs tense with nerves more than the difficulty of flying.

He twisted in the saddle to half-face Anna, making sure that he kept his hips level to keep Toothless flying straight. “I’ll take us through the pass, then swing west when we hit the gorge. You’ll need to guide me once the castle is in sight.”

Anna nodded, and he thought that she said ‘all right’ but it was all but lost beneath the wind. She looked a little bit like she was going to be sick, and he knew full well it was nothing to do with the flying. But there was still determination in her eyes, and Hiccup nodded in return and turned back to concentrate on the path ahead.

Going between the mountains was easy, but he had to squint to pick out the dark ribbon of the gorge far below them. Arendelle’s pale walls stood out more, and he could not help looking to the north-east where Elsa had ripped one section apart. It looked to have been partially rebuilt, but was not as high or clean as the other parts of the wall.

The firelights and torches of Arendelle reflected from the clouds above them, just enough that Hiccup was able to pick out dim shapes in the darkness. As he had promised, he moved out west, arcing through the darkness just beyond Arendelle’s reach, dropping down past the snowline to camouflage them against the wooded hills at the foot of the mountains. He slowed them, the wind less cutting on his cheekbones and around his eyes, and sat up slowly to guide Anna to do the same where she was pressed tightly to his back.

He did not mention that her fingers were painful where they were digging into his waist.

“All right,” he said, looking back over his shoulder. “I need you to guide me in.”

The rooves of Arendelle Castle were green, not the grey-black that would have been ideal for Toothless to hide against. He knew that there would be guards in the towers that surrounded the courtyard, but hoped that at least they, unlike Viking villages, would not be thinking to watch the skies.

Anna reached over his shoulder to point, and he tilted his head to make sure that he could look as cleanly down her arm as possible. “There,” she said. “The highest floor that runs the full width of the castle. She’s on the front, facing the courtyard. The first room after the… the bit with the steeper roof.”

“We’ll have to come in from the water,” he replied. “And fast.”

Toothless could land on the tip of a pole, if he needed to, but settling on a steep, potentially icy roof was going to be harder. And they were going to need to come in fast and low to limit their risk of being seen.
He felt Anna nod more than actually saw it. As he settled low to Toothless’s back again, Anna came with him, and though two of them would never be able to make as streamlined a form it was better than them sitting upright. Drawing up his memories of Arendelle Castle from the day, he overlaid them onto what he could see, and picked out a dark hollow that would be in the lee of the highest levels, at the end of the very roof under which Anna had said Gerda would be.

There was rope in their packs. It would do.

He patted Anna on the knee, which he hoped she would understand as a warning, and leaned in. Toothless responded to the tilt of Hiccup’s hips, and fluidly sped up, the wind starting to whistle again as they dropped down to barely any higher than the tips of the waves. Moving his hands from the saddle to Toothless’s back, Hiccup used his touch as much as his weight to tilt and shift them into line, trying to pick what he hoped would be the right angle to approach.

Anna buried her face in his back. Hiccup forced himself to remain calm and level, to not let his own tension affect Toothless’s flying. As they neared the castle, so low to the sea that the walls were above them, he cut up and left, cutting close to the castle’s northernmost tower at the level devoid of windows and barely feet above the outermost walls. With a tuck of Toothless’s wings, they swung sharply to skim along the rear of the roof that Anna had pointed out, and landed with a soft patter of feet as Toothless slowed and padded to a halt.

Toothless tucked in his wings tightly as they reached the wall of the castle, and Hiccup paused for a moment, looking around with his heart in his throat. The sound of their landing was as much a problem as the sight, he knew, and he waited to see if there would be shouts below them, or more lights appearing in the towers.

There was nothing.

“All right,” he said to Anna. He sat up, all but pushing her upright as well, and nodded for her to swing out of the saddle first. Her boots were almost silent on the slate tiles, although she wobbled and grabbed at the wall for balance, but Hiccup was careful to put his right foot down first so as not to cause sound with the left. “Gerda’s on the front, right?”

She nodded, eyes still a little wide and frightened. Hiccup retrieved the rope from Toothless’s saddlebag, slung it over his shoulder, and gestured for the dragon to curl up along the foot of the wall. In the shadow of the roof above, it was difficult to see anything but his eyes, and when Hiccup gently touched the top of his lids those closed to little more than slits as well. In all honesty, Hiccup had more trust in Toothless to stay undetected than he did in himself, but it did not hurt to be careful.

He turned back to Anna. “Come on, then.”

He dropped to his hands and knees to make his way up to the top of the roof; the angle might have been shallow, but the tiles were bitterly cold even through gloves and almost as slick as glass. On the far side, he dropped to a seated position and carefully inched down, using his right boot and not his metal foot along the way. A glance round assured him that Anna was doing the same, and for all that it felt like an eternity before they reached the edge of the roof again it was probably no time at all.

“It should be the room right below us, right?” he said, pointing straight down.

“Yes.”

Unless they’d found reason to move around the rooms of the servants, but Hiccup knew that there
was no help in thinking like that right now. If they entered the room and found that it was not Gerda’s, then they would do their best to beat a hasty retreat. That was all there was to it.

The steeper roof on the narrow central part of the castle came down within an arm’s reach of them. Thick stone loops made a pattern along the bottom, and Hiccup slung the rope around one, tying it off in a knot whose name completely escaped him but which he knew his father had taught him somewhere along the line. He gave it a hard yank to make sure that it, and the stone, held, and when it did pushed the rope down. It landed and pooled on the section of roof below with another soft thud, but this one he was not as worried about, and he did not wait before scooting to the edge and sliding down onto the roof below.

It was only some seven or eight feet, and again he made sure to touch down right foot first. Anna cursed under her breath in Arendellen as she followed him down the rope, and he helped her get her footing before they both edged the couple of feet over to the first window.

Hiccup put one hand on the frame. “This one?”

To her credit, Anna glanced around them again, as if calculating the places of the rooms inside, before nodding firmly. “Yes. This is the start of the servants’ wing.”

“All right.” Arendelle might have bothered with glass windows for rooms like Anna’s, but apparently even the longest-standing of servants did not get the same. Hiccup put his hand to the shutters, and slipped a slender, flat tool from his pocket to slip between the wooden panels. He ran it upwards, until it caught on the latch inside.

“Is that a butter knife?” Anna hissed, from behind him.

“What in Thor’s name is a butter knife?” he hissed back, trying to undo the latch. He was nowhere near as skilled at this as others, notably Camicazi, would be, but he had been able to do it once upon a time. It rattled, and he paused for a moment, hoping it would not be too noticeable.

“A knife. For butter.”

Only Arendelle. Hiccup rolled his eyes, safe in the knowledge that Anna would not be able to see that he was doing so. “It’s a Bog Burglar tool,” he said.

Confiscated some years ago, if he remembered correctly, from Bog Burglar visitors to the island. Berk went more for knocking down doors than trying to sneak in through them, but Hiccup had been a little more interested in the latter once he had realised that he mostly bounced off any door he tried to break down.

He finally managed to unhook the latch, and felt the window try to swing open immediately with the wind. Catching it, he leaned on it to hold it shut, not wanting a gust of cold air to wake Gerda up before Anna could even get into the room.

He looked round to Anna. “Ready?”

She nodded.

There was not much wind, but he knew this was still going to need to be quick, before the wicked cold got in with them. He hauled open the window, and Anna all but launched herself through, boot scraping on the sill and sending a flutter of panic through Hiccup’s chest. But there was no time to pause, and he simply followed her through, pulling the window closed behind him again as quickly as he could without letting it slam, and flicking the latch back into place.
The room was dark, and Hiccup had no warning before a hand landed on his shoulder. From the muffled squeak of surprise, though, it was Anna, and he caught her wrist before she vanished into the darkness once again. He pulled down the scarf from over his face.

“Stay still for a moment.”

He could hear their breathing in the room as he reached into his pocket with his left hand and drew out the taper there. He put it into Anna’s hold, then reached for the flint and steel in his pocket and checked the location of the taper one more time before snapping the two together.

The sound was painfully loud in the quiet room, but on the third try a spark caught and he quickly cupped his hand around the wick to make sure that the candle took properly. It flickered, then the flame grew, and even if it was not much light, it was enough.

“All right,” he said, putting the flint and steel away again. “You’re up.”

He pulled the scarf back over his face, just as Anna pulled hers down. He did not know who Gerda was among the castle staff, but if she had worked for the castle that long then there was a chance that she would recognise him as Stoick’s son, and neither of them wanted anybody to be put at risk by knowing where Anna was. He hung back as Anna crept over to the bed, lit the candle beside it, then blew out their own taper and stuffed it back in her pocket.

“Gerda.” She bent over the figure on the bed. “Gerda.”

There was no response, and Anna gave Hiccup a worried glance; he shrugged, and she turned back. Tentatively, she reached out and shook the sleeping woman’s shoulder.

“Gerda.”

Gerda started awake, saw Anna, and scrambled away across her bed snatching in her breath. Perhaps, Hiccup had to admit, she was not so much seeing Anna as seeing someone looming over her bed.

“It’s all right!” said Anna, mercifully switching over to Arendellen. “Gerda, it’s me, it’s Anna!”

Gerda paused, at least, looking at Anna with wild eyes. She had a narrow face and greying hair, and Hiccup did not think that he recognised her but was happier not taking the risk. “Anna?” she said, finally.

“Yes. Remember how when I was six, I tried to incubate those duck eggs? I lay on them for days and wouldn’t get out of bed?”

Amazement spread across Gerda’s face, and she reached to stroke Anna’s cheek with one hand, then lunged back across the bed to hug her tightly. Anna clutched her in return, with a breathless laugh, and Hiccup felt more and more out of place.

“Thank the Mothers and the Fathers that you’re all right…” Gerda said.

“I’m all right. I’m fine. I’m somewhere safe, I promise.”

“Why have you come back?” Gerda drew back again, but still cupped Anna’s cheek, looking her over as if searching for some answer written on her clothes. Although what she wore was loosely viking, Hiccup had done his best to make sure that it was as nondescript as possible. “It isn’t safe for you here…”
“I’m only here for tonight.” Pain tightened Anna’s voice, and she gripped Gerda’s free hand with both of hers. “I’m sorry, I know that I can’t stay longer. Are you all right? Are they treating you well?”

Gerda nodded, though her expression was slightly pinched. “Yes, yes. It’s settled down, now. We’re working as we always did, we just—” she caught herself, undeniable fear flickering in her eyes.

“I know what happened. That they’re saying that I’ve locked myself up in the castle,” said Anna, so quickly that the words almost blurred together. “It’s fine. Do what you have to do to stay safe. I…” her voice cracked for a moment, and she tilted her head into Gerda’s hand. “I was wrong about them. I know. I’m sorry.”

“You didn’t cause this, child,” said Gerda. “It’s been going on since before your father’s time.”

“Well, I… I’m going to fix it. I can’t yet, but I’m going to,” Anna said. There was an edge of desperation in her words, and Hiccup’s heart ached to hear it. He wanted to say that he knew what to do, but he had to protect Berk from the Berserkers before he could turn his thoughts to Arendelle. “Just stay safe until then, all right?”

Gerda half-smiled. “I’ve been in the castle thirty years, child. I’ll stay on through this. We’ll wait for you.”

“I… I came for Hans.” Anna made it sound like a confession. “I know that they arrested him, but… do you know where he is now?”

Shock sparked in Gerda’s eyes, lingered on her parted lips before she caught herself again. “Yes… yes, he’s in the northern tower. They brought him back here a few days after… what happened.”

“Thank you.” Anna’s hands were trembling where they were wrapped around Gerda’s, and Hiccup heard the thickness of tears in her voice. “And – and I need you to know,” she added, voice beginning to tremble. “That Elsa is alive. My Elsa. My sister.” Gerda was looking at her in wonder and fear both together. “She’s alive. I know that you knew, I remember that you knew,” she was babbling, and Hiccup stepped forwards wondering whether he should pull her away. “And she’s alive.”

“It was – ah!” Gerda seemed to catch sight of Hiccup, and half-pulled away again.

Anna looked round sharply, as if checking it was him, then back. “It’s all right! He brought me here. He’s a friend.”

For a moment, Hiccup wondered about speaking in Northur, but that would be more of a clue than just hearing his voice would be. He swallowed. “We aren’t here to talk about Elsa,” he said.

“It was her, wasn’t it?” said Gerda. “We did wonder, when we saw the ice, those of us who remembered her, but…”

Anna nodded. “She’s alive. And she’s all right, too, we’re both all right. And we’ll come back to Arendelle, both of us.”

He wished that she had talked to Elsa before making that promise.

“But not tonight. Not yet. I just… I just needed to know that Hans is all right.”

“Thank you.” Anna clasped Gerda’s hand more tightly, half-shaking it again. “Come morning…”

“I will be as surprised as anyone else.”

Anna hugged her again, with a shivering sigh, and hung on a moment longer than Hiccup expected before reluctantly untangling herself from Gerda’s arms and drawing away. She stepped back, then hesitated, raising one fist like gripping the tail of a question.

“Gerda,” she said, the word blunting out. “If there are others that you trust… tell them. That I’m all right, that I’ll be back.”

“Anna—” Hiccup began, but she shot him a look.

“Even if I can’t be here yet, maybe this can be a start. Don’t endanger yourself, or them, but… you can tell them.”

Gerda nodded. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

She spoke the title with deliberation, and for a moment Anna’s lips trembled again. Then she turned abruptly back around and strode back towards the window, shoulders tense and hands curled tightly into fists. Hiccup grabbed the window, unlatching it but not yet opening it, then paused and looked apologetically at Gerda.

“It’ll need closing from the inside.”

She nodded, and Hiccup turned his eyes to the floor as she reached for the robe at the foot of her bed. He heard the shift of the covers, then footsteps on the wooden floor, and he glanced up again as she came closer. She was taller than Hiccup or Anna, thin, and her hair was scraped back into a tight bun that even sleep had apparently not managed to ruffle. Anna paused as if she were about to say something, then looked back to the window, and Hiccup knew that their time was over.

He shoved the shutter open for her to climb out again, then followed her. It had started to snow again, light flutters of thin flakes, but he hoped that it would not make it harder for them to hide against the sky or on rooftops. Listening carefully, Hiccup waited until he was fairly sure that he heard the click of the latch again before stepping away and huddling close to Anna.

“We’ll need to use Toothless,” he said.

She nodded, not looking at all surprised, but he was quite sure that her abrupt silence was because she had too much to say, and not too little. He helped to hold the rope taut for her to climb up, then followed her, still doing his best to use his right foot and not his left against the wall. He untied the rope and coiled it around his arm as they crawled their way back up and over to Toothless, who looked hopeful and perked up his flaps at the sight of them.

“Almost there, bud,” said Hiccup, running a hand over Toothless’s head. He climbed back into the saddle, and once again drew up his mental image of the castle. The northern tower was not far away, but it was overlooked from several angles, and they would need to go outwards before they could come back in. He hoped that if there were guards on Hans’s rooms, that they were on the outside. But there was not much to do but to duck out against the dark sea, loop around, and come back in to land on the roof of the northern tower. It was going to be steeper, but he trusted Toothless’s sure footing and precise aim.

Once he was sure that Anna had a good seat, he did so, fast and sharp against the walls and cutting down low over the sea. Toothless was so quick that all that he could do was fix his eyes on their target, keep his own frame low and let Anna press close against his back, and manipulate
Toothless’s tail.

They reached the tower and all but spun around it, Toothless’s wings half-tucked but still almost grazing the tiles of the roof as Hiccup pulled them into a painfully tight turn to drop their speed. He felt it in his gut as they slowed, blurring at the edges of his vision, but then Toothless tilted his wings the other way and they jolted slower in the air before landing almost delicately, lolling around another half a turn before coming to a complete halt.

“I think I’m going to be sick,” said Anna in Arendelle.

She muffled a cough in her hand, leaning over the downwards slope, and Hiccup was torn between trying to twist round and comfort her and getting out of the way. She gagged, a retching sound, then panted for breath and tightened her left hand on his shoulder.

“No,” she said finally, for all that there was a tremble in her voice. “I’m all right. I’m good.”

“I won’t take off that sharply,” said Hiccup, guilt creeping into his voice. “I promise.”

Anna waved her free hand at him, took another deep breath, then straightened up and swung out of the saddle. They had landed low on the roof, but at least the towers had a small stone ledge about their base, which looked like a fair footing. Hiccup dismounted as well, and allowed Toothless to find his own footing on the steep slope. Again, he noted gratefully, there were shapes in the stone ledge that would hold a rope.

Then again, he supposed that Arendelle Castle might have expected intruders from the land or sea, but not necessarily from the air.

“You ready?” he said to Anna.

She nodded. “Please. Let’s bring him home.”

The latches on Hans’s windows were somewhat harder to lever open than Gerda’s had been. Hiccup was on the verge of reaching for his Gronckle iron knife to cut through whatever was on the far side when it finally flicked open and the shutter tried to throw itself open against him.

That was less than ideal when he was hanging from a rope down the side of the tower. Hiccup swore, looked up to Anna and gave a hasty wave to indicate that he was in, and hooked his left foot into the shutters in an attempt to control them.

It didn’t work, and one slammed open. Giving up, Hiccup grabbed the window frame and hauled himself in, glimpsing Anna sliding down onto the rope above him. He fell through the window more than stepped through, hit the ground, and turned it into a roll that brought him more or less back to his feet in the darkened room. He could hear movement from the far side of the room, heavy breathing and frantic scrabbling, and pulled down his mask to clear his voice.
“Prince Hans,” he said, in Arendellen. “It’s all right! We’re here to help?”

Mercifully, it was Hans who replied, although his first words sounded to be in his native tongue and not Arendellen. Then he spat another word, which sounded suspiciously like swearing, and continued in a sleep-roughened voice. “Who are you? What do you want?”

“It’s all right, I’m here with Queen Anna—”

That was as far as Hiccup got before Anna fell in through the window with a yelp. Hiccup flinched, and looked over to the door, but he supposed that strange voices would probably have been enough to bring any guards charging in, were they right outside.

“Anna?” Hans’s voice grew lighter. “Anna, is that you?”

“Yes! Yes, Hans…” he caught the dim outline of Anna getting to her feet, but she seemed just as unable to see as him in the darkness and simply stood there, looking around. This was not working.

There was a table right beside the window, and if Hiccup squinted he could see a candle on it; he crossed to it, dragged the shutters closed again to keep out the wind, and reached back for the table and the candle on it by feel rather than sight. Drawing out his flint and steel, Hiccup tried to stop his hands from shaking as he struck them together once, again, until the candle finally caught. He scooped it up and was about to press it into Anna’s hands, but then Hans was striding into the dim light from the darkness, dressed in a heavy nightshirt and long underwear.

“Anna?” he looked her over, then turned to Hiccup, and a frown drew his brows together. “You! You’re the one from summer, you—”

“No, Hans!” Anna stepped between them, putting her hands to Hans’s chest. “It’s all right! He brought me here so that we can rescue you!”

His frown faded slightly, but he did not look any more as if he knew what was going on. “Rescue me? Anna, you have been missing for—”

“I know.” Her voice was pained. “I know, I’m sorry, it…” she trailed off, and shook her head, having to look away for a moment, and however little Hiccup might have known Hans he could see the concern in the older man’s eyes, the way that he reached up to stroke Anna’s cheek. “There were things which needed to be done,” Anna finally seemed to settle on, and Hiccup did not miss the matter of by whom. “I… please tell me,” her hands traced from his chest out to his arms, wrapping around his biceps. “They did not mistreat you, did they? They did not…”

The word torture hung in the air, unspoken but all too clear, at least to Hiccup’s ear.

“What? No. No!” Hans still sounded confused, but seemed determined to deny whatever it was that he was hearing in Anna’s words. “They took me to the Temple for a few days to be sure that I had not been maartelamter;” there was something about sorcery in the word, but Hiccup did not recognise the exact form; “but once they were sure, they brought me back here for my own safety. I asked for news of you, but they simply told me that they could not tell me…”

“I’m just—I’m glad that you’re safe. That you’ve been safe.” She squeezed his arms, tightly enough for him to wince. “And now we can get you properly to safety. Come with us, we have a way out of here.”

“Where?”

“I can’t…” distress filled Anna’s eyes, but rather than making her look younger as blind fear
tended to, it seemed to put years upon her. She looked like the adult that Arendelle had not seemed to want to acknowledge her as. “We’ll tell you once we get going, I promise. But it’s, it’s for all of our safety, I can’t tell you until then.”

“There’s nobody listening, Anna! I… whisper it to me, then,” said Hans, almost fiercely. “You have to understand that I can’t just run off with you… the last time that anyone saw you, you were believed killed by that wildling creature, and now–”

“She’s not a creature!” Anna half-shouted, then caught herself and swallowed her voice back down again. When she spoke again, it had the hoarseness of a whisper about it. “Hans, I swear, there is more to this. She’s just human, there’s nothing evil or beastly about her. But the Silver Priests aren’t what we thought.”

“What do you mean?”

“Anna…” said Hiccup, a soft warning.

She gave him a half-wild look, but he supposed that they had already asked if Hans had been tortured. There was only so much worse that they could say. Anna turned back to Hans, then carefully uncurled her right hand from his arm, running it back around to rest it over his heart.

“She told me her story,” she said, carefully. “And it matches things that I’ve seen, that I’ve heard. The magic-user, the – the wildling?”

In Northur, the word was starting to lose the sting it had once had. In Arendellen, to judge by the catch in Anna’s voice, it was not.

“She was from Arendelle. The Silver Priests found out about her magic, when she was a child, and banished her.”

“But she looked so young, she–”

Anna shook her head. “Not as young as she looks,” she said, perhaps a lie, perhaps just enough of the truth to stop Hans’s words. “But… no, it was not that long ago. After I was born, but before I would be old enough to remember. The Silver Priests told me, when I became queen, that they used to banish magic-users from Arendelle, but they made it sound like it was much longer ago. Like… like it was history. But they hunted her, like an animal, and all of the magic this summer was because she was scared.”

“She told you this? When?” Hans’s thumb brushed Anna’s cheek.

“After… afterwards.” For a moment, she shook her head, but then seemed to lean into Hans’s touch instead. “But I’ve seen her, and she can control it. Just not when she’s hunted and chased and shot at. The Silver Priests are the ones who have caused all of this disruption, and we can’t trust them.”

“Then we should talk to them,” said Hans. “Make them see sense. I’m sure that if we explain that these people need help to not use their magic, then–”

“They sent children to die, Hans!” said Anna, a hoarse whispered shout. “They have turned the Mothers and Fathers into a weapon, and it isn’t right.”

“Then we should say that to them, and–”

“They need to be returned to matters of faith, not politics, I know.” Anna curled her hand into a fist,
thumping it lightly against Hans’s chest. “And I will be coming back to fix this, Hans. But if I come back now, the Silver Priests will cage me as much as they have caged you, and… they sent a treaty to Berk in my name, which I never signed.”

“What? Are you sure?”

Hiccup’s hand curled into a fist at even the mention of Berk. Of course it was important, it was the clearest evidence that they had of the Silver Priests seizing power, but all the same Anna should not have mentioned it. Not until they were safely gone, and there was no chance of them being spied on, no chance of Hans being captured before they could rescue him.

Even Anna seemed to realise her mistake. “I have contacts there,” she said. “They told me, before the seas closed. Hans, please, I need you to trust me, and come with me.”

“We don’t have time for this,” said Hiccup grimly. He stepped up, candle in his right hand still, to put his left on Anna’s shoulder and steer her back a step. His scarf was still wrapped around his face, giving him a ghost of anonymity, and he hoped desperately that Hans would not remember his voice from the one, brief conversation they had shared before the summer had torn itself apart. “Prince Hans, I’m sorry, I need you to come with us now. Dress warmly, and in dark colours if you can.”

He expected a protest about climbing out of the window, the absurdity of the entrance, but instead Hans looked him over with a frown, then turned back to Anna instead.

“Contacts, you say. I see what you mean that it is not safe for you here, but they are treating me well enough. Let me remain your contact here, and I can tell you what is happening. You have come here once, like this; surely there is a way for me to get messages to you?”

Anna looked over at Hiccup, but Hans put his hand to her cheek again and her attention snapped back to him. Even Hiccup was not sure what he would have suggested – they should have had Kristoff, but he had vanished. Hearing from someone in Arendelle would be useful, but the danger of having to fly in and out to speak to Hans would be immense. The weather had been on their side this night, clouds thick and dark enough to shelter them but the winds slow and the snow barely falling.

“It’s not safe to leave you here,” she said, softly.

Hiccup felt like an intruder as they looked into each other’s eyes, Hans’s expression softening into concern as his thumb traced Anna’s cheekbone, then reached up to push back a stray lock of her hair from her temple. “Look at me, Anna. I’m fine.”

“Please, Hans, come with us. I promise that I’ll explain everything.”

“Anna, if I vanish, they will only become more fearful,” said Hans. “I don’t want to think what they might do to the castle staff… to your people…”

He shook his head, turning his eyes downwards as Anna looked only more pained. Hiccup shuffled back, dropping his hand away from Anna’s shoulder and uncomfortably aware of how close he had been standing to them.

“But if I stay here,” Hans scooped up both of Anna’s hands to clasp between his, “then I can keep watch for you, and send you news. You need not worry that the Silver Priests will be worse to your kingdom, and I will do my best to see what I can learn from them. Perhaps even try to sway them, to persuade them to–”
“No!” Fear tightened Anna’s voice. “No, Hans, I can’t ask you do to that! They’re dangerous, they’re the dangerous ones, they’ll–”

“Anna.” Hans pulled her in closer, bowing his head to press their foreheads together, and Hiccup had to look away just because of how much of an intruder he felt. He could not walk further away, not while he was the one holding the candle, but he could at least turn his body half away from them in some semblance of privacy. “I survived the intrigues of the Southern Isles to find you, I am sure that I can survive the Silver Priests to wait for you. Let me do this for you.”

“I can’t be sure when we will be back,” said Anna. Hiccup kept his gaze turned away, but he heard a tell-tale sniff as well as the thickness of tears in her voice. “Please, Hans, don’t make me leave you behind again.”

“Trust me,” Hans said, so quietly that Hiccup barely heard it. His voice was silken-smooth, soothing. “I can do this, Anna, for you and for Arendelle. And it will keep you safe; with the winter closed in they are not looking for you, but if I vanish they will surely extend their reach again…”

Hiccup could not help the briefest of glances up. There were tears on Anna’s cheeks, glittering in the firelight, but she looked at Hans like the image of hope as his thumb brushed her lower lip. “I can’t leave you here,” she said.

“Then don’t think of it as leaving me here. Think of it as me returning before you. Let me be your vanguard.”

For a moment, there was silence.

“Anna?” said Hiccup, finally. Anna had closed her eyes, tears still glinting there, but her lips were pressed into a firm line and there was no trembling there now. There were so many things that they could not say in front of Hans, about the Berserkers and the Outcasts, the Skrill and the threats they faced. About just how powerful the Silver Priests had been even a decade ago, to banish the Crown Princess from her parents’ arms.

“All right,” she said. The words almost creaked, and Hiccup could not help a stab of surprise. He would have expected that Anna would insist on rescuing Hans all the same, and that they would find another way to get their information on Arendelle. “All right, I’ll let you do this. Just… just be careful, please, Hans~”

Hans silenced her with a kiss. Anna made a muffled sound of surprise, and Hiccup quickly turned his back altogether, though not before he saw her creeping up a hand to Hans’s shoulder. He felt as if his cheeks were burning, but was mostly grateful that the sound of his own hammering heart gave him something to concentrate on listening to. There seemed to be a long silence, then a hand on his shoulder made him jump and he looked round to see Anna wiping away her tears, Hans standing behind her with far-off, sad eyes.

Clearing his throat, Hiccup handed the candle back to Hans, and glanced to Anna in what he hoped was a clear enough query even from just his eyes.

“We’re going,” she said. Her voice was shaking, but her eyes were sure. “We’re going back.”

Hiccup turned to Prince Hans, and gave a stiff half-bow. Even if he had not been tortured, he had still been held captive by the Silver Priests, and having heard what they had said was still willing to remain. Hiccup had to give the man credit for it.
“Be careful,” he said. “We’ll be back in,” he had to pause and remember the words in Arendellen in
his head, “a moon or so, if we can. If you’ve changed your mind, we will take you with us then.”

“Thank you,” Hans replied, every inch sincerity. Hiccup was just impressed that he could summon
any gravitas when pulled out of his bed in the middle of the night by his fiancée and a masked
stranger. “I will do what I can to find things out for you, within reason.”

Feeling that he had to say at least something more, Hiccup offered, “Your Highness,” and backed
away a step before turning to the window.

By the time that he did, Anna was already hauling the first of the shutters open, making the candle
gutter in Hans’s hand as cold wind cut into the room. Anna climbed out and onto the rope without
a pause, and Hiccup hurried to follow her, seeing that Hans was frowning as she disappeared
upwards and out of sight. He paused on the sill before he pulled the shutter closed again after them,
and one more time caught Hans’s eyes in the gloom.

Neither spoke, but Hiccup was aware of a weight passing between them, had a sense that Hans was
wondering who this stranger was who had appeared beside his fiancée, the same person who had
been in Arendelle as the same time as the wildling in the summer. Perhaps it would be for the best
if he were taken for a wildling as well, although he hoped that Rosa and her people were not being
harried by Arendelle's guards as much as or more than they usually were. In return, he could not
help being impressed by this southern prince who was willing to stand in the view of the Silver
Priests and attempt to keep some peace in Arendelle, even when Anna had offered him a chance to
escape.

Once he was outside, he held the shutter closed until he heard it click from the inside, and
wondered how it could feel like they had accomplished so much and done so little all in the same
night. He climbed back up the rope with leaden arms, wanting only to climb into Toothless’s
saddle and get home so he could begin to work through what had come to pass.

Chapter End Notes

maartelamter = ensorcelled. An unusual enough Arendellen word that Hiccup did not
otherwise know it; Hans likely picked it up from the Silver Priests since Arendellen is
not his native tongue either.
He did not have to have Gothi’s healing knowledge to know that Anna’s shaking was not just due to the cold. But only once they were well clear of Arendelle – not just clear, but beyond the line of the mountains which meant they could not be spotted even by the sharpest eyes or spyglasses – did Hiccup dare to bring them in for a landing.

“Why are you stopping?” said Anna, voice thick with snotty tears. He turned, barely able to see her in the darkness, but the fierce movement of her hand as she tried to rub them away was more than telltale enough. “We need to head back to Berk.”

“Yeahhhh,” said Hiccup, swinging a leg out of the saddle so that he could stop craning his neck around and look at her properly. “I’m not taking you back like this.”

“Because,” Anna began to say, venom in her voice even with just one word, then caught herself and shook her head. “No, that’s not fair. This isn’t about Elsa.”

He wondered whether she even realised that they were still speaking Arendellen, but did not mention it, nor whatever her stifled comment might have been. “Anna, we just changed our plans in a big way. And I know we didn’t have much time to talk it through there, but we need to talk now.”

“What’s there to talk about? We made our decision. We’ll get back in, in… a moon, or whatever, when we can, when the sky’s right. Find Hans and get the message from him.”

Hiccup still could not help feeling that they had thrown themselves into something that did not really add up to a whole plan, and that after the persuasion he had needed to employ to get Stoick to accept bringing Hans back to Berk at all he was going to be having a very long talk with his father about why exactly they had proceeded to leave Hans behind.

“Anna…” he said, as gently as he dared.

Still too gently, apparently, as she looked at him with something akin to desperation. “I did the right thing, right? What Hans said, it’s a good idea, especially if Kristoff – you know chiefing, is it right, is – nngh!” she broke off with a snarl, all but launched herself to her feet on the far side of Toothless, and stormed away a few paces.

Hiccup wasn’t sure whether that was progress or not.

“I have to make the decisions for myself!” said Anna, as if she were projecting her voice across a hall. Perhaps the trees would appreciate it. “I can’t rely on you, I can’t rely on other people, I can’t keep letting other people tell me or lead me into what to do! I was just some malleable kid to the Silver Priests, I can’t keep being one!”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t take advice, Anna–” Hiccup began.
“And where has advice got me?!” Anna demanded. With another growl, she rubbed her face again, this time more of a scrub than just wiping away tears, then turned back to face Hiccup again. “No, I – I have to decide this. I’m the Queen of Arendelle, I need to take responsibility for this. And after Snoggletog, we’re going to come back and find out what Hans has learned, and if he isn’t able to find out anything because they don’t trust him, or if it’s getting more dangerous for him, then we’re getting him out. Whatever he says.”

She was daring him to challenge her with her gaze, eyes wide and stance almost ready for combat. Hiccup had the distinct sensation that he was being shielded just by standing on the far side of Toothless.

“That sounds like a good plan,” he said, not sure what else would be reasonable or, indeed, received particularly well. They probably should have told Hans that he only had one moon as a test run before they pulled him out, but that was a rather minor matter compared to the decision itself. He just hoped that they weren’t going to end up outright kidnapping one of the princes of the Southern Isles. “Plans can adapt, and change, all right? But that sounds like a good place to start.”

Some of the tension seeped out of Anna’s shoulders. “I know that it was Hans’s idea, but I – I could have still overruled him,” she said. Truth be told, Hiccup was not sure who she was trying to persuade. “I mean, he does listen to me when I suggest things, it just wasn’t very fair to him to come in and say that we’re going to take him to an unknown place without any warning. After Snoggletog, he’ll have had warning.” She reached across, rubbing her left arm with her right hand. “It would have been the easy way out for him to come with us. He must think that he can find something out.”

“He is in the castle,” said Hiccup. Even he had to admit that Hans was probably better-placed to find out what was going on than Kristoff would be. Even if Arendelle took deliveries of ice all through the winter, they would be fewer and briefer, and no tradesman visiting could hope to have the sort of access that a prince, the Queen’s fiancé, would. “The Southern Isles don’t have the Silver Priests, do they?”

Anna shook her head. “But Hans learned about them. He used to pray with me. He said that he liked… the symmetry of it all. The balance.”

“Then they won’t have reason to think of him as an outsider for that,” he said, still cautious. He could still feel the edge in the air, almost tangible, the risk that Anna might crumple again and fall into herself harder and deeper than ever. “And even if he hesitated over doing… what they said… he was still listening to them.”

Either Anna did not put together the full implications of what he was talking about, or she was not particularly listening altogether, as she rubbed at her arm harder with her eyes still fixed more on Toothless than on Hiccup. He wondered whether she knew that she shared that tic with Elsa.

“He followed their laws. He converted to their religion.” There was still a franticness to Anna’s voice, but the steady rhythm of words seemed to help calm her. “He has been respectful to them. They trusted him enough that he hasn’t been imprisoned long, hasn’t been t–” the word seemed to snag on her tongue, and she forced it out in one bitten word; “—tortured at all. Gerda was all right. Hans was all right. There wasn’t a guard outside his room, or we would have been heard. He’s – he’ll be all right.”

She took a ragged breath.

“He’ll be all right.”
From the distance, Hiccup could not tell whether he was shaking still, and when it came to Anna he was less sure whether she would appreciate a hug or not. He fiddled with the cuff of his sleeve, clumsy through his gloves, as she took several more deep breaths. They formed faint clouds in the air.

“He’ll be all right,” she said, one more time.

“We can still go back and get him now,” said Hiccup, quietly but firmly. “We’re a long way from dawn. Like you said, you can overrule him, or… I don’t think the window is big enough for Toothless to fit through, but gods help me I will fly Toothless to right outside and you can push Hans out of the window into our hold if need be.”

Anna gave a ragged laugh.

“It’s your decision.”

That, more than anything else that he had said, seemed to steady her. Anna nodded, drifting back towards Toothless without looking down and without any sign in her expression that it was even deliberate. “No. I… he suggested this. It’s a good idea. We should do it.”

“All right.” With an apologetic pat to Toothless’s shoulder, Hiccup slid back into the saddle again, and waited for Anna to join him. Her hands were rather too tight on his shoulders, but he did not grimace just in case she could still see a sliver of his expression. “Let’s get home, then.”

Anna’s head thudded between his shoulderblades. Her skull must have been even harder than he expected. “I want to see Elsa,” she muttered.

“Shouldn’t be long,” he said, and with a touch to Toothless’s tail they were in the air again.

It was still dark when they returned to Berk, keeping low over the forests where it was not so bitterly cold and where the winds were not so strong. Anna wrapped her arms around him without ever really moving her forehead from between his shoulderblades, and it was far from comfortable but he supposed that at least it would keep the wind out of Anna’s eyes.

They landed quietly and without fanfare, though no sooner had the door opened before chairs were screeching back, and after the quiet of the air it managed to feel like an onslaught of heat and firelight and people all at once.

“Hiccup!” Stoick and Gobber were both saying, overlapping each other. Elsa, of course, was calling Anna’s name. Hiccup blinked for a moment, not quite sure who to address first, but then Elsa was enfolding Anna in a hug right in front of him, clutching her close.

“Where is Prince Hans?” said Stoick, in fast but accented Arendellen.

Hiccup waved the words away, and stayed in Northur with no small relief. “No, it – he isn’t with
us. He’s still in Arendelle.”

“Did you find him?” said Elsa, finally drawing back to hold Anna at arm’s length again. She glanced over at Hiccup, but then fixed her gaze on her sister again. “Was everything all right?”

She cupped Anna’s cheek, and Hiccup suspected that Anna’s flinch was not unrelated to the pang of cold in the air around them. But Elsa noticed, and looked away as she withdrew her hands again, before stepping awkwardly back. Hiccup had to steer Anna by the elbow to step further forwards so that he could let Toothless in behind them and get the door closed, before unwrapping his scarf completely. He could feel the messy contrast of hair stuck to the back of his neck with sweat, but the chill of the cold still across his cheekbones.

“He offered to stay,” said Hiccup, choosing his words carefully. “To collect information for us. He’s been safe in Arendelle so far, and has reason to believe he will continue to be. Whereas if he vanished now…” he trailed off, left hand circling in the air, and finished only guiltily. “There could be repercussions in Arendelle.”

The frown that had been gathering on Stoick’s lips softened slightly, and he nodded. “I can see how that could be so.”

And after what had been done to Berk because of Hiccup – to Berk, and now to Outcast Island – it was not as if Hiccup could blame Anna for taking the offer. But he caught his father’s eye and tilted his head slightly towards the back room, an unspoken message that he, at least, wanted to talk more privately.

“Did you anything to eat?” said Stoick, with a glance between them. “I’d be glad if you would all at least drink something before you try to sleep. Aye, that means you too, Toothless,” he added, even as Hiccup was trying to parse the word ‘all’.

Well, that was one answer, he supposed. Hiccup mumbled something vaguely in the shape of a no, was not totally surprised when Anna responded similarly, and set about peeling himself out of gloves and cloak.

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“Come on,” Stoick added, and Hiccup looked up like a deer at the sound of a breaking twig. “I’ll help Toothless out of that gear while you get changed.”

“And I’ll put together warm drinks, shall I?” said Gobber, though he sounded amused.

Well, Hiccup supposed that it was probably more subtle than the rarity which stepping into the back room would be. He allowed himself to be ushered upstairs, Stoick following and Toothless in their wake, still squirming out of his cloak as he felt the heat seeping into his skin.

“What happened, then?” said Stoick, as conversation stirred below them once again. True to his word, though, he did kneel down to begin undoing Toothless’s saddle. “After how sure you’ve been about wanting to bring this Prince Hans back here, I’m surprised to see you here without him.”

Hiccup sighed heavily. “We found him with no problem,” he said, because there, at least, he could
be sure about his feelings. “The servant that Anna suggested, Gerda, she was glad to see Anna. She told us.”

She had seemed scared, though perhaps that was only to expected when her queen and a stranger broke into her room in the middle of the night.

“Hans was willing to hear Anna out,” he gestured to himself, wondering how it must have felt to see him again after everything that had happened in Arendelle in the summer. “But he said that he could do more good there. That he could try to find out information for us.”

“He wishes to spy for you?” said Stoick, sounding dubious. He paused in his unbuckling, though it was hard to read his expression in the dim light.

“If that’s spying, then Kristoff was supposed to spy for us,” Hiccup replied. Chill helplessness washed over him, felt heavy on his shoulders and tight in his gut. “I just…” He rubbed his face, then stilled with his hand over his eyes.

He heard his father sigh, rise, and cross slowly over to where he sat. Stoick’s knee clicked as he knelt down again, hand coming to rest on Hiccup’s leg, and at another time, in another place, Hiccup might have made a joke of it.

“I just hope that Kristoff’s… all right,” he said, finally. He swallowed. “When we were in the Wildlands, Rosa said – she said ‘it is not the Trial of Earth they are using now’.” The words had clung with him. “In summer, they were willing to… hold the Trial of Fire.”

Gods, all of it, each word was so wrong on his tongue. They were not Trials; there was no judgement, no honour or weighing of facts. There were only the uncaring mountains, or the bitter flames.

“For Elsa,” he forced himself to say, although it was hard to do much more than breathe her name. “And there are two other Trials besides.”

Stoick rubbed his knee. “Kristoff is a smart young man,” he said. “And you’ve said that he has magic on his side anyhow. And if anything did happen,” he added, voice slow and careful; Hiccup snatched in his breath as it felt like a fresh cut across his skin to think that perhaps his fears were not unfounded, that his father could see the reason for his worries as well, “then Kristoff did not go in blind. You did not demand that he do this, or send him into danger unknowingly.”

“It’s not his fault if something happened to him.”

“No, but nor is it yours.” Finally, Hiccup looked up, to see Stoick watching him intently and sadly both at once. “Men can take their risks, Hiccup, and you must grant them that. If anything has happened, it is the fault of the Silver Priests, and no other, and I am sure he has a solid enough head on his shoulders to see that.”

“And I don’t have a solid enough head?” said Hiccup, wryly. He propped his chin in his hand, and half-wished that he had a better joke to make with his heart still hollow in his chest.

All the same, Stoick found a faint smile, and reached up to rap on Hiccup’s forehead. “Hmm. Seems solid to me. No, it just… sometimes learning to let people make their own decisions is harder than learning how to make decisions for them.” He leaned in, as if imparting a secret. “Not least because every so often, you find yourself trying to help a fool.”

“I know a few fools.” And if he were honest, Hiccup would count himself among them.
“Every man will do foolish things,” said Stoick. “The difficulty is in knowing when he is about to do them – and in knowing whether you should stop him or not.”

Words that would never have been spoken to the fool that Hiccup had been not two years before, he knew that much. The knowledge that he had finally earned his role as the heir to the chief was bittersweet, after all the years that he had not even realised how far from it he had been.

“Well, this fool would like to change his socks, drink some milk and get some sleep,” said Hiccup.

It seemed to do the trick, as his father patted his shoulder one more time before pushing back to his feet and returning to Toothless’s side.

He wasn’t sure how he felt about not being corrected when he called himself a fool, though.

He woke from a dream of clouds and blazing blue skies, to Anna shaking his shoulder and a mouthful of blanket.

“Mmffuh?” he said, intelligently.

He pushed himself up onto his elbows and spat out the blanket to blink at Anna as best he could. She was in her nightdress, holding something in her hands – he blinked away the last muzziness of sleep, and realised that it was an ice statue of a dragon, less than a foot tall and perfect in her hold.

“Hobblegrunt?” he managed. He was pretty sure that a fair amount of his brain was still in the clouds, soaring through shining cold sky with the sun bright above him and the sea glittering below. He reached up to rub the sleep out of the corner of his eyes, and wondered what ungodly acts had taken place for Anna to be the one trying to persuade him to get out of bed.

Anna sighed like he was being an idiot. Perhaps he was. He wasn’t really awake enough to be able to tell. “Elsa left it,” she said. “She’s gone to see the Hobblegrunt.”

“I guess it’s easier than leaving a note,” Hiccup said. He was very aware of how rucked-up the blankets were around him, the fact that his hair was sticking up at all angles, and the fact that he was somewhat worried that his backside might be hanging out of his nightshirt beneath the blankets. “I’m assuming that you want to go after her, so please let me get up and put some clothes on and we can?”

Finally looking down at herself as if she had forgotten about getting dressed all together, Anna relented slightly. “Oh. Right. Yes.”

He waited until she was going back down the stairs again before dropping his face back down into his blankets.

It felt like it was going to be a long day.

He heard Toothless get to his feet, pause to stretch, then pad over to butt Hiccup’s elbow.
Hiccup turned his head sideways and regarded what he could see of Toothless over the line of his own arm, until Toothless turned his head sideways as well so that they were on the same angle.

Hiccup chuckled, and pushed upwards. “All right, all right, I’m up. Come on, let’s see what the crazy dragon has to say to us now.”

They hadn’t even seen her for a while, but presumably Elsa had some reason to be running off and was not just doing so for the fun of it. The wind moaned at the corners of the building as Hiccup did his best to get dressed without actually emerging from the covers, at least until Toothless proceeded to grab the blankets in his mouth and pull them away from him altogether.

“What side are you on?” said Hiccup, feeling goosebumps wash over him as he hastily finished pulling his shirt on. Toothless dropped the blanket onto the floor and chirped.

He dragged the rest of his clothes on as quickly as possible, still adjusting his left foot even as he was standing up, and shuffled down the stairs trying to get his hair into something resembling order. He doubted it was any more successful than usual, but optimism sometimes worked in his favour.

Just as he reached the bottom of the steps, Anna came barrelling back out of her room, hopping on one foot as she tried to pull her boot on.

“Woah there,” said Hiccup. “We’re not going to get up to the academy if you fall on your face first.” He was more than a little reminded of her desperate energy as they had climbed the North Mountain towards Elsa. “And to judge by the sound of the wind, we’re not going to be flying up.”

Anna paused, boot on but foot still in the air. “You walk on that path? When it’s icy?”

“I’ve been doing it with one leg, you’ll be fine,” said Hiccup. Truth be told, he suspected that if either of them fell it would be Anna, but Toothless would at least be walking alongside them. And it was a steep slope, not a full cliff, leading to the pebbled beach below. He trusted Toothless more than he trusted his own feet, never mind someone else’s. “And for Thor’s sake wrap up warm, you—” he paused and grimaced. “Oh, gods. I’m turning into my father.”

“I’ll… go get some gloves,” said Anna, weakly.

She hurried back into her room again, and Hiccup took the opportunity to rub his face and wish that the entirety of his brain was actually awake. Unfortunately, wishing did not get him very far, and he could only hope that cold air would do the trick instead.

“Great day,” he muttered. Toothless butted his hand. “Really great day.”

The wind was biting-cold, and almost horizontal, but at least the flakes of snow were fine and dry rather than wet and cloying. Hiccup tugged his cloak around himself, picked his steps carefully, and filtered out Anna’s various curses and evocations as they made their way up to the academy. It
was not quite so simple to filter out Toothless’’s chirps and grumbles, which he suspected were more of the same sort of comments, just not in Northur. The tone of them was certainly the same, anyway.

He had snow down his collar, his stump was doing the sort of hot-cold prickling that would definitely get him a telling-off from Gobber if he admitted it, and all that he could hope was that Elsa, and the Hobblegrunt, were all right. At that, he suspected that the two hopes were rather dependent on each other.

“–bloody awkward dragons!” Anna proclaimed, in a manner that clearly meant it was the end of at least a sentence if not a full paragraph, and she probably had a point this time. They had not seen any indication that the Hobblegrunt was worried about storms, so why some simple snow – it did not count as a blizzard by Berk’’s standards, and she was supposed to be a more northerly dragon anyway – should worry her was beyond Hiccup.

“Nearly there!” he called back, as they reached the last corner. He got another mouthful of snow for his troubles.

Anna either shuffled closer to him, or was blown closer by the wind, but at least he did not have to catch her altogether. A particularly good thing when the ground was feeling increasingly treacherous beneath his left foot; it was getting to the point when anyone heading into the Wildlands would be carrying spiked straps to wrap beneath their feet and give them some grip, but that was hardly an option. He was not sure how many people with prosthetics actually went beyond Berk’’s comparatively passable borders, and had certainly not paid attention when he was younger to how they did so.

Another thing to ask Gobber, he supposed.

She said something which included the word ‘Hobblegrunt’ and still had more than a little annoyance to it. He let that slide, as well.

They rounded the corner, and Hiccup braced himself for worse wind than ever, only to feel it drop to a comparative lull. His eyes widened from where he had been squinting against the snow as he saw the Hobblegrunt sitting in the open like an oversized, nesting bird, Elsa sitting cross-legged in front of her. The Hobblegrunt’’s chin was in Elsa’’s lap, her colours cool placid blues and purples that would have made her hard to see against a summer sky, but very visible against Berk’’s white-grey snow.

The Hobblegrunt’’s head snapped up, green-yellow tendrils streaking down her neck, then Elsa touched her cheek again and they faded away. They both got to their feet, and the air seemed to calm even further as Hiccup took another few cautious steps forwards, still wary of the Hobblegrunt and wondering exactly what to make of the weather.

Of course, he was fairly sure that it was Elsa. The Hobblegrunt had not shown any inclination to influence the weather, just other dragons, but honestly with everything that they had seen Hiccup did not consider it unthinkable that there was a dragon with such an ability and that the Hobblegrunt had called one to Berk.

Elsa smiled. “You understood the message.”

Her nightshirt was visible at the hem of her shirt, and her feet were bare, but at least in her case that was not an invitation to frostbite. It looked like she had simply pulled her hair through a loop of itself, as if in a knot, rather than actually braid it. But she was smiling, and that was all that Hiccup could bring himself to worry about.
“Yes,” said Anna, immediately and rather too loud for the still air. Mercifully, she seemed to make herself jump with the first word, and continued somewhat more gently. “What’s wrong? Has she done something?”

“I woke up because she wanted me,” said Elsa, as if it were obvious, and Hiccup frowned. That was new, and he was not sure that he liked Elsa, and only Elsa, being all but at the beck and call of a dragon. Although perhaps it was more like a shout, that Elsa could have ignored and chose not to; he held his tongue, decided to ask later. “She wanted to leave, but…” she reached out, and ran her fingertips along the dragon’s jaw, “I persuaded her to wait for you, first. Showed her my memories of you.”

She was saying you in the plural, and Hiccup was not sure he had ever been so grateful for it. If it had only been one of them, he knew, both of them would be double-guessing whether it was them or not.

“She wants to go?” said Hiccup. Anna still looked to thunderstruck to say anything. “In this weather?”

She would lose her wings, and it would all be over. One of the reasons that Berk had bourn the winters so willingly was that bad storms kept the dragons away. Hiccup frowned.

“She wants me to calm it for her.” Elsa bit her lip for a moment, with a worried glance at the Hobblegrunt again. “I am not sure, but… I will try.”

For a moment, she paused again, and Hiccup saw the uncertainty in her eyes. But the Hobblegrunt crooned and rubbed her chin against Elsa’s good shoulder, and Elsa smiled again before turning and waving for them to come closer.

“She wants me to calm it for her.” Elsa bit her lip for a moment, with a worried glance at the Hobblegrunt again. “I am not sure, but… I will try.”

For a moment, she paused again, and Hiccup saw the uncertainty in her eyes. But the Hobblegrunt crooned and rubbed her chin against Elsa’s good shoulder, and Elsa smiled again before turning and waving for them to come closer.

“Here. If… I have an idea, but you cannot be too close for it. If you want to say goodbye, it must be first.”

The grass snapped, with delicate sounds, as he walked closer. Anna stepped forwards carefully at first, then seemingly more boldly as the ground did not give way beneath them, nor the Hobblegrunt start to growl again. True, the blues and purples grew somewhat less strong, but they did not fade away altogether.

Hiccup wondered what colour her skin was, beneath it all. Whether even she remembered. Even on the two or three occasions he had glimpsed her sleeping, the colours had played across her skin as well.

“So you made the decision for us, huh?” he said, as he drew within the Hobblegrunt’s range. She turned her eyes towards him, and his stomach clenched as he half-expected another wave of anger or pain, but instead there was a gentle curiosity, and a sadness that almost tasted like remorse. “I’m sorry that Berk couldn’t be the right place for you.”

He offered his palm, not really expecting her to reply. She did not touch her nose to it, but instead turned her head to press her cheek into his touch, and he snatched in his breath as a shock ran down his spine. For a moment, he was flying, more intensely than even in his
dreams, the wind plucking at his skin and his wings spread to soar. Most of all, he could feel the joy of it, the freedom, after moons in a filthy dark cell surrounded by hatred and pain and bitterness.

She guided his hand with tilts of her head, until his palm was spread flat against her fin, fingers spread. He thought that his eyes were closed, though he was not really sure, because he could see bright swirling mists of colour, slashed through with red and pain, and then saw himself coalescing out of the gloom. The figure of him was greyish at first, then seemed to turn blue-white-purple as nonsense sound spilled from its lips and it reached up, slowly, to brush tentative fingers over his skin.

With a choking sound, Hiccup jerked away from the Hobblegrunt’s hold, blinking rapidly to try to see clearly again. His brain did not quite feel the right shape inside his head, and he realised that he was panting for breath as he tried to feel like a human again.

“Hiccup?” said Elsa.

“I’m good,” he said. Even to him, it didn’t sound particularly convincing. He blinked a few more times, and the Hobblegrunt came back into view again, looking at him in a manner that looked more curious than anything else. “I’m… I get it.” He looked her in the eyes. “I get it. Thank you.”

Beneath it all, perhaps, she had understood. Understood more than it had often seemed.

The Hobblegrunt huffed steam at him, and he smiled and backed away. Then she swung her head around to look at Anna, who shifted nervously.

“Does it want me to…” began Anna.

The Hobblegrunt simply bowed her head low, with a deep rumble, and held it there. Anna paused again, looked from Hiccup to Elsa, then gave a minute shrug and responded with a bow of her own, dipping her head low. The Hobblegrunt straightened up again, and looked back to Elsa as Anna also rose.

“She is ready,” said Elsa, softly. Then she drew herself up, and her shoulders squared. “I think I know how to do this… but I will need room. As much of,” she waved a vague circle around them, “as I can.”

Hiccup glanced around as well, then took Anna’s elbow and steered them both over to stand beside the arena. Anna stuck her little finger in her ear, grimacing, but that could have been the snow as easily as some effect of the Hobblegrunt. “You good?” he said.

“I should be asking if you’re good,” Anna said, managing to make it sound like a complaint. It was too early in the morning to disentangle why, Hiccup decided. “You’re the one that dragon did… something… to. What did she do to you?”

“Communicated,” he said. He wasn’t sure if he could explain it any better, at least so far.

Anna rolled her eyes, then fixed her gaze on Elsa and fell still as a brief, cold wind fluttered past them.

The Hobblegrunt crooned, a soft note that seemed to reverberate around them. Her skin shimmered blue, paler and paler, until she seemed to glitter like Elsa’s ice, and Anna grabbed Hiccup’s arm painfully tight.

He could not blame her, though. Elsa turned in slow, circling paces, tracing a circle a couple of
yards across. Light sparked in her hands, then she snapped back to face the Hobblegrunt, and slowly brought her hands up to her chest.

Around them, the air stilled, so cold that it ached in Hiccup’s jaw. The light grew stronger in Elsa’s hands, so bright that it was almost painful to see, and Hiccup became aware of the strange sensation of the wind coming down onto them even as the snow seemed to cease completely.

He heard Anna breathe in, as if to shout.

Elsa’s eyes snapped open, and she rolled the light into her left hand and thrust it upwards in the same moment. Like a falling star in reverse, the light shot upwards, piercing the clouds and shattering outwards with a dull slamming sound. Light rippled through the clouds, then they seemed to melt into a thick flurry of snow that fell towards them like a shadow.

Making circles with both of her hands, Elsa guided the snow down, from a broad sweep into a tight spiral that arced and narrowed down into her hands. There it formed a glittering white ball, too small to really contain everything that fell, and Hiccup tore his eyes away from the shining magic to the look of concentration on Elsa’s face as her hands moved, weaving, spinning the snow together.

The snow looked like a whirlpool’s core, curving down through the sky, until just as abruptly as the clouds had withered, the whirlpool did in turn, shrinking away into Elsa’s hold. Her hands made one last pass, and then her right hand cupped the snow from below and her left drew upwards. The snow turned to glittering clear ice in the shape of a Nadder’s quill, and as the air became less cold she took hold of it in her hand instead.

“Elsa?” said Anna, caution in her tone.

Elsa did not immediately reply. Instead she turned, lightly touched the Hobblegrunt’s nose, then reached out to press her hand against the crown in turn. Another of those bright, chiming sounds, and the Hobblegrunt’s fin seemed to vibrate in the air for a moment before she drew her head away, huffing.

Elsa smiled, and stepped back as the Hobblegrunt spread her wings. The sky above them was a clear, pale blue, like someone had reached up to grab a handful of the clouds and tear them from the sky.

Perhaps, in a way, Elsa had.

The Hobblegrunt beat her wings, and Hiccup could not feel relief that they worked at all, after the time in chains and in recovery. He had seen her flying, from time to time, but had not seen her take off in quite a while now. The stiffness of the movement was gone, as she flew straight upwards, so high that she rose beyond the low clouds and then disappeared from sight beyond them.

He had thought that it might all fade into disappointment, but still there was a lightness in his chest. He smiled, at least for a moment; it faltered as he looked back down to see conflict in Elsa’s eyes. Her hands curled up and back into her chest, and she looked over Anna cautiously, as if waiting for another fight, another judgement.


All the same, he braced himself for another explosion, from one or both of them, even as Elsa blinked and her eyes glittered. “I’m sorry,” said Elsa, in a rush, the roughness in her throat like in Marulousen. “I – I’m sorry.”
“What for?” Anna hurried closer, taking hold of Elsa’s shoulders. At least that was without hesitation. Hiccup walked behind her more cautiously, as Anna brushed Elsa’s hair back from her face. “Elsa, you just – you just helped it leave. Hiccup told me days ago that you had agreed it was leaving.”

But Elsa shook her head. “No, not that. For Mama, Papa.”

Anna’s shoulder’s stiffened, and caution coiled in Hiccup’s gut again. He almost felt like an intruder, as the two of them seemed to search for something in each other’s expressions.

“They failed you,” said Anna, finally.

“She told me…” Elsa glanced up, towards the hole in the clouds still, almost desperate, before fixing her eyes on Anna again. “She showed me. When she was captured, not by Alvin, by hunters to the north. There were others there. Other dragons, other Hobblegrunts. Killed, and…” she shook her head, a grimace pulling at her lips, and Hiccup could imagine what it had been like to make Elsa grimace after she had seen so much.

“Butchered,” she said, finally, though the darkness of her voice made it sound worse than the mere job of processing a carcass.

Elsa took a deep breath, while Anna kept on frowning at her. “She showed me that she grieved. She – a dragon, a lone dragon – grieved them. And if she did, then I… I had no excuse not to grieve.

“But if I grieved, then they were real,” she blurted, the words tumbling over each other. They seemed to be delivered to the base of Anna’s throat, not to her face, not to the tears building in Anna’s eyes as well. “And if they were real then the past was real, and it hurt. I had to let go. I had to let go of everything, or all that I would have was the past, I would have nothing, and–”

Anna hugged her, fiercely, so sharply that Elsa gave a yelp of surprise and Hiccup felt a momentary stab of cold in the air. “I’m so sorry, oh, Mothers and Fathers, I’m so sorry,” she replied, fast and desperate and in Arendellen, and Hiccup was not sure how he could point it out to her. “I just couldn’t understand why you didn’t want to grieve, I’ve grieved for two years and it still hurts, I didn’t…” she buried her words and her tears in Elsa’s hair, and trailed off, still holding tightly to her.

The wind brushed past them again, and Hiccup shivered but was relieved to note that it was in the same direction that it had been when Elsa had cut it off. And about as strong, as well. He put a hand on Elsa’s shoulder, and she gave a shuddered and a sobbed gasp but raised her head, and as she did so Anna straightened up as well.

“I’ve got…” Anna drew back far enough to fish around in her bosom and draw out a slightly crumpled handkerchief. At least it was in Northur again. “Here.”

Elsa raised one hand towards the handkerchief, but Anna was already reaching to wipe her cheeks for her, and Elsa fell still and allowed her cheeks to be brushed clean. Hiccup knew full well that Elsa had not understood a word of Anna’s, but the tone had been unmistakable.

“I’m sorry,” said Anna again, in Northur this time. Elsa scanned her face. “I just… wanted to be here for you while you did grieve. Because I was alone,” her voice fell to little more than a whisper. “And it was…” she trailed off, and shook her head.

Elsa reached up and cupped Anna’s jaw, barely touching at first but then settling her hand properly
to Anna’s skin. Even Hiccup could see the way that she pressed, and the way that Anna tilted her head into Elsa’s palm in return. “You are not alone now,” she said.

She looked Hiccup in the eye, and the meaning of that was clear, as well. That despite Anna’s fears and Anna’s anger at him, Elsa expected Hiccup to have Anna’s back as much as he would have her own. Expected, trusted, pleaded. He wasn’t exactly sure which.

“Of course not,” he said quietly, and could not offer anything more.

Chapter End Notes

What Elsa does here is called a 'skypunch' - it looks gorgeous, just this circular hole in the middle of clouds. It’s an area of cold which makes the moisture in that area of clouds fall very quickly as snow, leaving a gap behind.

And yes, I’m afraid that is it for the Hobblegrunt, at least for a while. But Elsa's dragon isn't all that far away.
Going back to the island full of Changewings in search of acid seemed like a really good idea up until he actually came face-to-face with the Changewings again.

In his defence, the weather held, cold and spitting with freezing rain but the wind manageable for Toothless, and Hiccup was fairly confident about his plan of taking not just a glass vial but also one which Elsa had painstakingly made of her ice in order to put the acid in. He made the trip with no issues, landed smoothly, and was relieved to see that there were no brightly-coloured eggs in the trees which would be a fair indicator that the Changewings would be more protective than usual.

Unfortunately, just as he was finding somewhere relatively sheltered to sit down, and digging out the bag of dried fish which he was hoping earn him some more friends among the unpredictable dragons, the snarling started.

It came from somewhere off to his side, and he whirled, looking around wildly. Which was not all that helpful when dealing with Changewings, but he could not exactly help it. Toothless hunched down beside him, wings part-flaring, but he did not immediately snarl or fire and Hiccup would take that for the moment.

He tried to pick out the flicker of movement, the shadow that was not quite right, the fall of snow that was not quite the pattern that it should be for the rocks beneath. But there was nothing, and he would have left were it not for the fact that he needed this damn Changewing acid, and he was just about to get to his feet again when Toothless slammed into him and tackled him aside.

It knocked the air from his lungs as he was bowled onto his back, the world spinning. The bag of fish fell from his hand down the uneven pillars of rock, but he managed to squirm far enough out from under Toothless’s crouching form to peer down and see what in Hel’s name was happening.

There was… an impression of dragon. Movement, and flashes of colour, and something that looked like rock but moving in fluid, flowing ways, and honestly it made him feel seasick more than anything else.

“Is this a territory thing?” he asked the rocks, or Toothless, or the wind in general. He knew that he wasn’t going to get an answer, so much as a demonstration, and groaned as he squirmed out so that he could get a better view of whatever was going on.

On the bright side, he supposed, it suggested that the Changewings considered him welcome enough to not attack him. Either that, or they simply did not consider him threatening enough.

Just as he was wondering whether he should be flattered or insulted, there was a flicker of movement beside him, a disturbance of the wind and patterns of the snow, and Toothless turned to growl at what looked like a patch of bare rock. Hiccup was not at all surprised, though, when the look of the rock melted away to reveal the red skin of a female Changewing, eyes fixed on him.

“Uh… hi,” said Hiccup. He debated stretching out a hand, but decided not to push it too far straight away. “Nice to see you again… I hope that you remember me…”

The Changewing looked him over, sniffed, then snorted derisively. It still wasn’t snarling or spitting acid, at least.
It struck him that was really a very Viking sort of thought to have.

“Come on, bud, let me sit up,” said Hiccup, squirming out from under Toothless. He only really got to a seated position, Toothless still hunched protectively over his legs, but it was far enough; he turned and peered back down at the shifting ground that represented the Changewings below.

One of them spat acid, green and smoking across the ground, and there were at least two answering snarls.

“Did you have to do this today?” he asked the scene below him.

Hiccup pursed his lips. Considering the Changewings did not seem to much care for him at the moment, he could probably leave unchallenged, and let them get on with whatever they were doing. It was probably a bad idea to interfere with territory struggles or whatever was going on. But he really needed that Changewing acid, as the weather was barely good enough to have flown out today and he did not want to gamble on anything better before Snoggletog.

Another splash of acid beneath them, but this one prompted a shriek, and a Changewing faded into view. At the sight of them, though, Hiccup sat up straighter; their skin was a mottled patchwork of red and green, the fronds trailing from their head much less developed than any other Changewing that Hiccup had seen. Hiccup cocked his head and looked them over, curiosity flaring.

At least, until another Changewing flowed into view, deep red and huge, either a Titan Wing or on the verge of it. She snarled at the mottled Changewing and slashed out with one wide claw, drawing welling red lines of blood down their side. The mottled Changewing yelped, a pathetic sound, and tried to huddle away against the base of the rocks. They dodged another spit of acid, tail whipping back and forth but head low and submissive. The Titan Wing female lashed out again, and this time the mottled Changewing tried to dodge but the scratch caught their shoulder and sank deep into the flesh.

Another scream.

Hiccup almost felt disappointed in himself when he realised that he already knew he was about to do something stupid. It was one thing to let a territory dispute work itself through, but two more female Changewings were revealing themselves, circling the mottled one like a pack of wolves, and he recognised it as hunting behaviour.

He rolled out from underneath Toothless, flipped open one of the saddlebags, and pulled out the reel of rope instead.

Well, at least it wasn’t another Nightmare.

“Please be friendly,” he muttered, making a loose loop of the rope and climbing into the saddle. Otherwise this could go badly. “Come on, Toothless.”

The Changewing close beside them gave them a curious look as they sprung into the air, wheeled around, and landed on the steep rock slope behind the mottled Changewing. Toothless was almost head-down, claws digging in to the stone surface, and Hiccup held on tight with his legs so as not to fall from the saddle altogether.

A twitch of his hand, and Toothless fired against the ground, a sharp blast that boomed in the air of the rocky hollow. Two of the circling female Changewings jumped back, while the Titan Wing turned to his up at him.

“Nope,” said Hiccup, “not happening. This one’s coming with me.”
His first attempt with the loop of rope completely missed, which did not do much good for his feel of control in the situation. He gritted his teeth and tried again, this time a more gentle swing which looped neatly over the Changewing’s head, slipped down the length of their neck, and settled almost at the level of their shoulders. He allowed him to shake their trailing fronds loose before gently tightening the rope, just until it would feel snug.

“All right, then. Let’s see if we can get the idea.”

One of the female Changewings prowled forwards again, and Toothless snarled and spat another tight, sharp fireball between her and the mottled dragon. They, either sensing that Toothless was protecting them or simply as a way to escape, Hiccup honestly did not care right now, scrambled back towards the rock, and then leapt into the air with a jerk.

Hiccup tried to spool out the rope, but more almost dropped it, and brought Toothless springing back into the air in the same movement. He got hold of the end of the rope and tied it onto Toothless’s saddle where the safety strap would usually go, then looked up just in time to see the Titan Wing Changewing rising into the air in front of them.

The red of her body seemed to grow darker, bloodier, and she opened her mouth in a snarl.

“Yeah, that’s not hard to interpret,” said Hiccup. Toothless was small before her, even smaller than his usual with his wings carefully controlled against the wind.

But perhaps the dragons around here didn’t know what a Night Fury could do.

“Careful, bud,” said Hiccup. “Just enough to warn her.”

A hand pressed to Toothless’s back, a shift of Hiccup’s weight, and Toothless fired. It was tightly restrained, from him, barely any build up behind the puff of fire and punch of the air, but when it struck the Changewing’s chest it knocked her back in the air in a flash of light and prompted a roar of fury.

Toothless responded with a snarl, and Hiccup wondered whether it was a warning of how light a blast that had been. In any case, the Titan Wing paused for only a moment longer before sweeping away, tail lashing through the air like a warning, and turning back down to disappear among the trees and swirling snow.

Hiccup looked down at the mottled Changewing, and when they looked back there was not a hint of anger in it.

He had a Changewing on a leash.

This day really had not gone to plan.
Changewing straight to the academy rather than trying to explain to his father with the dragon still right in front of him. The Changewing followed him meekly into the academy, he was sure that he was going to wake up any moment, but guided them into one of the pens.

Girl Hookfang looked them over critically, leaning in for a thorough sniff. The Changewing accepted it with surprising meekness, then a hopeful chirping sound as Girl Hookfang drew away again.

She snorted, and curled back up again, putting her head back to her side. The shortwings took this as their cue to scamper over and start investigating the Changewing, climbing all over them and chirruping as they went.

The Changewing looked more than a little startled, but did not try to shake them off or yelp, even when there was some flailing and scrabbling of claws that could not have been comfortable against a Changewing’s thinner skin.

Hiccup slid out of Toothless’s saddle, rolling the rope back up again as he returned to the Changewing’s side and undid the knot which had held it around their neck. They had not even tugged enough to draw it tight, for which he was grateful. One of the shortwings butted his thigh along the way, and he gave them a distracted pet, but was more worried about checking out the cuts on the Changewing’s side.

It was dim in the pen, the snow outside making life as difficult as it usually did in a Berkian winter. He gestured Toothless closer, asked with a hand gesture for light, and carefully ran his hand alongside the deeper scratches.

They were just ahead of the shoulder joint, cutting deep into muscle but mercifully not having reached deep enough to expose bone. Already the wounds had frozen shut, although when he reached to touch beside them the Changewing snorted and shied away.

“All right, all right. I get it, you don’t like humans that much yet. But if that starts looking infected, you’re getting treatment whether you like it or not.”

The Changewing grunted.

“I’ll get someone to bring some fish up,” he said, giving up and stepping back again. “Though you might have to share it with this lot – not my foot,” he added, reaching down to pry off the shortwing trying to chew on his boot. “At least you went for that one,” he muttered. “You’d lose your teeth on the other.”

He extricated himself from the group, gave the Changewing and the surrounding Nightmares one last cautious look, but had to conclude that it had seemed to be a relatively painless introduction.

True, he still did not have the Changewing acid, but it was progress.

He made it home only moderately windswept, to find that his father was not in the house. Anna had a small leather ball and appeared to be trying to teach Joan to fetch, while Joan looked blankly at the ball. To judge by the fact that Anna had tied a piece of string around the ball to pull it back to her, it might have been going on for some time.

“Hiccup!” Elsa emerged from the downstairs bedroom, smoothing down her sleeves. “Did you have any luck?”

“Technically I brought Changewing acid back,” he said. He ran his hand through his hair, and gave a sheepish smile. “It’s just… still inside the Changewing.”
“You brought a Changewing back?” Elsa’s eyes flew wide. “Are you all right?”

“Yes! Yes, they’re…” he tried to think of how to describe it, as he peeled off his cloak. “They were getting pushed around by some of the others, and seemed willing to come back with me. Currently in with Girl Hookfang. Oh Thor, I was going to grab someone to get some fish for them…”

“I will go,” said Elsa. “You should sit down.”

“It’s not that late,” he said, but had to admit that he could already feel the warmth seeping back into his bones. Elsa tilted her head, and he acquiesced with a nod, continuing to shed his outer layers. Elsa grabbed boots, but did not bother with anything else against the winter cold, and brushed Hiccup’s shoulder as she let herself out again.

“What’s a Changewing?” said Anna, as Hiccup closed the door. “Does it change… shape?”

“Mercifully not. Just colours.” He really did need to get Anna to properly read the Book of Dragons, if she was going to have a hope of keeping up with them. He had not thought to enforce it as part of the academy during the summer, knowing that Speedifist would already have done so, that Wartihog would not listen, and that with Clueless it was not likely to make that much of a difference. “Here, let me…”

He grabbed the new Book of Dragons – he had a feeling it was always going to be thought of as new, to some extent – off its shelf and sat down next to Anna on the stairs. She attempted to throw the ball once again, and Joan watched it go as if wondering why throwing a ball away and then tugging it back again was fun for humans.

“I’m not sure she’s getting it,” said Anna.

Hiccup refrained from pointing out how much of an understatement that appeared to be, helped by the distraction of spotting the green Terror, splinted tail and all, sitting a few stairs further up. “Oh, hey there, little guy.”

The green Terror opened an eye, looked at him coolly, then closed it again.

“Hey, Limmet.” Anna poked the Terror in the shoulder. “Be nice and say hello.”

“Limmet?”

“This one time, some traders from the south brought these green fruit with them. The inside was just this colour. Also horribly sour.” She pulled a face. “I tried to eat a piece and it was disgusting. It made my father smile. But I remember the colour.” One finger delicately trailed down the Terror’s side. “And the fruits were Limmeten. So… Limmet.”

“Well, I usually try not to impugn a dragon’s nature too much, but I have to admit that it suits them.”

“He likes Joan. Gobber checked,” she added, quickly. “When he was setting his tail.”

“Well, Joan and Limmet. That works. Fair warning that most of Berk are going to call him Limpet instead, though.”

“I think we can live with that.” Cooing, Anna tickled Limmet under the chin, and he accepted it with an expression that managed to be both indulgent and smug at the same time.

Hiccup smiled, shook his head, but flicked through the Book until he found the spread on
Changewings that he had made the winter before. “Here. They can change the colour of their skin, it’s like they disappear. If they don’t choose to show themselves, you’d never even know they were there.” Anna peered over his shoulder. “They’re chunkier in the body than Toothless, but not that much bigger. Spit acid. Cluster in packs. Never really attacked Berk much, but they’re on some nearby islands so we’ve run into them in the past. Violently defensive, usually.”

“So far?”

“Well, there’s one sitting in the academy with Girl Hookfang’s shortwings clambering all over them,” said Hiccup. Even this new Book contained warnings about how dangerous Changewings could be. “But I get the feeling they were something of an outsider in their own pack. We’ll wait and see.”

Anna shifted uncomfortably in place, and Hiccup was honestly not sure whether that was due to sitting on a step for too long or whether it was something else altogether. She dragged the ball back in on its string, showed it to Joan, showed Joan a small piece of cheese, then pointedly threw the ball again. Joan’s eyes remained fixed on the cheese, and Anna sighed. “They’re not… like the Hobblegrunt, right? It’s not going to do that to Elsa?”

“I wouldn’t have let Elsa go if I thought they might,” Hiccup said, holding back from being offended. He did frown, though. Other than the changing colours of their hides, Changewings and Hobblegrunts still seemed wildly different, in shape and behaviour and abilities.

Anna hunched in on herself. “I didn’t think so,” she said quickly, not looking round. “But…”

She gave up, reeled in the ball, and gave Joan the cheese anyway. Perhaps he should suggest getting some hints from Fishlegs’s sisters.

“Changewings usually just… hide, unless they’ve got reason to think you’re going to attack them. Then they give it everything.” Often in gruesome style. Hiccup had seen people come back on boats that had found Changewings while they were at sea. More often, only most of them had come back. “But this one let me lead it away on a rope. And I’m going to get Gobber to take a look at them, they’re this weird combination of red and green I’ve never heard of. Unless they’re doing it deliberately, in which case…” he shrugged, with an expansive wave of his hands that nearly clipped Anna’s shoulder. “Sorry. But if that’s the case, I have no idea. Dragons.”

He did not expect Anna to snort. “Humans are bad enough.”

She probably was not referring to herself, and Hiccup was not very well going to bring it up, but he could not help the thought. He reached over to stroke Joan’s head instead, as the dragon climbed back into Anna’s lap and settled down. “Well, at least dragons all speak the same language,” he admitted.

Joan chirped, and headbutted Anna’s hand. Hiccup waved down at her.

“And comments like that are clear enough.”
The Changewing was… shy, for want of a better word. They seemed almost relieved to have been brought back to Berk, perking up at the sound of Hiccup’s footsteps in a manner that had honestly confused him until he had remembered that one metal foot made him sound pretty distinctive.

Gobber looked at their mottled skin, scratched his chin, and shrugged. “Buggered if I know,” he declared, with an air of finality about it. “You want a hand getting some of that acid?”

Hiccup gave up. “Yeah, please.”

Of all the problems which he had expected having over the winter, a Changewing that did not want to spit acid was not among them. It was frankly more than a little embarrassing the amount of time that the two of them spent trying to get the Changewing to fire while they looked increasingly confused, until finally Gobber swapped his hook for a pair of tongs, held the glass vial in front of the dragon’s face, and did something to the back of their throat with a poker while Hiccup stroked the back of their neck and made noises which he hoped were vaguely soothing.

It was not in the least bit dignified. But it did end up with a vial of acid and no casualties other than the end of the poker, and Hiccup dared to hope that if they could actually get the Changewing to spit their acid on command, they could turn out to be a popular addition to the village.

“Right,” said Gobber. “I’ll get this back to the smithy and keep it safe, make sure that Nightchase doesn’t stumble across it.”

“I think I can be trusted to walk back as far as the village.”

Gobber pointed, wordlessly, at Toothless.

“Or fly back to the village!” Hiccup waved at Toothless in turn. “Honestly, bearing in mind my track record with my foot, I think the flying would be safer.”

“Well, I’ve got to head back to the village anyway, so I might as well take it,” Gobber said. Hiccup opened his mouth to protest, but Gobber waved his hook like waving a finger. “Nope. Because your father also has a fair idea that you and your friends have been bringing a random assortment of stuff up to store in that old armoury, and he’d appreciate a list of them some time before Snoggletog.”

Hiccup looked at the armoury. The door was slightly ajar, and it looked abruptly as if it were laughing at him. “Oh, come on…”

“Nope. Your academy, your huge pile of assorted rubbish.”

“There’s not that much in there…”

“And when was the last time that you did a thorough check to see what your reprobate friends have brought back?” Hiccup did not deign to look round and see the pointed look which he could all but feel boring into the side of his head. “Aye, exactly. And I’m no’ gonna take bets on whether you’ve got a slate and chalk in there to write it down, because wherever you go, chalk and charcoal end up following sooner or later.”

“I can just see my day frittering away before my eyes…”

“Welcome to being an adult.” Gobber clapped him on the back, which made Hiccup jump only partially because it caught him by surprise, but also partly because it was the hook. Although
perhaps that was still better than the vial of acid. “See you back before sunset, I’m guessing.”

“I hope there’ll be rations forthcoming, if I’m here that long,” Hiccup retorted.

“I’m sure you’ll manage to scavenge something.”

As Gobber turned to leave, it started raining.

It was tempting, sorely tempting, to just take off and fly away anyway, either home or to some secluded cave where he could wait long enough for his father and Gobber to think that he had taken an inventory of the armoury. However, he was sure within a heartbeat that not even the strangest things he could make up would actually do justice to what he was sure he was going to find in there.

Besides which, as Gobber had said, this was supposed to be his academy now. Which meant the boring and responsible side, as well as the good side of having somewhere to put the dragons which he seemed to inevitably be bringing back with him.

“Well, bud,” he said to Toothless, “looks like we’re going to have to be the responsible ones.”

Toothless looked him over, then wandered over to sniff and chirp at the new Changewing instead.

“Well, thank you for nothing.”

At least it was dry inside the armoury. Hiccup did his best to count the various things around the armoury from the barrel on which he was sat and without moving, pausing to wonder whether it was worth the effort of climbing on top of the crates of rocks for Meatlug so that he could see better.

Considering he still would not be able to see everything from up there, it probably wasn’t worth it.

He was sure that they had cleared this out, properly, not all that long ago. How they had ended up with the weapons rack overflowing – staffs, wooden swords, wooden axes, proper axes, and shields of various conditions and levels of damage – he had no idea. There was more rope than he had expected, a number of drafts and half-made saddles that had been overtaken in design, but those at least made sense compared to the five foot long stuffed shark, complete with teeth, that he had mercifully stepped on with his left foot. The tidiest corner seemed to Fishlegs’s work, with several scraps of parchment but also neatly-labelled jars and bags of herbs, a neatly-folded set of spare clothes on the end of one shelf. He wasn’t sure who to blame for the pair of underpants hanging off one of the spears; while it was not unheard of for them to change out of wet clothes in here, he had generally hoped that people would keep their underwear on while doing so.

Rather more concerning was the board with a picture of Snotlout on it and one of Stormfly’s spines sticking out from the middle of his forehead. He was going to have to talk to Astrid about that.
On the whole, though, nothing exploded or tried to run away, so he supposed there were worse things to be doing while the rain continued outside.

He cocked his head at a Nadder’s shriek, and tried to think whether the Nadder with the broken wingtip had been in one of the pens when he had entered. He honestly could not recall, after the embarrassing scenes with the Changewing, and grimaced. He needed to pay more attention.

When he heard the thudding dismounts of boots through the rain, however, he knew who to expect at the doorway, and he paused to lean on his knee and smile as Astrid came into view. She pushed back her hood, looked around at him in the room, and raised an eyebrow.

“Looks like someone found the cushy job.”

“Oh, it’s going to be great until I have to walk back in the rain,” said Hiccup. He put aside the slate on which he had been making notes, and picked up probably the strangest of his finds. “And also until I have to stand in front of the academy and ask with a straight face who is responsible for these.”

He scooped the Toothless puppet onto his hand and held it up so that it was regarding Astrid. For all that Hiccup had stared blankly at it, it had been immediately apparent what it was meant to be; the eyes were quite an accurate shade of green and great care appeared to have been taken replicating his flaps. But Hiccup was honestly having difficulty getting past the fact that he had discovered hand puppets in the storage room.

Astrid looked at the puppet, and snorted.

“There’s one of me as well, if you want a real laugh.”

“I assure you that they aren’t my work.” Astrid shrugged off her cloak and hung it on the edge of the weapon’s rack. “Stormfly’s enjoying herself in the rain. You want a hand with whatever it is that you’re doing?”

“My father wants a list of everything that is in here. I thought that I had a good idea of this room’s contents, myself,” said Hiccup, looking at the hand puppet. “Until I actually started looking.”

“Where have you checked so far?”

“Uh.” Hiccup gestured at a rough area of the room. “From the door to where I’m sitting, plus the weapon’s rack, and those first three crates. I’m saving Fishlegs’s shelves for last, because I think I’m going to need a nice moment of sanity at the end of this.”

“Does that list include Snotlout’s underpants, then?” Astrid pointed to them.

“Do I want to ask how you know that they’re Snotlout’s?”

“From this angle, you can see a big ‘S’ embroidered on them,” said Astrid. “Plus, who else would leave their underwear in the academy?”

“Not a question I had wanted to contemplate at great length. So, how was your flight with Stormfly?”

He put aside the puppet and picked up the slate again as Astrid started to pick her way around the room. Her explanation of her continuing training with Stormfly – flying until they were both cold, and sore, to keep stretching their limits, and it was not something he would want to do with Toothless but Stormfly seemed to enjoy the flights – was interspersed with the list of everything
that she found along the way, from half a box of dried fish to the crossbows they had modified to
fire paint, and from a bucket with a bite taken out of it to a pair of boots that looked to have been
decisively chewed on by one group of hatchlings or another.

Even with the rain outside, the door was pushed mostly closed and between the torches on the wall
and Toothless’s warm bulk in the middle of the floor it was not too bad inside. Hiccup’s writing
grew progressively smaller and more squashed as he continued to the bottom of the slate, at least
until he looked up abruptly to find Astrid standing right in front of him.

He quickly adjusted his eyes further upwards and away from Astrid’s chest, as she extended a hand
down to him. “Here, let’s see how much you’ve got.”

Obediently, Hiccup handed up the slate, and Astrid leant it against her hip as she looked down it.
He allowed his eyes to trace the line of her cheek in the torchlight, the way that some of the loose
tendrils of her hair were starting to wave and curl as they dried. There was a smile just at the corner
of her lips that he could have watched for days.

“Hmm. Just one thing missing, that I can see.”

He reached back up, frowning. “Wait, what?”

Astrid, however, did not hand over the slate. “You,” she replied. “The amount of time that you
spend up at the academy, you’d think that you’d be listed up here as well.”

“Ha ha, you’re hilarious.”

Astrid put down the slate on the crate next to Hiccup, put her hand into his instead, and before he
could say anything she was in his lap, kneeling across him and sat on his knees, and he almost fell
backwards in his instinct to lean away.

Not that he wanted to, of course, but there was still part of him that felt like he was supposed
to. At least until Astrid ran a hand through his hair and kissed him with the shape of a smile on her lips,
and he fell back into it just being them again.

“Ever since Camicaizi,” she said quietly, between kisses, “you’ve been busy with Anna and Elsa,”
her thumb brushed his lower lip, “and then getting ready for Arendelle,” her knees were on other
side of his hips, and he was very aware of the warmth and weight of her on his knees in turn, “and
wherever you were off to yesterday.”

He did have just enough spare thought process free to wonder whether she had checked in the
academy pens that morning, and for that matter whether the Changewing would have hidden
anyway.

“I’ve only seen you at academy meetings,” she finished, drawing back to set her gaze on his. The
thumb of her left hand brushed his ear, while her right hand dropped down to rest in the centre of
his chest. “And even those have been pretty rushed.”

A long, pained sigh escaped him. “I’m sorry. There’s just been… so much, lately. I think it’s going
to be busy through to Snoggletog, now.”

“Anything I can help with?”

It dawned on him that his hands, apparently of their own accord, had come to rest on Astrid’s
thighs rather than risk an encounter with the spikes on her skirt. He was not sure whether he dared
move them and draw attention to them more. That, and he had to admit that it spread heat down his
spine to feel the faint twitches of her muscles beneath his hand, the warmth of her skin soaking through the leggings that were still slightly damp from the rain.

“Is that just trying to find a way to make more room in my schedule for you?” he answered. As the words left his lips, he felt himself blush, but it really was rather difficult to think clearly while he was quite so aware of Astrid being on top of him.

Of course, the thought of those words on made him blush hotter.

To judge by the way that Astrid’s eyes flickered, it did not escape her notice. “I wouldn’t mind,” she said, voice softening. “But mostly, I’d just be glad to take some of that work off you.”

He did not want her to have to wade into the mess with Anna and Elsa, nor make one or both of them explain things to someone else which it had already taken him time to unravel. Heather had still not approached him, as Elsa had indicated she had planned to, but in his gut he suspected that she was more likely to talk to Astrid than to talk to him anyway.

“Who would you want to train, in the new academy?” he blurted. “Of the older adults. Established fighters.”

Astrid cocked her head. “You want me to answer now, or can I think on that?”

“Think on it, of course, sorry,” he said. The breathlessness was not just from talking quickly, but he knew that it was not helping. Then again, neither was the way that Astrid’s right hand had slid back up so that her fingertips brushed the bare skin of his collarbone. “I just… I know there’s going to be more people wanting to train than we can train. And I might have fixed weapons for people, but I haven’t seen them fight.”

Not beyond Thawfest, and Thawfest was no more like the real horrors of fighting than getting on a dragon’s back for the first time was like the horrors that they had seen.

A slow, thoughtful nod. “I can think on that,” she said, then leaned in to brush a gentle kiss over his lips again.

He felt the tension melt out of his shoulders with the knowledge that at least he would not have to worry about making those judgements, judgements which he knew Astrid would give the weight that they deserved. But any lingering tension at all seemed to leave him as Astrid’s hand in his hair slid to the back of his neck, as she kissed him again with her lips warm and soft and her thighs tensing alongside his as she leant a fraction closer into him.

Time meeting at the academy let them talk, certainly, but it did not give them time alone. Did not let Hiccup admit his concerns, for Astrid to steer him in the right direction, or… gods only knew what she saw in him, it still awed him, but there must have been something in him that she wanted to know. Something that she saw, even when he couldn’t.

Her teeth brushed against his lip, and she shifted against him, leaving him aware of each inch of his skin, each pound of his heart. Her boots were pressed against the outside of his knees, her fingertips almost tickling against his skin. Beneath the smell of rain and leather was her, faint sweat that was not bitter, just real.

He could feel the palms of his hands growing damp, hoped desperately that they were not shaking as badly as it felt like they were. But when he kissed Astrid back, she seemed to sink down into his lap. He was not sure whether her hand on the back of his neck was holding him in place or clinging to him, and did not care. He kissed just below Astrid’s lip, then her jaw, then pressed his lips to her
throat as she gave a shuddering sigh against his brow. It seemed to prickle down his spine.

Astrid shifted again, and his hand slid a couple of inches up her thigh, beneath the hem of her skirt. Hiccup froze for a beat, not sure if Astrid would object, but instead her right hand skimmed down his front and then up again, but this time beneath his shirt, her fingers burning and cold both at once against his skin. He snatched in his breath.

“Is this…” Astrid breathed against his hair, voice shaking. “If you don’t want me to, then—” she started to draw her hand away. It felt like there were lines burned down his skin, like he could not breathe and it felt incredible.

“I want—” he found himself saying before he could think better of it, then snapped his mouth shut again, feeling his cheeks burning, realising too late again that what he had managed to come out with was quite possibly worse. At least, if he wanted to keep his brain functioning. His lips were still pressed to Astrid’s skin, probably too firmly and too still to be considered a kiss, and her fingertips fluttered against his skin.

Instead he tilted his face upwards to kiss her mouth again, and it seemed like she understood, like she realised that even the lightest touch of her fingers to his skin was like sparks down his spine, like he was opening up his very skin to her. His tongue traced the roof of Astrid’s mouth, as her fingers crept over his skin, raising goosebumps despite the cool of the air around them.

As she rocked against him, Hiccup’s hands tightened on her thighs, and she made a tight sound in her throat that he felt on his lips, her fingers pressing tighter against him. Still shaking, Hiccup raised his right hand to Astrid’s waist instead, careful to avoid the spikes of her skirt, but gods it tightened across his skin when he felt the curve of her waist and the firmness of her muscles, the way it felt when she breathed.

The thought stole in again, wondering what it would be like to run his hand over Astrid’s bare skin, some part that was not her arms or her cheek. It was not the first time that the thought had come to him, of course, but it still made heat rush beneath his skin, made him all the more aware of how thin were the layers of clothes between them, how soft was her skin, how it rushed in his head to feel her hand against his stomach.

His little finger brushed the skin between her top and her skirt; he had not even realised that there was a gap between them until he felt the smooth warmth of her skin. He traced the line of it, and Astrid seemed to kiss him harder, pressing into him with the pressure of her thighs and a tilt of her hips.

He wasn’t sure whether it was bravery or madness that crested in him, as he pressed his fingertips to the hem of her shirt. “Can I…?” he murmured against her lips, the words tight and half-lost to the sound of his own breathing.

“Please.”

Another tremble ran through him at the yearning in her voice, and maybe it shouldn’t have surprised him so much when she had so often been the first one to reach for him, but somehow it did. His hand slipped up, flat against her stomach, and he caught his breath at the feel of the hard ridges of muscle shifting against his palm. The way it felt when she breathed.

He followed her stomach up, fascinated by the arcs of her skin, not paying attention until his fingers met with another layer of fabric and he realised with a jolt that it was her wrap. He was about to pull back again, apologies springing to the tip of his tongue, until Astrid responded by
hitching her hand higher in turn, rucking up his shirt across his stomach, with another low sound.

The movement of his lips slowed, even as his heart was still racing. Because the movement of Astrid’s hand across his skin throbbed in his chest and pulled a low groan from his throat, because he was not even sure whether it was still his palm that was damp with sweat or whether it was Astrid’s skin as well, because he was falling into her and it was getting increasingly difficult to even think with her hands against his skin.

Not that such a message appeared to have reached every part of his body. Astrid’s lips strayed to the point beneath his ear again, and her murmured laugh when his hand tightened on her thigh told him that it was perfectly deliberate. But a small, desperate part of his attention managed to latch onto the reaction of other parts of his body, and as much as he tried to not think directly about it in case it made matters worse it was really hard not to worry that Astrid would also notice.

That probably wasn’t a good choice of words, either.

Even as she was kissing his breath from his lips, he wondered whether he should draw away, and desperately did not want to.

The decision was abruptly made for him as there was a crash of metal outside and a burst of raucous, recognisable laughter. They broke apart their kiss in an instant, turning at the sound of Ruffnut’s delighted whooping and an outburst of swearing from Tuffnut, then Astrid seemed to spring upright in the blink of an eye, hauling her top back down and tucking it back in.

“Oi! Hiccup!” Snotlout shouted from outside, laughter ringing in his voice as well. “We know you’re up here!”

Hiccup also tried to frantically put his shirt back into place, realised that was also possibly not a good idea, and from outside heard Ruffnut say something about the armoury.

This was absolutely not a situation he was going to let anyone else find him in, let alone Ruffnut. He grabbed the slate on which he had been writing and hauled it over onto his lap.

It was clearly a day for questionable decisions. The slate slipped from his damp hands and dropped onto his thighs, only not just his thighs, and for a moment Hiccup forgot quite how words were supposed to work as pain flashed through him.

The door to the armoury was hauled all of the way open, and light flooded in. Toothless looked up with a chirp, while Hiccup mostly concentrated on trying to not curl up in a ball and fall off the crate.

“Charlatan!” Tuffnut declared, framed in the centre of the doorway. Hiccup blinked away the haze of pain. Ruffnut was standing on one side of Tuffnut, Snotlout on the other, while Fishlegs had the look of having been dragged along with them to make up numbers and wondering whether he could leave again while they were distracted. “Perjurer!”

“What in Frigg’s name are you talking about, Tuff?” said Astrid.

Hiccup had to give her credit, she had exactly the same world-weary tone as she usually took incidents such as this. He was still wondering whether he was going to be able to speak without his voice going sharply upwards.

“Fabulist!” said Tuffnut.

“You,” said Ruffnut, pointing at Hiccup rather less dramatically, “told us that we weren’t getting a
pet Changewing. And now what do we hear? That you’ve got a pet Changewing!”

“There’s no pet Changewing—” Astrid began.

Hiccup cleared his throat, partially to interrupt her and partially to be sure that he could speak clearly. It felt promising. “It’s not a pet,” he said, “but there is a Changewing.”

This time it was Hiccup that fell under the full power of Astrid’s incredulous look. “Where?”

“Er, this morning they were in the old Zippleback pen?” he offered. Astrid raised her eyebrows, and Hiccup adjusted his hands on the edge of the slate. “I was only going to get Changewing acid, but they were being harassed by a Titan Wing female and ended up following me back…”

“See?” said Ruffnut. “Pet Changewing!”

“Now that is a hippo-crisis!” said Snotlout.

Hiccup looked at him blankly.

“Do you mean hypocrisy?” Fishlegs offered, also looking sideways at Snotlout.

“There is a difference between having a Changewing in the arena and having a pet Changewing…” said Hiccup, but could already feel his will to argue ebbing away. He finally managed to dredge up the memory of what in Thor’s name they were talking about. “And it was most of a year ago that I said we weren’t getting a Changewing.”

“We will remember this,” said Tuffnut, with a final, stern wag of his finger. He turned on his heel, and strode out of sight again. There were a few seconds of pregnant pause, the others staring after him, before a rather distinctive sotto voce added: “Uh, guys? We were all supposed to go then, remember?”

“Oh, yeah,” said Snotlout, and hurried out of view. Ruffnut took the time to point two of her fingers towards her own eyes, and then at Hiccup, before grabbing Fishlegs by the shoulder and hauling him back out of view again as well.

Silence fell, broken only by the sound of splashing footsteps in the lessening rain.

“What just happened?” said Astrid.

“Something I really should have predicted when I decided to rescue the Changewing,” Hiccup admitted. He adjusted the slate again, and regretted a good number of his life decisions. Although at least, he supposed, he had one less problem to worry about just at that moment. He cleared his throat again, trying to shake the tightness of it.

“Are you all right?”

“Fine,” he said, quickly.

Something flickered in Astrid’s expression, too fast for him to read, but then she shook her head and unfolded her arms. “Good thing Tuffnut fell over, I guess.”

“Yeah, never figured I’d be grateful for how slippery the floor out there can get in the rain, but there you go.”

“We got round the last of the crates, right?”
“Uh, just this one that I’m sitting on. Which has,” Hiccup peered over to his left, then to his right. “‘Smoke bombs’ chalked on one side, and what looks worryingly like the second verse of Tuffnut’s song for Anna on the other. And an obscene drawing, probably added by Ruffnut.”

It also sported the chalked phrase ‘Hiccup is a wonker’, and he was not sure whether it was Snotlout’s slapdash approach to spelling and handwriting or the unevenness of the wood which was to blame. But he did not intend to add that part aloud.

“Yeah, that sounds about right.”

Chapter End Notes

The Changewing is intersex, with genetic mosaicism - but naturally, nobody on Berk really has the way to figure that out. Its very un-Changewing-like behaviour is absolutely in gratitude to Hiccup right now.

So, this chapter: featuring intersex Changewings, awkward boners, and a strong sense that I was sick of doing stocktakes when I was writing this chapter. (Unfortunately, I don't have a hot kickass gf to interrupt me.)

Thank you, ashleybenlove, for insisting that I include "Hiccup is a wonker". For anyone wondering, Snotlout was trying to say "wanker" - a UK English insult referring to masturbation.
Chapter 25

It turned out that Elsa’s ice made a better stylus for the Changewing acid than even glass did, the point able to stay fine and without any impurities for the acid to form pits of. Elsa sat with Hiccup at the forge as he worked on Astrid’s axe, tracing out the form of Stormfly across the shining metal. He had practised the sketch multiple times to be sure that it would be right, that there would be the right amount of fire and spirit to her without it looking like the monsters that they used to turn dragons into.

Gobber grumbled about having them cluttering up his smithy, but it was done with a grin, and he would wander over regularly to see how Hiccup’s etching was coming along. It made Hiccup feel strangely nostalgic, for how much simpler things had been when he had only been ‘the blacksmith’s apprentice’, but he knew that was a fake memory. He had chafed in the role, hated being hemmed in and yearned to be something more, to make something more of himself. Mostly, what he had made of himself was a fool. Besides which, he would not have wanted for a moment to give up the fact that Elsa was sitting on the bench not far away and sewing as well – Anna’s Snoggletog present, she had admitted, clothes which she could not very well work on at home. Toothless had to remain outside, of course, but it was still worth a smile to hear people greeting Toothless before they even entered the forge.

It was certainly how he heard Heather coming, the amusement in her voice as she said Toothless’s name. It was snowing heavily, but the wind was not too bad and the warmth of the forge was more than enough to keep their doorstep clear.

“Hey,” said Heather, stepping in. She pushed back her hood and wiped stray snowflakes from her cheek. “Saw the light was on again.”

“Yeah, day three of working,” said Hiccup, with a gesture to the axe. It was nearly finished, and he knew that with the air still enough to fly, Runa would be sure to monopolise Astrid’s time.

“How’s your work going?”

Heather looked better than usual, he noted. True, there were still shadows beneath her eyes, and her shirt appeared to have gained an extra sewn-up rip just beneath the shoulder, but there was a smile on her face and she did not have the distracted, distant look that he had sometimes seen her with.

“I’m letting the floor cool down,” she replied, leaning on the counter by the door. “Hnoss and Gersemi are certainly enjoying themselves.”

“Well, as long as they’re having fun, clearly the humans are doing their jobs right,” said Hiccup. He made sure to set aside the glass stylus, not wanting to risk a stray drop now of all times. “We’re just here to provide their creature comforts, after all.”

“Well, Fishlegs has been making sure that we’ve got plenty of limestone, and Snotlout is still looking proud of himself when he brings more fish over, so…”

Most of the dragons were now feeding themselves, flying out over the sea with their strange mixed flock, Stormfly at their head. But Hnoss and Gersemi did not seem to mind in the slightest having their food delivered to them, and flying when the wind was gentler and the weather marginally more pleasant. “Might as well spoil them,” said Hiccup.

There was something in Heather’s smile which did not quite seem to be about the dragons, though, or at least there was an edge that Hiccup could not quite put his finger on. It was almost frenetic, almost too bright, but her shoulders were relaxed and her stance was calm.
He tilted his head. “Some news?” he asked, hoping the question would be open enough.

It seemed that it was. Heather’s smile widened, and she curled one hand around the edge of the counter beside her as if grabbing for some sort of support. “I’ve just come from Duskhowl’s,” she said. “She says my father should be able to live with me soon.”

“That’s great!” said Hiccup.

He started to stand up, carefully so as not to jog the bench and the acid upon it, and it was not really a surprise when Elsa managed to drop to her feet first, stride across the distance between them, and pull Heather into a hug. Heather made a strangled sound, almost a laugh, and clutched at the back of Elsa’s dress.

“I am so glad for you,” Elsa said, words all in a rush. Hiccup lingered awkwardly, standing but not stepping forwards, until he saw Elsa give one last squeeze then step back. One hand lingered on Heather’s upper arm.

“Thank you,” Heather said.

He saw the corner of Elsa’s smile, but more heard her disbelieving chuckle. “I have not done anything.”

Heather raised her eyebrows, looking at Elsa with clear disbelief, and it was not exactly difficult to guess why. But then she shook her head, gave her own breathless laugh, and finally met Hiccup’s eyes again. It seemed as appropriate a moment as any, and he stepped forward; she slipped out of Elsa’s touch and let Hiccup hug her in turn. There was a faint tremble to her hands as they pressed to his back, but her hug was firm and at least she did not cling to him.

“It’s great news,” he said. She was the one to step back. “Look, if you need more furniture or anything, just let me knows, I–”

“It’s fine,” she replied. He remembered arranging help for the bed that had been upstairs to be moved to the back room, remembered wishing that he could help out himself but limited by his right hand. There had been other people looking for or moving furniture since, though, a bed here, a table there, and he honestly could not remember exactly what had ended up with Heather.

“We’ve got what we need. I…” she glanced over at Gobber, and her voice grew sheepish. “Sorry. I’ve interrupted your work, I just,” she looked back to Hiccup again. “I had to tell someone, I–”

“I get it.” He remembered talking about dragons to Elsa, in the cove, when she had probably only understood half of his words. He had been used to talking to Gobber about anything that he desperately wanted to share, whether it was about blacksmithing or the woods or books. Not that Gobber cared much for books beyond the Book of Dragons and notes like it, but he had been more than willing to let Hiccup babble on and make the occasional encouraging noise, and that had been more than enough.

Besides, he suspected that telling someone else about this would make it real. As if the world could not take back the decision that it had made about letting Heather’s father live.

“But seriously, if there’s anything I can do, let me know.”

Heather clicked her fingers, catching herself. “The Gronckle Iron. I’ve tested most of the samples you gave me. Nothing that matches, but some interesting alloys. I’m going to try to finish that up before my father comes back. He’s… still got to meet dragons, after all.”

The last that Eirik had seen of dragons would have been the Skrill, Hiccup realised. “We can start
with Skyfire and Silversnap. It’s hard to find them too scary.”

Even getting bigger, with their eyes no longer looking so huge and their heads taking on more adult proportions, they were unreservedly friendly and undeniably cute. They could be rambunctious at times, but he knew that they had longer calm stretches which he could take advantage of.

She tilted her head. “Or Toothless?”

Berk’s nightmare, but a myth at most to other islands, and intelligent enough to understand when Hiccup asked him to be gentle. “Whichever you think would be best. You know him better than me.”

Her smile flickered in a way that he couldn’t quite read; he was not even sure whether it was a good sort of flicker or not. But she nodded, even if her next sigh had a hint of weariness about it. “Probably Toothless. I’ll think about it, but probably.”

“Let me know when would be a good time.”

Heather nodded again. Hiccup glanced over to Elsa, but whatever he might have said faded on his tongue as he saw her expression, lips just slightly parted, clearly on the verge of speaking but holding something back.

He cleared his throat. “Um, if you would like to speak privately…”

Even as Gobber cleared his throat in turn, rather more pointedly, Heather jerked a thumb towards the door. “We’ll step outside for a moment,” she said, quickly, and Hiccup might have said something were it not for how relieved Elsa looked at the decision. Instead, he just nodded, and both of them quickly stepped out.

He heard a chirp from Toothless, and Elsa laughing. It was not worth worrying, he decided firmly, and returned to his seat again.

Gobber was regarding the doorway thoughtfully, slowly scraping his hook back and forth across his chin in a way that in Hiccup’s experience was more to do with pondering than an itch.

Not that Hiccup was sure what to think. He knew that Elsa had been visiting Heather, both before and after her fight with Anna on the Islands of the Quiet-Life; Elsa and Anna both knew, now at least, that he was aware. He wondered what part of it was privacy, and what part of it was giving him plausible deniability – even if Elsa probably didn’t know that exact phrase – about how much time she was spending there.

Having siblings really was not the smooth sailing that he had somehow assumed it would be.

“How’s that Nadder coming along, then?” said Gobber, finally.

Hiccup returned to his seat, and slumped down into it, trying to look over the image with a fresh, critical eye. “I need a couple of spines to balance the look of the tail,” he said. “And I want to ask Elsa to reshape the ice so that I can do the eyes. But I think that’s about it.”

“She’ll like it, lad.”

Keeping secrets from Gobber just wasn’t an option. He should have learned that years ago. Part of him wanted to ask how much Gobber knew, and for how long he had known, but Hiccup suspected that it would make a mockery of how discreet he thought that he was being and would be no good for what dignity he still tried to maintain.
He considered a sarcastic response, but didn’t have the heart. “Thanks, Gobber.”

It earned him a pat on the shoulder, mercifully with hand and not hook, and Hiccup set to carefully choosing the placement of the last few spines on the Nadder’s tail. It was not long at all before he heard footsteps at the doorway, and looked up to see Heather and Elsa return, both still smiling and with snow scattered in their hair. Heather’s was melting already.

“Elsa reminded me,” said Heather, without preamble, “I spoke to Phlegma about growing those plants, and she said that it would likely need at least some sort of glasshouse or intense growing to get them going. That design you were working on over summer.”

It was strange to think that they had spoken about glass before, back when he had thought that Heather was just someone else to help escape Outcast Island and get home. Before he had known how deep was the trouble she was already in.

The sketch had sat among his work for moons, but with everything that had happened he had not managed to look back at it again. “We do have six adult Gronckles now,” he said. “You still remember that idea about cooling it against the air, no surface?”

“Well, that’s about the whole of the idea,” said Heather dryly.

Hiccup shook his head. “You talked about turning it vertical. Dropping down instead of pouring out.”

“And how do you intend to cool the glass before it makes a mess of whatever floor you’re doing it over?” said Gobber. “Cool it too fast and you’ll break it anyway, you know that.”

He saw Heather raise an eyebrow. “I… know somewhere to find glass. I tried melting and reforming it, but you can’t treat it like steel.”

“Aye. Shards of molten glass in every direction,” said Gobber cheerily.

“The glass,” said Elsa. “It was from…”

He simply nodded, but he could all but taste Heather’s curiosity on the air, her eyes boring into him. His time in the forge, however, had taught him that it all but had ears of its own; he was sure that it spread stories without Gobber even having to be in the mix. She would probably be able to get down to the beach, though, through the narrow tunnels. “Elsa or I will need to show you some time.”

“So many secrets, Hiccup Haddock.”

Hearing his family name felt jarring after a day in the forge, in a way that it usually did not. “Nah,” he said, trying not to let it show. “Just a handful, nowadays. Like trying to keep everyone else from finding out where I get the only purple glass on the island.”

“Well, I’m honoured to perhaps get the chance to find out. And don’t worry.” She drew her fingertips across her lips, a mime of closing a drawstring bag. “Your secret will be safe with me.”

That, at least, he knew. Even in just a few moons, she had proved herself better with secrets than most of Berk, and he still was not sure how he felt about that. But she had fought for Berk, had killed for Berk, and clearly had more than enough sense of supply and demand to know that keeping the secret of where the glass was would be in her favour as well.

Besides, it would give her something that could let her feel a little more independent, until they
could make the glass and grow these plants of which she thought so much. But he knew she was smart enough to calculate that on her own as well. He just wasn’t sure whether she would be patronised by it.

“As secret as the bat stew recipe, I’m sure,” he settled for, and wasn’t expecting either Elsa or Heather to burst into giggles as they did. Clearly there was more to the joke than even he was aware of, but he did not feel like he had the strength to seek it out just then. Or that it would amuse him any more than watching them try to calm down, catch each other’s eyes, and go again. “Or you could use that as an alternative option, and just laugh at anyone who mentions it.”

“Sorry,” said Heather, recovering first. “But hey, why not. I guess that’s where everything for your spyglasses came from.”

“Yeah. Pieces that big aren’t so common, but you can turn them up occasionally. If I see them, I pick them up; I have half a dozen spare at the moment.”

Glass was easier, was so much easier. The sound of a Nadder’s call cut through the air, and Hiccup looked up without even thinking about the fact that he would be doing nothing more than staring at the ceiling. At least a glance confirmed that Heather and Elsa had done the same thing, while Gobber was more interested in poking at the fire.

“Probably Astrid,” said Heather. She was smiling still as she caught Hiccup’s eye. “I call the first conversation.”

“If you could distract her while I finish this,” he replied, pointing to the axe. “I’d actually much appreciate it.”

“I’ll get you half an hour.”

She pulled up her hood again, and Hiccup gave her a faint wave as she slipped back out into the snow. It was good to see her smiling, at least, and with more drive to her words and her actions than he had seen in a while. Even her work with the Gronckle iron had not seemed to have all of her attention behind it, and he had been starting to worry that not getting anywhere was wearing down her patience.

More likely, he supposed now, worrying about her father. He could not begrudge her what she was going through, but he hoped that at least she was speaking to someone as she was not speaking to him. Elsa had said that Heather wanted to, but Heather had not pushed the matter and Hiccup was not going to do so.

For now, he gave her a smile as she left, and hoped that at least some things were finally on the mend.

When Astrid’s axe was finished, he squirrelled it away to his own house where he could feel more confident about successfully hiding it, and returned to the increasingly pressing concern of
Snoggletog. It was not just that he had not finished everybody’s presents, but that he knew now that he needed to prepare for the dragons heading to their nesting island before Snoggletog came, and the Wildlings who may or may not come afterwards. Once again, Stoick set him the task of finding the banners and tapestries which were supposed to be raised, but it turned out that the ones for Snoggletog in the Great Hall were entirely different from the ones for Thawfest, and Hiccup found himself dragging round a whole new trail of people and wondering how pieces of fabric and thread could get so thoroughly lost in less than a year.

If he didn’t know better, he would have thought it was a deliberate game. But most of Berk did not have the guile for that.

On the other hand, he finally tracked down one of them in the hands of the twins, just in time to stop them from replacing a human head with a dragon one. So perhaps the game theory was not so wrong after all.

He kept a wary ear open for news from Heather, but the first time that he visited her, her father was not yet home, and the second time she turned Hiccup away with a whispered apology that he was too tired and she wanted to keep the noise down. She had bags under her eyes as well, and from the colour of her cheeks he wondered whether she had been crying, but she closed the door before he could say anything else.

He almost went to open the door again anyway, but could not. It would hardly be as if he could help, with how little he knew, after all.

Finally, though, Stormfly came in to land on the green where they were gathering for one of their training flights, and Astrid sprung down with her usual grace but headed straight for Hiccup instead of staying by her dragon’s side. Fishlegs and Snotlout were arguing over the best way to keep warm on a winter flight, with the occasional interjection from Snotlout that this was all theoretical, of course, he was too tough to need to keep warm, and the twins were comparing “butt-grooves” on their saddles. Hiccup wasn’t sure how to feel about the fact that he knew what they meant.

“Hey,” said Astrid. She glanced over. “Got quite the shower today.”

“Yeah, I was hoping not to repeat the debacle of three days ago, but it’s not looking promising.”

“We’ll reunite Snotlout with his shirt eventually. But lucky for you,” she punched him lightly on the arm, not much more than a tap, “Heather sent a message asking whether you could bring Toothless on over to meet her father.”

He blinked for a moment, brain already, optimistically, in the sky. “Today?”

“Well, not last moon.”

“You’re hilarious,” he said, reflexively. “Uh, are you sure now would be best? I don’t want to cancel this flight, but…”

Astrid grinned, a glitter of mischief in her eye. “I’ll keep them in line.” She interwove her fingers and stretched out her arms, palms away, until at least one of her knuckles clicked. “No need to waste a good day for flying.”

“When you said reunite Snotlout with his shirt, you didn’t mean throwing him after it, did you?” he said, raising his eyebrows. Astrid rolled her eyes, though her smile did not slip. “Look, sometimes I need to double-check these things.”
“Joking about throwing Snotlout into the sea is a lot more fun than actually doing it would be.”

He wasn’t sure quite why that was reassuring, but it just about managed to be. Hiccup let it slide.
“All right, sure. Hey, gang!” He cupped a hand around his mouth as he turned, and lost track of his
words for a split second when he saw Belch’s neck curving round and head upside down, Tuffnut
dangling in his saddle beneath. If he let sights like that put him off, though, he would never get
through a sentence. “I’ve got to go and do a dragon introduction.”

“Does that mean that Fishface can get home out of the cold?” said Snotlout, hands rammed in his
armpits. Fishlegs narrowed his eyes.

“No, training flight is going ahead as planned,” Hiccup pressed on. There were some half-hearted
mumbles. “And instead, Astrid is going to lead you.”

“Oh man,” said Tuffnut, still upside-down. “We’re never gonna be able to keep up.”

“You keep up with a Night Fury just fine!” said Hiccup.

Ruffnut shook her head. “Yeah, right. You keep down with us!”

He understood the sentiment, if not necessarily the sentence, and looked over at Astrid. Her smile
was perfectly placid, which was a warning sign in and of itself, but there really was nobody else
that Heather was going to trust with introducing her father to dragons and he didn’t really have a
choice. With a flick of his hand, Hiccup called Toothless over.

“Play nice,” he settled for, and Astrid just raised an eyebrow that was neither clear
acknowledgement nor clear defiance. Hiccup swung himself into the saddle, and in a beat they
were in the air, leaving the other four dragons and their riders behind and below.

It still felt like so few. Even with the adults that they wanted to train up this winter, it was going to
continue feeling like very few, and it was going to leave them with a choice between riders who
barely knew how to fight and fighters who barely knew how to ride. And either way, Hiccup was
not going to know their thoughts and moods and flying skills the way that he knew the riders’, and
the newcomers were not going to know his.

He shook the thoughts out of his mind as he flew round to Heather’s house. The last thing that he
needed was a tension in his body, or a ripple of fighting-thoughts in his words, to make Toothless
nervous or Eirik scared. He wished that Heather had given him warning, or the opportunity to meet
Eirik beforehand, but perhaps it could work out well that Eirik met them both at the same time.

Well, met them again, at least.

Another thought he needed to put aside. Hiccup took a deep, cold breath as he came in to land, and
brushed a few fat snowflakes off his shoulders and Toothless’s saddle. They had landed in the lee
of the building, where it was easier to stick a tight landing, and Hiccup did his best to gird his
metaphorical loins as he made his way around to the front of the building.

It had been Gobber who had explained the phrase to him, many years ago now. He had agreed that
having one’s trousers done up did indeed sound like a good idea before anything that could go
badly.

Hiccup knocked at the door, then busied his hands by removing his gloves as he waited with his
heart pounding for footsteps on the far side. They were fast, loud enough to hear, not a tiptoed
quiet that would probably worry him by itself. Or perhaps he was trying to read too much into each
detail, the thrum of nervous energy running fast in his veins.
He tried not to hold his breath as Heather opened the door. But she smiled to see him, a smile that reached her eyes, and stepped back to motion him inside.

“Come on. No point standing in the snow.”

“Oh, I don’t know, I think I’d make quite an interesting ice sculpture,” said Hiccup, but followed her in all the same. Heather scoffed, holding the door open for Toothless as well, as Hiccup looked around the room.

It had changed, again, since he had last been there. The slates were still pushed together in the middle of the floor, but the furniture of the room looked more normally arranged than it had before, chairs by the fire, table easily accessible. Eirik was seated in what looked like it had once been meant as the chair for the head of the table, now in the firelight and with a couple of blankets arranged around him in such a way as to let him draw them over him as he desired.

As Hiccup peeled off his cloak, Eirik smoothed down the blanket in his lap, and gave a smile that looked to Hiccup to be a little cautious. His beard was growing back, much more silver than Hiccup remembered it being before, but it almost covered the dark pink scar that stretched across his neck. There was a hollowness to his cheeks, as if after a long lean winter, and Hiccup wondered how much weight he had lost. But he was alive; they all had to hold on to that. Alive, and walking, and well-minded enough to be able to meet dragons properly.

“You’re, ah,” Eirik nodded to Hiccup. “The one with the dragons.” He paused, and Hiccup waited patiently. Sometimes Bucket could not find his words immediately, either. “You and the dragons,” Eirik tried again, this time with a flick of his right hand, “you – you - damn it.”

His voice was hoarse, beyond the sound of mere sleeplessness or time without water. There was an almost metallic ring, low and grating, and Hiccup understood why Heather had said that her father would neither sing nor recite again. His pride, she had said, would never bear it.

“Yes,” said Heather. “It was Hiccup first. Hiccup and,” she swept a hand around, “Toothless.”

Toothless rumbled softly at the sound of his name. Even by the homely warmth of the firelight, Hiccup was struck afresh by how sleek and large Toothless was, uncurling at Heather’s words to fill the empty floorspace of the room. He may not have had spines or horns to exaggerate his size, but the black gloss of his scales made him seem to coalesce from the shadows of the room.

“There’s no songs about Night Furies,” said Eirik. There was a gleam in his eye, and Hiccup did not know whether it was fear, or mania, or something else altogether. “No tales.”

“Well, at least that means we don’t have any expectations to live up to,” said Hiccup. His heart was still pounding in his chest, though. Gods, the last thing he wanted or needed was for this to go wrong, for Eirik’s sake more than his own. “Have you seen Berk’s other dragons around?”

“I’ve seen, ah,” Eirik gestured to Heather, “the two outside. When Heather feeds them. They seem tame.”

“They’re pretty calm,” said Hiccup, keeping his tone agreeable and biting down on the urge to say that if dragons were tame, it was only because humans finally were as well. He shifted from one foot to the other, fidgeting, then caught himself and planted both foot and boot firmly on the ground. “They’ve only been here a couple of moons, as well.”

“Heather told me you rescued them at the same time as her.”

That, Hiccup did not have much of a reply for. It had felt like a rescue at the time, but he had failed
to see the second, more insidious, set of chains in which Heather was trapped.

“ Toothless has been in Berk longer,” he blurted, instead. “Since last autumn. And Elsa and I had known him since the summer, as well.”

“Elsa. Nice girl.” Eirik patted the arm of his chair vaguely, and Hiccup did not manage to hide his jolt of surprise. He had assumed that all of Elsa’s recent evening walks, which she had said were for practice, were indeed just that. When she came home with ice flowers, of birds modelled down to the finest feather, or even a glittering cloak seemingly embroidered with dragon scales, there had seemed no reason to think otherwise.

Even Heather looked startled for a moment, but she folded it away again so quickly that Hiccup barely glimpsed how her eyes widened. “So, Dad,” she said. “Did you want to meet Toothless?”

Eirik gave Toothless a long, pensive look. As it dragged out its seconds, Hiccup felt another curl of nervousness, eyes on Eirik.

He jumped as hot breath washed over his hand, before relaxing to Toothless’s nuzzle. Looking down, Hiccup smile, and let Toothless butt against his palm for a moment before running his hand back over the arch of his head.

“Yes,” said Eirik. The word cracked and croaked, and as Hiccup looked up sharply he had to replay its sound over in his head to be quite sure of it. Eirik seemed to know it was well, from the twitch of a frown that he gave. “Let’s see him.”

Smile broadening, Hiccup hurried over, and was about to crouch down at Eirik’s knee when Heather handed him a stool. He took it with a vague murmur of gratitude, sat down upon it, and was immediately struck with regret as it wobbled almost fit to knock him off again.

This did not feel like it was going to be his most adept introduction, somehow.

“Come on, bud,” said Hiccup, motioning Toothless closer. From the corner of his eye, he could see Heather hovering at her father’s shoulder. She had warned him that Eirik had problems with words sometimes, but that it was usually in speaking them, not in understanding. That Hiccup’s explanation should be fine, but that it might be safer to keep things on the simple side.

Hiccup took a deep breath.

“Not all dragons are the same,” he said, “but most of them will gladly live without fighting, just like most humans.” He could almost feel Dagur’s shadow looming over them. “But the ones in Berk, they’re peaceful. They’re used to humans. And they’re all you need to know about for now.

“The ones on Berk? You can nod and greet in passing like you would any other person. But if you want to get closer, then you need to get up to where they can smell you,” not technically needed with all of the dragons, but useful enough with most. “At first, so they can tell you haven’t been fighting dragons, but then so that they can recognise your smell. Then you reach out your hand…”

Even with all of Hiccup’s rambling, Eirik was clearly keeping up well enough, as he raised his hand towards Toothless. It was trembling, a little, but that was not what worried Hiccup; Heather had downplayed the damage to her father’s hands, the way that neither his knuckles now his finger joints now seemed quite able to straighten. His little finger was partially turned, as if it were trying to face the digit beside it. Hiccup glanced over at Eirik’s other hand, on the arm of the chair, to see that the curling of the fingers on that side looked worse, and that the little and ring fingers were both part-tucked beneath the others.
Heather had waved it off. His hands were not perfect, she had said, but it had been because Gothi and the others had been too busy with his neck. Berk of all places knew that it was possible to live without perfect hands.

For the Berk dragons, though, it should still be enough. Most of them had a year of experience, and would respond to lazy waves and half-bothered hand movements. Eirik’s earnest but imperfect hand shape should be no problem. Hiccup raised his own hand in a rough demonstration, but made sure to keep it soft and curved, not quite as curled over as Eirik’s but not the usual flat palm that he would usually use to teach people.

“It started off as a way of showing that you have no weapons,” he said. He wasn’t quite sure whether it was true, but it felt like the closest to the truth that he had found so far. “A show of trust. The most dangerous part of a human is their hands;” or their mind, but that was not very well something that could be shown so easily; “and the most dangerous part of a dragon is their mouth. So we offer up our hands, and they,” he clicked his tongue, and Toothless turned and pressed his nose into the waiting fit of Hiccup’s palm, “offer up their heads.”

He drew his hand away, caught Toothless’s eye, and gave a minute tilt of his head in Eirik’s direction. Toothless looked round, flaps perked and curious, and stretched out his neck to reach and sniff at Eirik’s palm. Eirik’s fingers twitched slightly, but there was still a very faint, wondering smile on his face as Toothless snuffled from his fingertips down to his wrist, then glanced straight up at him before deliberately pressing his nose home.

Eirik made a half-choked sound that still managed to seem delighted, and Heather’s laugh had a definite ring of relief. Toothless drew back again; Hiccup rewarded him with a ruffle of his flaps and a pat to the shoulder before shifting his weight and nearly falling off the stool again. It didn’t matter so much now, at least. He’d take success over dignity any day.

“So!” said Hiccup. “That’s basically it, with the Berk dragons. I won’t bore you with their names now, it’s easier to learn them as you see them, but I’m sure that you know most of the common breeds. There’s a Gronckle and a Nadder here,” he nodded to Heather.

“Hnoss and Gersemi,” she supplied, and Eirik chuckled. Hiccup wondered whether it was some sort of family joke, as well.

“We don’t really bother saying ‘Deadly Nadder’ now – Nadder is shorter, and Berk is lazy. Same goes for Nightmares and Zipplebacks, and Terrors unless we’re annoyed enough with them to want to call them Terrible. And there’s a Scauldron that hangs out in the bay, but they don’t really come out of the water much.”

“Plenty of songs that mention them,” said Eirik. “Just not the Night Fury.”

This time, the hand that Hiccup ran back over Toothless’s head was more tender. “Yeah,” he said. “He only came to Berk, and there was only the one. They must be rare, or not usually from this part of the world. You just a strange one, bud?” He scratched under Toothless’s chin, and Toothless tilted his jaw to give more access. “Yeah, you’re just a strange one.”

“We’ll have to wait and see if Hiccup brings back any more species of dragon this Snoggletog,” said Heather. The note of teasing was back in her voice, and she leaned on the back of her father’s chair more casually now. “There’s been a few other types come and go, from what I’ve heard.”

“Heather tells me you’re behind, ah, all of the dragons. Here. That it’s you to thank for it, and they’ll write songs of it, one day.”
“That sounds more like a threat than a promise, to me,” said Hiccup, more on instinct than from real thought. Even Stoick the Vast had not really passed into song, after all that he had done for Berk. Kept it from falling, through nearly twenty years of hardship, when all that Hiccup had done was make one choice and stumble to keep up with the results of it for the past year and a half.

If anyone knew what they were talking about, though, it would be Eirik. Heather might tease, she knew him well enough for that now, but there was something far more serious in Eirik’s tone.

How, Hiccup had no idea. He was not sure what sort of song could be made about shooting down a dragon but then failing to kill it, about falling off a hundred times before actually managing to fly, or about barely surviving a battle-turned-ambush that had turned into such a horror.

But if human thoughts and tongues could turn dragons from beauty to horror, then perhaps those same tongues could turn horrors into something that looked at least a little grand. Like gilt viewed in shadow, that managed to look like gold.

It felt a little darker in the room, and Hiccup realised that he had paused for too long, eyes fixed on Eirik’s and probably not quite hiding the deep disquieting feeling running through him. He pressed his smile back into place. “Most of the public appearances in my life have been really quite embarrassing,” he said. “I’m sure that people would take the opportunity to tell terrible stories about me, instead.”

“That’s the importance of songs,” said Eirik. “You can beat them to it.”

Something else for which he did not really have a good answer. “Well, do you have any more questions about the dragons?” he asked. Dragons were much easier to talk about. “Heather knows a lot, by now, she can probably answer most of them. She’s learned quickly. But if you’ve anything that you wanted to ask me, instead…”

Eirik’s gaze pressed into him. For all the shaking of his hands and the words that he had missed, Hiccup could see that there was still plenty of sharpness there. “Heather told me the, ah, the – she told me how you first met that dragon. Toothless,” he said. Hiccup nodded. “But she couldn’t say why. Why you chose… what you chose.”

It seemed a very long time ago. Almost as if it had been a different person, a boy puffed up on desperation and glory-lust that pretended to be blood-lust. Thinking that he would not be afraid of fighting, of injury, of death – his own or that of other’s – and knowing now just how childish, and how wrong, he had been.

“That’s pretty hard for me to say, as well,” he said. He cupped Toothless’s cheek, able to look at Eirik only for a moment before turning back to Toothless again. “But for a moment, when I looked at him… he wasn’t a monster. And I didn’t see the monster that I’d heard about for all my life.”

His mother, taken. Gobber, less his hand and foot. Burning houses and wounded or dying men. Weapon after weapon, bloodstained and twisted or broken in his hands. “I was the one holding the knife, and all he wanted to do was escape. He hadn’t tried to hurt Elsa. And he wasn’t the monster.”

The rest of it caught in his throat, but when he glanced sideways, he could see the expressions of both Eirik and Heather that they knew what it was anyway. There had been a monster in that cove all the same, and they could hear without his words what it was.

Few had ever asked him. Fewer would have gotten so full or honest an answer. The riders, certainly; Elsa already knew, perhaps as well as he did, and Anna probably understood it to at least some extent. With what Astrid had said, about how it was to have gone from hunting dragons to
riding them, perhaps she understood what it had been to go through that realisation, as well.

Although it was never immediate. Always a process. He could just try to make it faster, and easier, for those who came after him. If he could make it so that the first wave was the worst, then just maybe he could count this as a success in the end.

“You should try your own hand at songs,” said Eirik, voice rougher than ever. He grimaced, reaching up to rub at his throat.

“Not sure that’s where my talents lie.” Besides the lingering weight of chiefdom, lurking in the shadows at his shoulder. It would have seemed like a prize, once. Hiccup smiled the best he could, and did not let his eyes linger at Eirik’s scars. At least Berk had left him well able to do that. “But I appreciate the thought.”
Chapter 26

At least they managed to plan the Snoggletog feast before the first of the storms came in, Hiccup supposed. Finding the banners was also a bonus, saving him from trudging through the snow or from running around frantically in the last few hours before Snoggletog began.

Although ‘running’ would probably have been optimistic, as the weather grew worse. It was just about possible to forge a path from the back door to the outhouse, for which Hiccup was deeply grateful, but the back door was not as wide as the front and Toothless had to squirm out in order to bat his way through the snow or climb onto the roof to hunch like an oversized carving against the wind. Flying was, naturally, out of the question. Walking was barely in the question, as after the first two days even Elsa admitted that the winds were getting too strong for her to easily walk in.

Hiccup retreated to his room much of the time, working on his father’s present or on Anna’s, quite sure that everyone else had been organised enough to finish their gifts already. Certainly it would explain the way that Elsa smiled when she came up to see how he was doing.

He turned down her offer to help with Stoick’s present, and did not explain exactly what he was doing with Anna’s. Hopefully she would not ask on Snoggletog itself why she had seen him painting when the gift he would be presenting Anna that morning would not be painted at all.

Even Stoick agreed on letting Elsa take bundles of food and firewood round to Heather and Eirik. The rest of the village knew how to handle a Berkian winter, even one that hit hard and fast, but there would be no question of Heather asking her neighbours for help if her firewood ran low or food became short. From what he knew of Heather, he was rather more worried that she would do something stupid like try to collect or cut more firewood herself instead, and that if there was anybody that she would accept help from and not see it as a debt, it would be Elsa.

The snow continued to worsen. By the fifth day, the bars of the front door were threatening to freeze in place, and Anna watched with wide eyes as Hiccup checked and rechecked that the rags tucked into the shutters to make sure that every gap was tightly plugged. Between that and wearing multiple pairs of socks, he supposed that it was quite an introduction to how bad a Berkian winter could usually get.

So when he woke up one morning to quiet, rather than the constant moan of the wind, he almost launched himself out of bed in his haste to get ready. Dragging on two layers of clothes, he grabbed the bag which had sat prepared at the top of the stairs ever since there had been an evening with nothing to do, and ran down the stairs so quickly that he almost lost his footing along the way.

“Well, it’d been a while since you’d bounced off that wall,” said Gobber, eyeing him sceptically.

“Good morning to you, too. What bright idea have you gotten into your head this time?”

“Wind’s died down. I need to see if it’s still enough to fly. Is Dad up yet?”

“That I am,” Stoick replied, little more than a voice from the back room for a moment. Hiccup hopped down to the floor, put his bag on the table, and was already half-way to the pantry when Stoick opened the door. Hiccup stopped, mid-step, at the weary and worried look on his father’s face. “Hiccup, when we discussed this, we did not anticipate the weather being this bad.”

“True, but the dragons aren’t going to be stopped from getting there,” he said. He lowered his other foot to the ground, in an attempt to keep hold of something vaguely resembling dignity. The odds were not, after all, usually in his favour. “And we don’t want them going off without us, or to risk
going in worse weather than this and getting themselves injured. This is going to be the safest way
to get them there and back. And honestly, there wasn’t a flake of snow there last year, I don’t see
how there could be this year.”

Stoick sighed, and Hiccup tried to press down both the desperation and the excitement that was
swelling in his chest. It had worked better, this past year, than when he had been younger and
tended to double down on his intensity as if by making his father understand he would somehow
change his mind.

“I recall what you said about how warm it was. But we discussed this at the end of summer, and
since then…”

“We can’t let Dagur define everything that we do.” It came out sharper than he had meant, and
firmer than he had expected. But Dagur had already forced their hand in so many ways, and this,
this at least, Hiccup wanted to do. To fly out and walk among the dragons, to show the other riders
the wonder of the hatchery, even if his attempts to bring dragons back were going to have more of
an edge of bringing back ones that might be willing to take riders in turn. “And the worse the
weather is, the better it’ll be for keeping him in.”

For a moment, Stoick did not reply, but reached up to rub the bridge of his nose.

Hiccup softened his voice, though he made sure not to make it quite so gentle as he would use with
the dragons. “We’ll be fine, Dad. Hopefully we can be back within today. Tomorrow at the latest,
if we want to wait for the light.”

“I don’t want you trapped there if the weather changes again,” said Stoick.

Even Hiccup had to admit that it was a possibility, and he nodded. “Neither do I,” he said. “But it’s
warm, and there’s plenty of fish, if the worst happens. The dragons won’t hurt us. And we won’t be
gone long enough to leave Berk undefended.”

Truth be told, if the riders did get trapped on the hatchery island for any length of time, Hiccup
would be more worried about Berk than about the riders themselves. He was not sure which would
be weighing more heavily on Stoick’s mind.

“We can do this, Dad.”

“Very well,” said Stoick, with a tone that was not concession but of facing something weighty
himself. “Just… be sure to be back safely.”

“Us and a bunch more new dragons,” he promised.

He considered it a stroke of luck to find Barf and Belch with their heads in one of the feeding trays,
while the twins leaned against the edge of it, yawning and shuffling back and forth. As he
approached, Ruffnut elbowed Tuffnut in the ribs, but they did not straighten up or bother with
looking more than vaguely interested in him. It was a relief, really.

“Morning,” Hiccup said, and promptly put his metal foot on a patch of ice.

The next thing that he knew, he was flat on his back in the snow with the twins cackling with laughter above him. He sighed, allowed himself to close his eyes for a count of three, then set about pulling himself back upright once again.

“Getting cold feet there?” said Ruffnut.

“No, I don’t think we’ve put a foot wrong yet.”

Hiccup made it back upright, chose his stance carefully, and brushed snow off his shoulders. The twins were watching him like sharks, wearing identical grins, and he waited to see if they were done.

“Don’t know, you might be running your mouth off.”

Apparently not, and no sign of either of them cracking into laughter and giving up, either.

“Well, what do you expect, when I’m thinking on my feet?”

“We’re leaving for the hatchery island in one hour,” he said, before it went any further. He had once seen the twins keep up a run of fish puns for an entire afternoon of training, nearly causing Gobber to lock them in with Smokey in frustration. “Grab your bags, grab your saddles.”

“Wait, that’s really happening?” said Ruffnut. “I thought that was another one of your flying boar ideas.”

Actually, come to think of it, there had been another conversation which had involved him falling over. Hiccup looked Tuffnut in the eye. “Make it to my house in half an hour, and I promise you at least three new Zipplebacks.”

Ruffnut went to say something more, then yelped as Tuffnut grabbed her by the hair and hauled her off in the direction of the house. Her words turned to protests, then rapidly to insults, as Tuffnut ignored her blithely and instead shouted at Barf and Belch to follow them. The Zippleback’s heads exchanged a glance, then they turned and padded after their riders.

“Well, that went… about as I should have expected to,” said Hiccup to Toothless. He rubbed his hip, and hoped it would not be made more sore by flying. Surely fifteen was too young to be having moments like this. If nothing else, Gobber would never let him live it down. “Come on, let’s try Snotlout.”

Fishlegs might worry about the weather, but the promise of seeing hatchlings would be enough to tempt him no matter what. And Astrid would not even need asking; the thought brought a smile to his face as he glanced into the feeding tray, saw very little fish left in it anyway, and turned carefully in the direction of Snotlout’s house.

He had not quite reached the front door when it slammed open and Spitelout stormed out, snarling clearly enough for Hiccup to hear it. From behind him, Brynnhild shouted something, but it was lost to a second resounding slam of the door before Spitelout turned and set his eyes on Hiccup.
For a split second, he tensed, muscles primed to run. Then he saw Toothless stiffen, from the
corner of his eye, and he forced himself to breathe again.

Spitelout marched towards him, pointing a finger, breath a furious cloud around him. “You,” he
growled, and Hiccup would have taken the twins and their jokes back in a heartbeat. “What bullshit
have you been telling my boy now, hmm?”

Hiccup did not know what to say. He doubted that saying that it was not him but the twins who
were likely to spin bullshit to wind up Snotlout would help in this situation. Neither would adding
that Snotlout did just the same back.

“He won’t be part of your cripples club, and he don’t need to be throwing around Rider like his
new name. He’s a Jorgenson, and that’s all he needs to be.”

With a final flourish of his hand, Spitelout stalked away into the snow, and Hiccup simply watched
his retreating back. Frankly, he was not sure what he was even supposed to feel, but he settled on a
broad swathe of confusion, and a bubbling frustrated anger in the pit of his stomach. Even on a
normal day, he would not honestly be able to say that he wanted to know what was going through
Spitelout’s head, and this was not about to make him start.

Shaking his head, he continued to the door, shared another glance with Toothless, and knocked
tentatively. Brynhild shouted something, muffled by the wood, but then there were running
footsteps and the door was flung open again.

Snotlout stared at Hiccup like he was an apparition. Hiccup paused for a moment in case anything
was going to be forthcoming, then cleared his throat.

“Hatchery,” he said. “Wind’s cleared, I’m getting the Riders together. We’ll need you for the
Monstrous Nightmares.”

Well, that was probably a bit of a stretch, but it blurted out as he saw the tightness of Snotlout’s
jaw, the way that he was staring at Hiccup without quite seeing him. The stare continued for a
moment longer, then Snotlout finally blinked and stepped back from the doorway. “Sure,
whatever.”

Although Hiccup had been to the Jorgensons’ house often enough, Snotlout was not usually
particularly inviting about it, and usually either left the room pointedly or made sure to do
something appropriately strong or manly that Hiccup could clearly never hope to do. He stepped in
tentatively, then was headbutted in the back by Toothless and hurried a little further in.

Brynhild was standing beside the table, and Hiccup caught the momentary look of astonishment
on her face before she replaced it with a smile. “Hiccup! Wasn’t expecting you here.”

“I, uh, came to let Snotlout know that we’re headed out to the hatchery today,” said Hiccup. It
occurred to him a moment later that Brynhild would have been well aware of that from what he
had said to Snotlout. He hoped that the wind had been loud enough. “Him and Hookfang.”
Grasping for a semblance of normality, he turned back to Snotlout. “Did you get a pack ready, like
I asked?”

Snotlout rolled his eyes and closed the door hard against the wind. “Like I need to set out
everything in advance and spent four moons planning like you and Fishface. Maybe you should
come and keep an eye on me to make sure that I do my own packing right.”

Yeah, there was no way that Hiccup was going to start delving into this, especially when there was
still a wary, attentive edge to the way that Brynhild was watching them, and they really did need to get flying before they lost too much daylight. But when Snotlout stormed across the room, not meeting anyone’s eyes, he decided that it would be better to follow than not, and stepped up to stand awkwardly in the doorway of Snotlout’s room.

Snotlout had the larger of the two downstairs bedrooms in the house, but it was still smaller than Hiccup’s. By the time there was a desk, a rack of axes and clubs on the wall, and chests scattered about, it managed to make it even more cluttered. Snotlout flung open the chest at the foot of his bed, pulled out a bag, and started stuffing things into it. Unsure exactly what he was supposed to do, Hiccup leant against the doorway.

The seconds stretched out, painfully, until Hiccup cleared his throat. “Adelaide not begging to come along, then? I expect Pig and Frog will.”

“She’s working on something upstairs,” said Snotlout brusquely. It made it clear that Hiccup’s words were not welcome, for all that he had been invited in, and Hiccup fell silent again. Snotlout finished adding things from the chest, slammed it shut, and headed for the axe rack. He knocked his shin against the chest, snarled something under his breath, and kicked it aside before going and retrieving a handaxe to clip to his belt.

“Uh, that might not be the best idea,” said Hiccup, keeping his wince internal. “I had one or two look protective last year. They won’t be fond of weapons.” Even his Gronckle iron knife, which had never touched dragon blood, was not coming this time.

Snotlout stared at him, not quite a glare, then stuffed the axe back into place. “Fine. Whatever.” He shouldered the bag, back to Hiccup, and paused for a moment. The breath he took was so deep that Hiccup could see his shoulders square. “I should regret not blaming you for my eye,” said Snotlout, short and clipped. “But I don’t.”

Before Hiccup had time to process the words, let alone to reply, Snotlout whirled on his foot and stalked back towards the door. He shouldered Hiccup out of the way, and Hiccup caught himself on the wall, but it was concern that flooded him as Snotlout stormed towards the door.

He caught himself, and schooled his features, as Snotlout pulled on a cloak. “Thanks for letting me borrow Snotlout, Brynhild,” he added, craning his neck but not able to see Snotlout’s mother anywhere. “Hopefully we’ll be back before midnight, but it might be tomorrow morning.”

They still had several days until Snoggletog. That was another reason for wanting to go now; even if the worst happened and they were stuck for a few days, they would be back before Snoggletog. He did not want to keep people away from their families on that day.

Mercifully, Brynhild appeared at the top of the stairs, and he had somewhere to fix his gaze. “That’s fine,” she said. Her smile looked forced. “I wish you success. Snotlout’s told me about what you’re planning.”

He had not expected that, either, but at least that was easier to handle than Snotlout’s sudden words. “Well, we’re not planning to bring back hatchlings this time. So your chair legs should be safe this year.”

Brynhild looked round to Snotlout, seemingly waiting for him to look up and catch her eye. “We’ll be all right without you, Snotlout. This is important.”

“Yeah.” Snotlout nodded, a little jerky. “Tell Adelaide she isn’t having another Nightmare.”
At that, at least, Brynhild’s smile softened. “I will.”

Snotlout finished fastening his cloak around him, and Hiccup felt like an intruder for all of the welcomes that had been extended to him. “Come on,” he said. “Let’s go.”

Compared to whatever confusing mess he had seen at Snotlout’s house, it was easy to let Fishlegs and Astrid know that they were ready to head out. Fishlegs had already spent time persuading his mother that it would be safe to go, and had already prepared a bag which probably had more emergency supplies than even Hiccup had bothered with, while Runa had seemed so interested in coming herself that Hiccup had originally blurted out an invitation. But she had demurred, saying that there were things she needed to do in midwinter, and that it would be best for all of them to do this as a team. There was something in her voice which reminded Hiccup of what he had told Anna, that their group of six would never quite fit in with either the generation above them or the generation below, and he suspected that she understood as well.

The twins were already waiting outside his house by the time that he returned; Belch had his head in the woodshed, and Hiccup could hear Thornado crooning away. True, Ruffnut was still trying to untwist her braids from where Tuffnut had presumably dragged her around the house at high speed, and one of her socks was visible above her boot, but they were there. Hiccup was genuinely impressed.

Stoick was waiting outside the house as well, but the set of his shoulders and the fall of his fur cloak made it clear that it was the chief, and not the father, who was there.

“The six of you?” said Stoick, looking them over. “Or the eight?”

Elsa was standing beside him, but there was still no sign of Anna. “Eight,” said Hiccup, firmly. Even if Anna had not come to Outcast Island, she could be involved in this. “Heather wanted to come, but she needs to stay with her father.”

She had also challenged Fishlegs to take extra notes for her, and he had blushed scarlet, but Stoick did not need to know that part. Hiccup did not even think that it had been intentional this time.

Anna all but exploded back out of the house, almost bumping into Stoick before catching herself and straightening up again. He did not even look round. She was wearing the pink cloak that she had worn in Arendelle, though her hair was tucked up beneath the lopsided woollen hat which she had spent much of the last moon attempting to knit.

“I’m ready!” she blurted.

“See? I told you we had more time,” said Ruffnut, poking Tuffnut in the side.

He turned to her beseechingly, both hands raised with his hands cupped. “Zipplebacks,” he hissed, drawing out the word.
Hiccup really hoped that there were going to be enough friendly Zipplebacks on the hatchery island for this.

“I hope to see you back tonight,” said Stoick, looking across them all. His eyes lingered on Hiccup a little longer, but Hiccup was not sure whether it was as a son or as a leader. “But if not, then tomorrow. Hiccup has left me directions for this island, if need be.”

Ruffnut gave Hiccup a steady, unimpressed look. Deciding that it was not worth pointing out that his father had insisted, Hiccup simply weathered it, and gestured for Toothless to come over to him.

“Elsa, you good riding with Astrid?” Had Heather been joining them, it probably would have been her riding with Astrid, and Elsa with Fishlegs as it had been on her first dragon ride all those moons ago. But he knew where he wanted Anna. “Anna, with me?”

“Yup,” said Anna. “Limmet is babysitting Joan. Well, I’d like to think she is. It’s probably going to fall to Gobber, really.”

“Yeah, I think that might be the case.” For all that he did not want to see any dragons back in cages again, if there were any dragon that might need it just to keep her out of trouble it would be Joan. Gobber liked to talk about how he had made a large padded crate to put Hiccup in, when Hiccup had first been learning to walk, so there was no risk of him hurting himself. “He’ll handle her.”

And she would not annoy the adult dragons on the hatchery island.

Hiccup clapped his hand, the effect dulled by his gloves. “All right, gang, saddle up! Let’s make the most of the daylight!”

For a moment, he thought that he saw a flicker of a smile behind his father’s beard.

It was just as cold as last year, but unsurprisingly the wind was a lot less fierce when they were flying at Meatlug’s speed, and not at Toothless’s. Hiccup could also keep his hands safely tucked away, rather than having to keep hold of Smokey, and the waves rolled calmly past beneath them as they spread out across the dull grey sky. It had taken long enough at Toothless’s speed, however, and he had warned the others that they would be settling in for probably their longest flight yet but was not sure that they had actually paid attention to him.

“I wasn’t sure you’d let me come,” said Anna, probably as the flying first started to become monotonous for her. He could feel her fiddling with the back of his cloak.

Hiccup turned his head far enough that could see her from the corner of his eye, but still keep track of where they were going. “Anna, even Elsa isn’t one of the six of us who really make up the Riders. She doesn’t have a dragon. She didn’t even begin training in the arena.”

She had gone to Outcast Island with them as his friend and sister, yes, but she had also gone as a
weapon. As much of a weapon as any of the dragons, perhaps more of one, and part of Hiccup still felt ashamed of himself for having used her as such.

Even at a glimpse, he could see Anna roll her eyes. “She might not be one of you six, but she’s one of you three. You, her, and Toothless,” she supplied, which was something of a relief because Hiccup was not sure he would have guessed what she was getting at otherwise. “All your stories about being in the cove together. Sharing a room. Your secret language.”

“Hardly anyone here speaks Arendellen, either,” he reminded her. The rest, he could not talk about, but he could not let her resent Elsa for having to have learnt Marulosen along the way instead. Or for having forgotten her Arendellen in those first early years. “My father and I speak it best.”

Anna’s silence took on a sulky texture.

“I know it doesn’t sound fair, but it also isn’t fair for you to blame her about the languages thing. As for the cove, yes. We have good memories there that are just for us.” He took a deep breath. “But again, you and I have memories of Arendelle that nobody else has. Any two people have memories that nobody else has. But… I know. What you mean.”

When the others had sat around their table at dinner and talked about their training at the arena, while Hiccup had been sitting with Gobber and talking about dragon care instead. However interesting it had been, it still hadn’t been with them.

“I’m sorry that I don’t know what to say to make things better, Anna.” The guilt felt like iron in his chest. “But I promise that I’m here for you. And Elsa is too – even if you argue, she loves you.”

Anna’s fingers continued to pick at Hiccup’s cloak, a strange fluttering feeling against his back. “If you had to pick someone,” she said, finally. “Just one person. Who would it be?”

“That’s not fair.”

“Neither’s life,” she snapped, this time with a flash of fire that he wasn’t sure how to react to. It was good to see something back in her, anything, after so many rounds of tears and so many times that her eyes had seemed to go quiet and cold. But it was hardly the Anna that he remembered from Arendelle, from their childhoods, even from those first days when she had Elsa in her life again and both of them had seemed to light up from the inside out.

He didn’t want to say that he had an answer. That if the heavens tore open and the gods rained down wrath, and if all parts of his soul save one were stripped away, he knew what that last remaining part would be.

His hand tightened on the edge of Toothless’s saddle, and he bowed his head for a moment. Left foot or no, he had never felt more whole than when Toothless was in the village at his side. While he would always want Elsa at his back, and want to stand at hers, Toothless was wound through him in a way that he never thought he would even be himself.

Something must have been an answer enough for Anna. Her hands pressed flat against his back, and her body softened. “All right,” she said. “Thank you.”

He hoped that she was more comfortable with the silence than he was.
Finally, the hatchery island came into sight on the horizon, and Hiccup let out a sigh of relief. He wished that he could feel the joy of the previous Snoggletog, finding their dragons alive and well and being able to witness for himself such an intimate part of their life. Now, he was all but looking to recruit soldiers, and he knew it.

As they drew close enough for the specks around the island to take distinctive winged forms, Hiccup pushed Toothless ahead, whirled around, and with a flare of Toothless’s wings and a raised hand drew the others to a halt.

“This had better be the right island!” shouted Snotlout.

It was not as if flying on a single compass heading was complicated, but Hiccup just rolled his eyes and ignored the comment. Too many people’s words today, and not enough time to think them through. “Remember what I said,” Hiccup shouted back, feeling his throat tighten in the cold air. “No threatening movements. Be particularly careful around hatchlings. These dragons do not know us and may be coming from areas were humans still fight dragons. Stay with your dragon, and back down if you need to. Follow me in to land.”

There were various replies that were half-hearted enough to be pulled away by the wind, and Hiccup did not wait for anything clearer before wheeling around again and leading them towards the island. His eyes scanned the air and ground, more practised than a year ago; he could see now the patterns of movement along the shore, the clusters of dragons in certain areas that might have been due to the sheltering shape of the cliffs or the way that the hot water rose from the ground to meet them. That was something he hoped to discuss with Fishlegs, if he had the chance. But it meant that there were clear spaces, as well, with only a dragon here or there patrolling the higher outcrops or the bleaker, sharper-looking plateaus.

In daylight, and with his head clear, he could see as well a handful of shallow basins in the rock, and a shifting that had nothing to do with the rolling motion of being on dragonback. Black rock flowed, cracking red and orange, and at least that explained the heat in the ground and the water. The volcano must have been docile enough to live beside, though, as there seemed to be no concern from the dragons on the island; they simply looked to be avoiding those areas where the lava welled.

Settling his eyes on a wide, fresh-looking swathe of bare earth, he guided them down, pausing just before landing to be sure that there would not be sharp obsidian strewn around. Dragons’ feet were tougher than humans, but obsidian could go through hide or leather boots with equal ease. It was clear enough, though, the ground already turning to rounder pebbles and the beginning of soil, and he brought Toothless in to land as softly as a breath.

He let Anna slip off first, as the others came in to land around them. Anna all but ripped the hat off her head, tugging the scarf from around her neck.

“It’s so warm down here!” said Fishlegs, eyes wide, before he had even dismounted.

“It’s the island,” said Hiccup, relieved at least that he no longer had to shout. “Or, well, the volcanic part. Hot island, hot springs, even in the middle of winter.”
“We’ll have to be ready for the cold when we take off again,” said Astrid, but even she was shedding her cloak. “Don’t want anyone freezing up there.”

“Yeah, but I don’t want anyone getting too sweaty down here, either. Make yourselves comfortable, gang, we’re gonna be here for a while.”

Astrid caught his eye, even as she was tucking her gloves into her saddlebag, and her smile softened for him. It made everything feel a little lighter.

By the time that everyone seemed to have removed as many layers as they wished – several of them, including Hiccup, removing additional socks which had been necessary in the air but which would end with nothing but sweat on the island – there was a tense excitement in the air, and even Hiccup felt himself standing straighter and smiling more as the warm, if somewhat less than fragrant, air wrapped around them.

Astrid sped up her steps as they hit the top of the slope, sliding down until she was beside him. “How many dragons are we looking for, here?”

“We’ve got three barns fixed up, and several more earmarked,” Hiccup replied, with a faint shrug that was probably lost as he took a step down a steeper section. “But honestly?” he took his eyes off the path long enough to catch Astrid’s gaze. “I want more dragons than we can reasonably train for. That way, we don’t have to force any of them under the saddle.”

“You want people well-trained this winter, I’d say ten at a time at most. But we might be able to run the academy twice.”

Twenty more people, on dragonback. The thought of it was breathtaking, but he could not forget that it was all happening so fast because of Dagur’s thirst for war. It sat bittersweet on his tongue.

“Aim for twenty dragons, including some Zipplebacks?” he suggested.

“I’d say twenty minimum,” Astrid replied.

He supposed that running the academy twice was going to make it rather more extreme. For a moment, Hiccup was almost suggested that they only try for enough dragons for a first run, and seek out more dragons after that. But he knew as well as any of them that finding this number of dragons in one place had not happened since the Red Death’s nest, and now that island seemed to have been all but deserted.

“Twenty to thirty.”

They rounded a corner of the rocky pseudo-path, and even Astrid caught her breath as the view rolled out in front of them. The ground was twisted and folded, full of hollows and caves, perfect for the dozens of dragons and hatchlings that clustered in front of them. Gronckles, Nadders, Nightmares, Zipplebacks, moving calmly among each other. Here and there, a roar or puff of smoke announced an interaction, but there was no sound of growling or snarling, no sign of antagonism.

So many dragons, many times more than Berk had even now. Hiccup tore his eyes away from them only to look round to the amazement on Astrid’s face, the shock slowly turning to a smile. His hand itched to hold hers, but he knew he could not as the others turned the corner just behind them and almost bumped into them where they had stopped in their tracks.

“Hey!” said Snotlout. “Watch where—” his eye went wide, and both brows rose, as he scanned the sight. “Shiiiiit.”
Hiccup stepped clear enough that he could spread his arms properly, as all of them – or at least the human contingent – bunched up just as they could see the dragons spread out below. “Welcome to the real nest, gang.”
It was bittersweet how well everyone was doing. Hiccup turned his hand to better scratch the Nadder he was currently greeting beneath the chin, and was rewarded with a fish-scenting rumble. The first Nightmare that he had approached had turned out to have a clutch of eggs not far behind her, but there was no sign of the Nadder having the same, and they seemed young and strong and friendly.

And it was not just him who found it easy. Tuffnut had already run back over to triumphantly declare that he had found a whole cave full of Zipplebacks, Fishlegs had come back for more dragon nip, and he had seen Astrid throwing a blanket over to a Nightmare’s back and climbing on to test their reaction to a possible saddle.

Too easy.

He kept lunch as short as possible, leaving the others talking while he returned to the dragons again. It was hard enough to look the dragons in the eye, let alone the humans. But it was easy to hide behind the excuse of the painfully short days this deep in the winter, saying that they did not have long to do their work, and indeed night fell around them by the time that Hiccup was able to feel even vaguely comfortable with choosing four of the dragons he had greeted and setting about leading them back to the place where they had landed.

It had seemed a lot more manageable when he broke down the numbers. Thirty dragons sounded outrageous; four each, not so much. After all, he had brought seven dragons back from Outcast Island with him, even if none of them were exactly fighting-fit and two were no longer on Berk. But the male Nightmare who had gone with Camicazi would not take long to get back to full health, and most of the others were well on the way to recovery. Likely only the old Gronckle was really past their fighting years.

The fires from across the island lit the underside of the clouds in rippling orange and red, and the still, warm air made sound travel. It made it feel as if the dragons were around every corner, as if this place was truly theirs in at least as much of a way as Berk belonged to the Berkians. Part of Hiccup would have happily made friends of some dragons and slept beside them again, but that was not the point of this visit.

For a moment, Hiccup just looked out over the folds and creases of rock that made up the island, the firelight making it glow, the shadows of dragons writ everywhere, the pops of fire along the coast as the eggs popped. Then he tapped Toothless on the shoulder and made the sign with his right hand, and Toothless fired into the sky in a light purple splash.

Tuffnut joined him first, rapturous over not just three but four Zipplebacks in varying colours. Hiccup could not get a clear enough look at the bases of their tails to know if they were male or female, but they were all full-grown or close to it, butting each other out of the way to pluck strips of dried fish out of Tuffnut’s hands.

“You had some success there, then?” said Hiccup mildly.

Tuffnut turned, grin so wide it almost split his face in two. “Hiccup! You would not believe the number of dragons here! I mean,” he snapped upright, one hand cupping the other elbow as he
tapped thoughtfully at his chin, “you probably could, you’re pretty credulous, Ruffnut says that you totally believed that psychic link thing that she came up with last autumn, but still. It’s a lot of dragons, that’s what I’m saying. We should come here another time when there isn’t, you know, the looming fear of invasion, death and warfare hanging over our heads.”

He had a point, somewhere underneath it all. Hiccup chose to let the credulous comment slide. “Yeah. That sounds good. We should come here another time of year, see if there’s any dragons who stay here all year round.”

“Oh, sure,” said Snotlout, from behind them, the crunching of his footsteps lost beneath the shuffling of the Zipplebacks. “Just what we need. Study opportunities over the summer.”

A stone bounced off the side of Snotlout’s helmet, and he immediately looked in the wrong direction.

“A vacation. I like the sound of it, once we’re quiet enough,” said Astrid, from somewhere behind the growing cluster of dragons.

“We might have to go back in two groups…” said Hiccup.

He had two Nadders and two Nightmares, it looked as if Snotlout had brought another two Nightmares and a Nadder, and Astrid had a Nadder, a Gronckle, and a Zippleback. He motioned for Tuffnut to move the Zipplebacks along, then when the message got lost somewhere between Tuffnut and the dragons gave up and waved for the dragons he had accumulated to go further back.

“You think?” Astrid replied. There was audible frustration in her voice, and Hiccup cleared his throat uncomfortably. “We’re going to have to land in at least four groups…”

Even the Green was not going to contain this many dragons.

“All right, gang!” He clapped his hands together. “This is the real test of your dragons – will they follow you into the air? Yes, Tuffnut.”

Tuffnut lowered the hand which he had raised. “I kinda need Barf and Belch back to test that. And Ruffnut, I guess.”

“She’s probably stuck in the queue,” Snotlout grumbled. He waded through his Nightmares until he made it to Hookfang, and hauled himself up into the saddle. “Whatever, nerds. This is how you know you’ve picked the right dragons. To the sky!”

To judge by the resounding silence that followed, only Snotlout had any delusions that such a declaration was going to work. Hookfang groomed his armpit with a slurping sound.

Lips pinching together, Snotlout looked back down from the sky to glare at the back of his dragon’s head. “This is not a good look for either of us, you know that?”

Hookfang snorted.

Hiccup plucked the whistle from his belt, balanced it between his teeth, and blew a short trill of notes as he made an upwards-sweeping motion with his hands. Hookfang’s head snapped round, he took in the motion in a glance, and barged one of the Zipplebacks out of his way in his haste to spread his wings. Snotlout yelped as Hookfang lurched into the air, clutched his helmet on to his head, and shot Hiccup a glare.

“At least I didn’t bring back a sheepish Changewing,” Snotlout shouted. He squared his shoulders.
“Hey, Fishlegs! Hiccup found you a new best friend?”

Hiccup could not see where Fishlegs was in the straggle of people and dragons, and settled for rolling his eyes on Fishlegs’s behalf instead. Snotlout had been snappier than ever the last few days, before even the spectacle that Hiccup had accidentally witnessed that morning. But it was for no reason that Hiccup could find out from his grouching, and he hoped that it was only a passing phase.

“Astrid, you got Stormfly there?” he peered over the back of a Gronckle, and managed to catch sight of her just as she pulled herself up into Stormfly’s saddle. “What dragons?”

“A Nadder, a Gronckle, and a Zippleback,” she called back, as Stormfly squirmed a large enough room to land. Good gods, there was just a morass of dragons, squirming past each other and grumbling back and forth. Part of Hiccup wondered whether it was the time of year that made them more communal, whether he was lucky enough to be taking advantage of some instinct they already had. “Come on, then!”

She took off, and put her fingers to her mouth to whistle rather than relying on a bone whistle as Hiccup did, and sure enough three dragons peeled out from the crowd and followed her into the air. It was probably pointed that she moved to the opposite side of the open ground from Snotlout, but he let it slide. The last thing they needed was an argument with over twenty dragons around.

It was a little easier to see, as Ruffnut pushed her way out between two Monstrous Nightmares and straightened her helmet. “Did you really think this landing area through?”

Apparently not well enough. “I’ll introduce a shift system if we need to do this again,” said Hiccup. To judge by the quirk of Ruffnut’s eyebrow, it was not an answer that she had been expecting, and he was not going to ask what she had thought he was going to come out with. “You and Tuff ready to get back in the air? Then you guys and Snotlout can start heading back, if you want. Get there first.”

The implied ego of being the first one back was aimed at Snotlout far more than either of the twins – especially with Tuffnut apparently so rapturous over the wealth of Zipplebacks he had found himself with. But Ruffnut did not comment either way as she swaggered over to Barf and Belch, swung into the saddle, and watched on while Tuffnut scrambled away from his Zipplebacks to follow her.

On the bright side, it did not take waves of the arm for Barf and Belch to get into the air, and it only took a minimum of shouting from the twins, voices overlapping, for six dragons to follow them up as well.

Suddenly, it was actually possible to breathe on ground level. Hiccup wondered whether there were going to be competitions to name the new dragons over Snoggletog, then heard the hysteria in his own thoughts and tamped it down again. Instead, he cupped his hands around his mouth and did his best to sound like he was still even faintly in charge of the absurd number of dragons around them.

“All right! Ruff, Tuff, Snotlout, you’re group reið!” It seemed like a vaguely appropriate rune name to shout at them. “Get going, the other groups will be behind you. Head for those barns that we fixed up!”

“You got it, Dragon Master!” called Tuffnut, and Hiccup groaned.

“I am never gonna live that down…”
Elsa managed to appear out of the throng beside him, pink-cheeked but smiling, at least, looking the happiest he had seen her in quite a while. Part of him wished that he could fly back to Berk with her, talking about anything and nothing to practice his Marulosen, or seeing if they could tease clues about their Snoggletog presents out of each other. But Anna needed him, in a way that he still did not quite understand, and in a way which daunted him as much as trying to help Elsa had daunted him.

At least, with Elsa, he had been able to grasp fairly quickly what her fears boiled down to. Her magic, its potential and its danger. What she had faced from others. With Anna, he didn’t have the words for the shadows in her head, let alone the answers for how she could deal with them.

“There are worse things to be called,” said Elsa, still with that smile. It was only as he looked her in the eye that he realised there was still sadness there, tiredness, as she wrapped her arms around herself.

He glanced around hurriedly, but Fishlegs was still on the other side of a Zippleback. “Are you all right?” he asked, lowering his voice.

Elsa nodded. “Dragons are easier,” she said, and he heard a lot more beneath the surface.

It took a lot of willpower not to glance at Anna in response to her question, but he let himself nod. “I hear you. You all right to ride back with Fishlegs, instead of Astrid?” Elsa just nodded. “What dragons?”

“Two Monstrous Nightmares. There were two Nadders, also, but they had a nest.”

“That’s fine, we’ve still got more than enough.” He reached out to rub her upper arm, tried not to let it look like a test, and was still relieved when she leaned marginally into it rather than away. “Let’s get them back. Fishlegs!” Stepping to the side, Hiccup raised his voice again and waited for Fishlegs to turn around. “Elsa’s with you, is that all right?”

“Uh… sure?” Fishlegs sounded surprised more than anything else, but as Elsa gave one more smile and stepped around the bluish Monstrous Nightmare closest behind her he readjusted the saddlebags on Meatlug and shifted the stirrups appropriately. They probably should have checked earlier, Hiccup supposed, but he had seen the tension and the yearning for the air in every line of Astrid’s body, and Elsa got along well enough with Fishlegs.

It took no effort to get their dragons in the air as well, and Hiccup did a quick count to confirm ten dragons, including Stormfly and Meatlug. Gods, but their numbers were going to multiply fast. It made everything very real, and tightened in his chest so much for a moment that he had to take a few deep, sulphur-tinged breaths before he could speak again.

“All right!” he managed, the sound a little strangled. He did not miss the way that Astrid cocked her head at him. “Team úr sound good to you? Aim for those barns that we nearly finished, on the western side of town.”

“Will do!” Fishlegs shouted back. Astrid gave a salute which should almost have been sarcastic, but he couldn’t bring himself to feel that way about it.

He watched them leave, another group of wings fading into the fast-darkening sky, and wondered whether Elsa’s hair was really the last thing he could see or whether it was just easier to imagine a speck of white in the darkness.

With the rush of shouting up at the sky gone, he felt the crushing tightness around his chest again.
It was like a weight pulling down, a worse weight than any armour he had ever tried to wear, and as it pressed in he bowed his head and closed his eyes and wished that he could think of the day as being full of the wonder of looking into the eyes of dragons, and of feeling their trust as physical as their skin against his hand.

Instead, he knew that he was choosing them for war, some half-conscripted army, and it hurt more than a blade across his ribs had ever done.

“Hiccup?” said Anna, tentatively.

His eyes snapped open, and he realised there were fragments of tears in them. Gritting his teeth, he wiped across his eyes with thumb and forefinger, pinching the bridge of his nose, and hoped that it did not look too obvious why. “Sorry. Lot of dragons, lot of shouting. When my father and I discussed what we’d need to feed and house these guys… it didn’t quite do credit to that scene.”

Anna glanced across at the remaining handful of dragons, then down at the droppings that had been added to the ground along the way. “Or the smell?” she suggested.

From Elsa, it would have been said dryly, but there was something almost desperate in Anna’s voice still. For a moment, he wondered with something approaching annoyance why everyone seemed to be having their worst time all at the same time, but he pushed that nasty thought back down again. It was neither kind nor helpful, and was certainly not what he should be thinking at a moment like this.

However difficult it was to juggle so many people at once.

“Also a factor,” he said. He nodded to the Nadder grooming beneath its wing behind her, and the Gronckle just behind them. “Two for you as well, then?”

Twenty-two more, altogether, all the same. It was going to be a lot more fish.

Instead, though, a flicker of guilt crossed Anna’s face, like a child caught stealing honey from the jar. She turned on the spot to reveal a large, golden-yellow Terror that had hooked their claws into the shoulders of her shirt and was dangling almost the full length of her back. They looked over at Hiccup with an expression which he could only describe as smug, and he opened and closed his mouth a couple of times before managing to come up with anything.

“You really do have a knack with them. Did you… want to bring that one back with you?”

“I don’t know why it latched on.” Anna tried to peer over her own shoulder down at the Terror. “I just petted it in passing, then the next thing that I knew…”

“They were deciding to test out the stitching on your shirt. Well, I guess if they want to come, they can fly back with us. Or sit under your cloak. I just don’t want them ripping anything while we’re in the air, because that cold gets everywhere.”

“Hmm.” Anna scrunched her nose up in concentration, then nodded. “All right, I think I have an idea. This shirt isn’t too fitted. Can you come and hold it for a second?”

He blinked. “The shirt?”

“The Terror.”

Any of the others would have given him shit for that one until at least his birthday. Hoping that Anna would forget it more quickly than his ego would, Hiccup hurried forwards and took hold of
the Terror around the ribs. They were certainly not underweight, probably the first truly healthy one they had ended up with so far, muscles twitching beneath their skin and claws extending just a little further into Anna’s shirt as he took hold.

“Hey, hey, it’s all right there,” he said, hastily but trying to keep his voice soothing all the same. “No need to be ruining that wool…”

“Right,” said Anna. She undid the leather clasps at each wrist of her sleeves, then squirmed both one arm and then the other into the torso of her shirt with her. It was another donated one, he supposed, and was too big for Anna as most clothing of Berkian origin would be, but there was still something bizarre about watching Anna withdraw into the shirt like a snail into its shell, and then very carefully turn around to face him.

“This is not what I thought I would find myself doing today,” he said.

It probably shouldn’t have been that much of a surprise, seeing as Anna had already adopted two Terrible Terrors and he had proceeded to bring her to an island with scores of them, but the shirt business was pushing it. Anna did back up the clasps again, then scooped her arms around the Terror, who was now glancing around themselves in confusion as to this human sorcery.

“There we go,” she said. The collar of the shirt was very high on her neck, and she would likely need to drape her scarf differently, but he supposed that it would do. She bounced the Terror gently in place, to a surprised squeak. “Couldn’t have done that in Arendellen clothes, could I?”

Figuring that his work was done, Hiccup released the Terror again, and they adjusted themselves against Anna’s chest. “All right. One Nadder, one Gronckle, one Terror.”

“Sorry it’s not exactly a riding-sized dragon,” said Anna, some of the confidence seeming to leak out of her as she glanced up at him, then very quickly away. He could see her lip curling in for her to bite on.

Hiccup shrugged. “All dragons are a step forwards. Who knows? Maybe these guys could carry messages for us or something.” He gave the Terror a gentle scratch on the top of their head. “If we could figure out how to get them to go certain places.”

“Kind of easier to intercept than a big dragon.”

“Kind of harder to spot, though,” he pointed out. Anna shrugged back, which may or may not have been an answer. “Anyway, they can come with us, and if they want to leave than they’re free to. We won’t cage any of them.” He hoped that it said something that, so far, only the Hobblegrunt had chosen to leave. Even the Scauldron still hung around the bay, where Ruffnut could lob fish from the shore. “Come on, let’s get wrapped up and back in the air, otherwise ‘group reið’ are going to have a little too long unattended with a lot of dragons for my liking.”

Anna smiled, and tucked the Terror closer to her chest again.
Impressively, nothing was more on fire than usual by the time that they returned to Berk, although it seemed that a couple of the feeding stations had been put back to their former use of holding bonfires, though at ground level now rather than hoisted into the air to try to make visible the dragons above them. It gave the village a warm glow that reflected against the skies above despite the snow and return of the freezing north wind.

Of course, it didn’t hurt that Anna’s latest Terror acquisition curled between them the entire flight back, a warm weight in the small of Hiccup’s back and, presumably, against Anna’s stomach. Once or twice, they rumbled to themselves, which was disconcertingly like a growling stomach, but there were worse things to have about one’s person.

He landed, sent the others home before they all got in each other’s way, and attempted to usher approximately the right number of dragons into each building. He barely realised until the last Nightmare was nosing a pile of straw into something which was apparently more pleasing that he had acquired something of an audience in doing so. Unlike in summer or even autumn, there was no real way that it could be passed off as a social gathering, and people were openly pointing and discussing the dragons and the barns as the snow fell around them.

At least they looked to be offering the riders mugs of hot soup as well, he supposed. Those who had remained on Berk had no way of knowing just how balmy it had been on the hatchery.

Stoick did not join them until about the point that Hiccup was stepping back from checking that the floor was holding up fine under the weight of a pile of three Gronckles, and whether or not that was deliberate Hiccup had no idea. The smile that he offered his father was tentative, and for a moment he did not feel at all like himself as his father surveyed the amassed dragons, hands on his hips.

Or perhaps it was like himself as he had used to be, instead. Offering his father a sharpened knife or a new fire iron, hoping that it would earn him a scrap of consideration on Berk as a whole. The challenges of the last year had rarely felt quite like this.

“Oh!” Stoick seemed surprised as he caught Hiccup’s eye, and by now Hiccup was practised enough to see the swift rearrangement of his father’s concentration. “They look like good choices. Your riders have done well.”

True, most of Berk could vaguely gauge a dragon’s strength and age, but that was more practice from fighting them than it was an eye for flying. Knowing how difficult they would be to kill. There was no way that his father could be making a detailed judgement, Hiccup realised with a strange jolt. Stoick’s voice and nod were confident, his shoulders square, and the other Berkians watching from their place nodded and murmured among themselves.

“We’ll need a few days to give them thorough checks and start getting them used to handling,” said Hiccup. “Might be the odd scrape needs looking at, or… something. But they’ve got to be doing well enough just to have flown back to Berk with us.”

A crude sort of test, he supposed, but any dragon that would not have been able to make the flight would have been able to turn back or, at least, drop onto one of the smaller islands and islets that had dotted the sea beneath them. But he trusted his riders when it came to choosing strong dragons, and ones that had strong potential to befriend humans.

For the most part, at least. He was largely sure that sympathy would not have played too much of a role in the selection process.

“But I think that’s us done for the night,” he added, more loudly, a little bit amazed all the same at the groans of disappointment from their audience. “We can start deciding on who to train soon,
though.”

Spitelout was going to be non-negotiable, Hiccup already knew. Phlegma too, as long as she wanted to be trained, and then all of the council would be on dragonback. Gobber was technically neither council nor on dragonback, but he was so involved in the upkeep of the village and the dragons both that it was impossible to think of him in any other way.

Stoick raised his eyebrows, and if Hiccup wasn’t mistaken there was a hint of a glitter in his eye. “We’ll see who can be spared for it.”

As if by magic, a number of those watching seemed to remember that they had work which they needed to be doing if they wanted a chance to train dragons, and hurried away again. Hiccup’s lips twitched into a smile of their own, and he rubbed Toothless’s head without looking down, warmth seeping through his glove just from the touch.

“Come on,” Stoick added, with a nod of his head towards the path. “Let’s head home, and you can fill me in on the day.”

It buoyed him up again, light in his chest, and only a warning slip of his metal foot kept him paying attention to where he was walking as he crossed back to his father and began the trudge home. The snow must have been steady all day, to judge by the crispness of it, already knee-deep everywhere that was not being used as a path. Well, knee-deep on Stoick, which would have meant thigh-deep on Hiccup and most of the way over Toothless’s head.

Home sounded good, but he was barely around the first corner before he drew up short, almost bumping into Toothless, and raised a hand. “Ah! Wait!”

Stoick stopped, turning to face him with a frown. “Aye?”

“I agreed with Grievous that as soon as I got back, I’d go and pick up Gobber’s Snoggletog present.” At least without anyone else from the household as witness, he could simply say it.

Stoick sighed. “And Grievous is going to trade rye whiskey for…”

“A fine selection of shed dragon’s teeth, including ones which I’m fairly sure are hatchling Zipplebacks because I haven’t seen anything like them before.” Grievous’s rye whiskey was always in high demand and short supply, and Hiccup had promised him both a good bag of dragon teeth and a spot on the list of candidates Astrid was already considering for the academy over the winter. He had made it clear that it was not a definite place, but Grievous had been content enough with that.

Stoick sighed.

“Look, it can’t give him as bad of a hangover as the poteen did last Snoggletog.” Or Stump Day. Or a few other celebrations as well, but those two had of course been the most spectacular. At least on Stump Day it was expected of the top table to be raucously and imaginatively drunk.

A long, considering glance, and then Stoick wagged a finger. “You’re to be responsible for getting him home if he gets out of hand, you know.”

“I’ll make sure the wheelbarrow is prepared.” Or possibly just push him onto a Gronckle, but those were the only ways that Hiccup could ever see him managing to manoeuvre Gobber around. Most likely, neither would be an option, and Stoick would recover his humour before Snoggletog was even through.
At least this time, the way that Stoick shook his head was fond. “Go on, then. As long as my present isn’t set to be the same thing.”

Hiccup mimed sealing his lips, turned on his heel, and thought better of walking with one glance at the snow. Instead he slung himself back into Toothless’s saddle, and they took to the air in a beat, wind and snow finding every gap at Hiccup’s wrists and neck where he had removed layers to make it easier to direct dragons. He pulled a face, but it was not too bad with only a short distance to fly, and home not far beyond that as well.

Checking the dragons would likely keep them all busy until Snoggletog, and then they could have a day to breathe before the Wildlings – maybe – arrived. The offer still stood open, and they would not know the answer until the day after midwinter as had been agreed. He could probably do with refreshing his Marulosen before that time as well, he supposed. But it was a better list of tasks, at least, to be moving on with as the nights drew to their longest and their coldest.

As they got longer, he knew, he was going to have to turn his attention back to Dagur in seriousness once again.

Chapter End Notes

Grievous is not actually a four-armed cyborg in this fic, but there you go. The name just sort of stuck.
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

Non-spoilery content notes for this chapter: we'll be back with Eirik again, so aftermath of traumatic brain injury; discussion of sickness; reference to child death.

Sorry that this chapter is a day late! I lost track of weeks and thought this was my week off. The fic has also ended up a little longer than planned, so a few chapters have been added to the count to show that.

The days passed quickly, in a way that had nothing to do with how short the nights had become. The downside of having so many dragons so quickly proved to be an immediate and village-wide difficulty in telling them apart, such that even Fishlegs and Hiccup were doing a certain amount of squinting and guessing, until Gobber rolled his eyes and got Fishlegs to rustle up some paint to put stripes on the dragons’ horns.

‘Blue Nadder, red stripe’ wasn’t the catchiest name in the world, but it at least did while they got a sense of which dragons had worms, which could do with their teeth being cleaned, which were male and which were female. Even Snotlout gave up on trying to find variations on Hookfang for the eight new Nightmares, and Hiccup did not even try to keep up with the running rota of names which Tuffnut was running over and suggesting for one or another Zippleback with almost hourly regularity.

Returning home after dark, the house felt warm and reassuringly peaceful, even when people were avoiding each other’s eyes and hiding out in different rooms to finish off Snoggletog presents. He looked forward to finding out exactly what had prompted Anna’s outburst of Arendellen swearing about thimbles, for one.

He and Fishlegs took Silversnap and Skyfire to visit Eirik, the next day that Heather said her father was doing well. As long as he did not think about how many days had passed in between, it felt like a good sign. Only Fishlegs could lift them, these days, and even he grunted when he lifted Skyfire onto the table in Heather’s house so that Eirik could get a good look and laugh, sounding disbelieving, at how the creatures of nightmare and legend were now sitting on his dinner table and nosing at his feet.

“With rapturous roars, she razed them all, and scoured the skies with scattering cries,” said Eirik, stroking Skyfire’s head. From the corner of his eye, Hiccup saw the way that Heather caught her breath.

Fishlegs paused in scratching Silversnap about the shoulders, and looked up. It would have looked just curious if not for the way that his other hand, out of Eirik’s sight, had curled into a fist. “Is that – from a song?”

“Yes,” said Eirik, seemingly quite unaware as he kept looking curiously over Skyfire’s face.
“About the Battle for – the, uh…” he trailed off. Heather stepped forwards, but he flapped a hand at her. “No! No, I – I’ll remember.” He took a deep breath. “Near the Puffins. Not the Puffins. Bashem.” He sounded relieved when the word came to him.

Heather looked it, as well.

“I… remember, more.” Eirik continued, voice scratching. He reached up to touch his scarred throat, with the hand not currently cupping Skyfire’s jaw. “Can’t, ah, can’t say them. Like before. But I remember them.”

“I’m working on getting them written down,” said Heather. “It’s more than I know.”

Hiccup tried not to make it too obvious when he looked her over more critically. There were shadows beneath her eyes, and her clothes were not hanging well on her frame. She had been at the academy less and less, and more than once Elsa had returned of an evening looking despondent, eventually admitting to Hiccup that Heather had turned her away at the door either because Eirik was struggling or simply because Heather had too much to do.

He glanced at Fishlegs. “What about Sardine?”

“You mean to…” Fishlegs seemed to catch on, and he nodded vigorously. “Oh, yes! He wants to practise his writing!”

“Bucket’s nephew.” said Hiccup, by way of explanation, as he saw Heather frown and Eirik fall still again with a look of uncertainty. “He’s pretty good with his letters, better than many on Berk. If your spelling is good, and you could advise him,” he added, straight to Eirik and knowing that Heather could not continue to make every decision for either of their sake’s, “he’d be happy to write for you, in return for that advice.”

There had to be a trade, he knew that much. He could not imagine that Heather’s pride had come from nowhere, and knew better than to offer more gifts to them that they would feel they had to repay. But with his right leg left almost useless since the fever that had swept the island when he was a baby, Sardine had if anything more difficulty in joining the usual Berkian pursuits than even Hiccup or Snotlout now would.

It had been a bad summer. A fever that had seemed to kill more than it had spared, among those who found themselves with anything more than hot blood and disrupted guts. Hiccup had only vague memories, of being five years old and watching his father go from funeral to funeral, but he remembered clearly that Snotlout’s brother had been one of the last to die, that fall, and that Snotlout had then hated Hiccup for the first time. That year had been the last time that a trader other than Johann had visited the island, and Berk had mistrusted anyone else ever since. On that, Hiccup could not very well disagree. Johann had never brought sickness to their shores.

“How old?” said Heather, still frowning.

“Turned eleven this spring. But he’s got a good head on him, and he’s understanding. Helps Bucket a lot,” he added, meeting Heather’s eyes in a way that he hoped looked more meaningful.

She had met Bucket. Gods, he had been the one guarding her cell when she had escaped, determined to join them in their fight on Outcast Island. Most likely, she had taken account of how the blow to his head had affected him – whether she had guessed at the time at the cause or not – and deliberately taken advantage of it.

He wondered whether that haunted her, now, with Eirik as he was. But he knew that asking would
be cruel.

She rubbed her hand across her mouth, then gave a minute nod. “We’ll talk about it. Right, Dad?”

This time, Hiccup could not help but think, the look of faint confusion on Eirik’s face as he looked between all three of them was more than justified. Finally, he nodded, jerkily.

“Great.” Hiccup did his best to look charming, or at least vaguely endearing, as he smiled. “I’ll let you know where their house is, let you sort out the details. They’re friendly folk,” he added, those words more specifically aimed at Heather. Eirik had at least not seen what had gone on with Spitelout.

Eirik frowned, and his hand seemed to spasm. Hiccup could not help the flutter of concern as his gaze and attention snapped instantly round, and he saw the way that Heather went bowstring-taut and covered the distance to her father’s side in a heartbeat.

“Dad?”

He shook his head, small and rapidly. “No, no. Just think… thinking. It would be nice. To see people.”

Heather swallowed, and as her father glanced away guilt made shadows in her eyes. “We can talk about it. I’ll see what I can do.”

And perhaps, Hiccup thought, it would be a start.

It was so busy that getting time to himself seemed like relief enough. Getting time with Astrid felt like all but a gift from the gods, even if it was deep into the evening and so cold that the snow was little more than fine powder as it fell.

It gave them an excuse, at least, to sit against Toothless’s side together as they watched the snow fall over the Wildlands, not even bothering to claim to be on watch or anything of that sort. They could see barely any distance at all, just falling snow over the dim shapes of the nearest trees, and the mist of their breaths in the cave. Even beside Toothless, with blankets wrapped around both of them and Astrid pressed tightly to his side, it was cold. But it would have been far colder without them.

“Looks like the winter’s going to stay hard,” said Astrid. “That might deter a few folks from wanting to be trained.”

He almost wanted to change the subject. To talk about nothings, or just to sit in silence and enjoy the way that it felt to have his arm around her back and her head against his shoulder. They had removed Toothless’s saddle to use as a seat, off the cold ground, and one of her hands rested on his knee. There were not even spikes on her skirt to make it uncomfortable. He could smell whatever herbs it was that she used to wash her hair, and gods help him, he did not want it to end.
But it did not mean that they did not have work that needed doing. “Might be helpful,” he said. “My father has given up redirecting all of the questions to me. He’s heard me answer so many times that he’s able to do it himself now.”

“I’m still wondering whether to put Spitelout and Phlegma both in the first group, in case the second doesn’t have time to run and so we can get all of the council on dragons at the same time, or separate them,” said Astrid. Hiccup was pretty sure that the shift against his side was her irritation. “But I know Spitelout will want to be in the first group, whatever happens.”

Which meant that Runa was going to be in the second; they had not even needed to say that aloud for them both to be sure of it. “I’ll speak to my father about managing Spitelout,” said Hiccup. It was not going to be easy. Frankly, there was a good chance of it being the hardest part of the entire training, even with the fact that they were going to be dealing with adults who had been trained to fight dragons for a decade or more. Even with a year to soften their instincts, Hiccup did not doubt that there was going to be some sort of incident. It would just be a matter of handling it when it happened. They had been taught to kill dragons, and the dragons had learned to fight them in return. One sharp move could set everything off.

But Spitelout was still what worried him. There was hardly anybody in the village to whom he would listen, and certainly not anyone in the riders whom he would respect. And with what Brynnhild had been saying in the forge, about Spitelout’s temper getting worse – well, Hiccup had cleared his throat quickly, in case she had forgotten that he was there as well, but she had simply given him a long look and said that it was unlikely to remain unknown around the village for much longer.

The first storm always drove people indoors. But Snoggletog brought them back out again, and after that they would be out and interacting, working, talking, in all but the worst of the weather. Whatever was going on with Spitelout probably wouldn’t stay contained for much longer at all.

“And I’ll keep an eye on Snotlout,” he added.

He would not have been surprised by a snort or a sarcastic comment from Astrid, but instead she sighed and pressed closer against him, wrapping the fingers of her right hand through his. “Good,” she said, quietly, and it was as much of an admission for concern about Snotlout as he had ever heard from her.

He wanted to tell her everything. But for as long as he was not sure whether it was academy business or chiefing business, he kept it to himself. Some things were not his to say.

“I’m sure Hookfang will as well. Hey, don’t let it get around too much that Nightmares come with a heated seat, or it’ll increase requests to come to the academy again.”

This time, Astrid elbowed him lightly in the ribs, even if it did nothing but make him smile. “Yeah, and tell everyone to bring their iron breeches with them.”

“Surely that would be worse.”

“Iron over leather. Spread the heat around.”

“Oh, yeah.” He had been thinking too much of his foot, he supposed, and how it had become hot to the touch even just on particularly sunny days over the summer. “Doesn’t the dragon usually eat the knight, in the stories, though?”

Her hair was so soft against his cheek. But then he felt her turn to look up at him, and looked down

Viking stories differed a lot from those of the southern kingdoms. That he had certainly learned, even before speaking to Anna enough to confirm it. “True.”

The air around them seemed to soften, and as Astrid’s eyes flickered to his lips it grew warmer as well. He reached down to kiss her, a simple brush of lips, and she returned in kind with a smile. Then a third, before pulling back enough to shift the blanket around them.

“Like Hel I’m getting a crick in my neck. Hang on.”

For one tantalising, terrifying moment, he almost thought that she was going to straddle his lap again. To sit in his lap again. To – no, there was no way to even phrase the thought in his head that was not going to make him blush, and he could feel the heat rushing in his cheeks. But instead Astrid twisted, half-kneeling, so that she was facing Hiccup and beside him with their thighs running against each other. That was much less daunting, and he helped her rearrange the blankets to keep what warmth they had trapped.

He brushed his thumb against her jaw. “You always have better ideas than me.”

“Well, maybe a better idea of human anatomy.” She placed a hand on his chest, right over his heart whether she knew it or not, and leaned in until the tip of her nose brushed against his. “You’re the one for the wild ideas.”

Then there was not much room in his head for any ideas, wild or not, as she kissed him again. And again, and again, until the fears hanging over him felt more manageable, just because he knew that she was there to show him how to break them down into pieces. And in return he kissed her until she gasped against his skin, and his hand found a sensitive point in the small of her back that made her put her hand to his thigh to keep her balance and make a wordless sound into his mouth. He had not even been meaning to, had been tracing the line of her spine just to know its shape, but then Astrid’s hand became a fist in his shirt as if to hold him in place and it was nothing but a pleasure to obey the unspoken command.

His other hand ran down the underside of her arm, feeling the tension of her muscles through her shirt, and he was really not sitting in the most comfortable position either, now, but it did not, could not matter. She tilted her head, kissed up into his mouth, and it was a thrill almost like flying just to lose himself to her.

Finally, though, he pulled away, not daring to drift so far as they had in the storeroom, before the other riders had interrupted them. They needed to talk, he knew, but gods he could barely think when her hands were on him in this way, in a room or a cave or any place that could just be them, and the rest of the world could fade away.

He felt… comfortable. Even without her lips on his. All over again, he wished that he could reach for her hand in public, as well, to ground himself in her strength.

“I feel I should apologise,” he said, reaching for a joke in lieu of any better topic to turn to. “First I kiss you in a storeroom, and now I kiss you in a cave. Probably not the best choices.”

Astrid tilted her chin up towards him a little more, a smile teasing at the corner of her mouth. “Don’t worry. You can kiss me anywhere.”

He had to have imagined that. Or at least, he had to have imagined the way that her eyebrow quirked and she half-shrugged with one shoulder, the way that her voice almost gave her words
two meanings at once. Because he could not possibly respond to those words, and it was a relief when she pressed one last, almost chaste kiss to his lips because at least that was not something that could confuse him quite so much.

“But sleeping a cave sounds less sensible, in this weather, and I’m sure Toothless would agree. So I should probably release you from this netter trap,” she finally release his thigh, to start moving the blankets around them again. Removing them, even. It was like his brain was still some way behind the rest of him. “And let you get home in time for a hot supper, and not a cold one. I think I’d prefer that for myself, as well.”

Letting Hiccup deal with cold food, or at least have to reheat it himself, was a longstanding tradition in Stoick and Gobber’s attempts to get Hiccup to be home at a reasonable time. “Probably a good idea,” he said, and set about squirming enough to get feeling back in his legs and backside to let him get to his feet with a semblance of grace.

Even if the air was cold around them, he felt a little warmer on his way back home. And if that was to be his comfort for Snoggletog, well, he was more than happy to accept it.

Before he knew it, Snoggletog Eve was rolling around, and Anna was looking bewildered at the sight of an entire boar over the fire.

“There cannot be enough boar for every house,” she said, flatly. “You’d have to have boar by the hundreds.”

“I mean, it’s usually… more than five people to a boar,” Hiccup admitted. He pushed a bowl of carrots into her hand and nodded to the table, and after a moment’s visible confusion she caught on and took the single step to put it down. Passing it from hand to hand was probably going to be easier than both trying to walk back and forth. “We’d probably have cousins, or something… I guess the Jorgensons would be closest. So Spitelout, Brynhild,” he started counting on his fingers, “Snotlout, Adelaide, Burplout, Pinebolt, Wartlout and Oaklout. So thirteen of us altogether?”

Which, no matter what else they had to contend with this Snoggletog, he was frankly grateful that he was not having to deal with that at the dinner table as well.

“That’s still a lot of boar.”

He shrugged. “Saves us from cooking for a few days after, as well. Plus some families only have half a boar, or a quarter.” And on bad years there had been no boar, but that was not something that Anna would ever need to know. Hopefully that nobody on Berk would need to know, again. “Here, greens.”

With five of them around the table, it would be increasingly crowded, but there was still room enough. The back door slammed in the wind as Elsa made her way back in with more wood, and the wind groaned its frustration on the outside of the building, but inside was still warm.
“And,” said Gobber. “No unexpected explosions this year.”

Anna looked at Hiccup, eyebrows raised.

“Why do you look straight to me?” In this instance she was, in a sense, correct, but the fact that her gaze turned straight towards him and that she did not think to ask Gobber was still a little galling. “It wasn’t me who exploded!”

“Dragon eggs,” Stoick explained, already with a slightly weary tone to his voice. He glanced round as Elsa joined them in the front room. “Which brings me to ground rules for conversation for the evening. No blacksmithing work, no dragon work, no chiefing work. This is a time to act like a family, not like another council.”

“Shall we just gag that one, then?” said Gobber, pointing at Hiccup with his hook. This time, Hiccup just spread his hands in an unspoken question.

“He did say no dragon work,” Elsa said, smiling. “Not no dragons at all.”

Hiccup gave his father a hopeful look, and Stoick nodded.

“Oh, thank Thor. I worried I’d have to go and sit upstairs with Toothless to eat my dinner.”

“Come on, sit down,” said Stoick. “Let’s get some food into you all, I can see you slavering over it. Not you,” he added, as Anna’s latest, golden, Terror appeared on the shoulder of his chair. He removed them and set them on the floor, with a sigh. “At least Toothless has realised he should not do that.”

“He does a very good job of clearing up the bones, as well,” Hiccup said, sliding into a chair beside his father. Elsa took the seat on the other side of him, and Anna hurriedly sat down beside her as if she in some way feared that she would lose the chair if she did not take it.

“Indeed.” Stoick raised his tankard. “Very well, everyone. To Snoggletog Eve.”

It was more an Arendellen custom than a Viking one, and Hiccup suspected that it was for Anna’s benefit, but luckily the others did not act too surprised as they raised their tankards or cups as well and choused back.

Anna’s eyes were indeed fixed on the boar, although Hiccup was not quite convinced that it was just hunger. “A lot of boar,” she said, again.

“Well, luckily my father has a lot of knife to carve it with,” said Hiccup, as Stoick gave him a faux-warnning glance before proceeding to do just that. “Gods, it feels good to be able to just sit down and eat.”

“Aye, you’ve been taking a lot of sandwiches to that academy of yours,” Gobber said, with a meaningful look as he set about swapping out his hook for a knife. “I can only hope that the dragons haven’t been eating them while you’ve been distracted.”

“No, Anna’s Terrors haven’t been anywhere in the vicinity,” he replied glibly, offering up his plate as Stoick started to peel off proper slices. “Well, Joan would have given it a go at least. Not sure about Limmet. Does the new one have a name yet?” He peered along the table.

“Not yet.” Anna peered under the table, then straightened up and shrugged. “Don’t know where they’ve gone. I’m waiting to see what works.”
“We’re rapidly heading for more dragons than humans,” said Gobber. “You sure you don’t want one of those… what are they called?” He drew a faint shape in the air. “Like they keep birds in, down south. Not the cage, the big ones, for loads of them at once.”

Even Stoick was looking confused by Gobber’s description. Hiccup retrieved his plate and tried to hazard a guess. “A coop?”

“Maybe.” Gobber did not look all that convinced, though. “Saw one years ago, some other island. Kept birds in them there – obviously they didn’t have so many dragons, or they wouldn’t have had free-flying birds around.”

Anna looked uncertain as to whether Gobber was making a joke or not, but Hiccup knew that it was, in some ways, both. Even chickens were nothing more than a mouthful to anything larger than a Terror.

“It would have to go on the outside of the house, though,” said Hiccup. “No room left inside.”

He knew that they were more attached to the house than most. They had been lucky; many families had seen their houses utterly destroyed in the years before the Red Death had fallen, when the attacks had been at their worst and the dragons at their most numerous and desperate. Hiccup knew the scars of the wood from the damage that their house had taken. But it had never fallen, not completely, and because of that they had never shrugged and taken the opportunity to expand it.

There was plenty of reasons for families to have at least one metal chest, of their most precious things. But as families grew, houses being burned down was taken in stride, and the next one was built larger than the last. It worked, in a strange sort of way. But the Haddock house had never fallen, and so it had stayed the same as the rest of the village houses swelled and waned around it.

“I could see arguments for dragons outside,” said Stoick, as there was a suspicious clank from somewhere in the pantry. They all looked round until, with a guilty clearing of her throat, Anna got to her feet and hurried over.

“I did give Camicazi the male Nightmare so that she wouldn’t have to deal with hatchlings,” said Hiccup, around a partial mouthful of bread. If he could avoid having food shoved into his mouth by his father again, all the better. “But then again, it would probably also have been a bad…” the memory Snotlout throwing himself on the Nightmare’s snout rose unbidden in his mind; “formative experience for them.”

“We should visit the Bog Burglars come spring, once all this is over,” said Stoick briskly.

Hiccup opened his mouth, but Gobber got their first. “Aye, now who’s talking chiefing at the dinner table?” he said.

Anna reappeared from the pantry, clutching a pleased-looking Joan. “Sorry.”

“We’ll put some soured cream in her mouth next time, watch her try to work through that,” said Gobber, without missing a beat. “If it can keep the average yak busy, I’m sure it’ll work on a Terror.”

“Come and sit back down, Anna,” said Stoick. “And tell us about Arendelle. Yul, isn’t it? Is it on Midwinter night itself?”

“Oh! Uh,” Anna hastily put Joan down and ushered her in the way of their bedroom, “yeah, Yul. It’s at midwinter as well, yes, though it’s… not quite like this.” She hesitated, just for a moment, as she reached her chair again and let her hand linger on the back of it. “I… think I like this better.”
There was something to her voice, perhaps almost guilt, which Hiccup was not going to pry into in front of the entire table. But every leader of every island in the Archipelago – and probably most of the southern rulers as well, although Hiccup could not swear to that – knew that the King and Queen of Arendelle had never recovered from the loss of their elder daughter. There had been no balls, no celebrations. He could imagine that there had not been much of a Yul, either.

“Sometimes I’d go down to the servants’ quarters, though,” she continued, as she sat down. There was a slightly fast, frantic edge to her words, but relief, as well. Perhaps it was just being able to talk about herself without scanning her words to be sure that she was not giving away who she really was. “They’d wait up until midnight and have mulled wine and roast pork and thank you,” her mouth certainly did not miss a beat, even as Elsa handed her one of the bowls of greens, “and I guess this is a little bit like that. Um, I mean,” she drew up short, stiffening where she sat and looking round in alarm. “Not that I’m comparing this to servants. I wouldn’t say you’re like servants or anything. Just…”

“Normal folks,” Gobber supplied, the boar on his knife giving emphasis to the jab he made.

Anna’s smile looked relieved. “Yes.”

“How’s your training going with Astrid?” said Hiccup. Between training Anna and training Heather, he had seen Astrid with more than a few bruises over the last moon, but they had been sporting a few in turn as well. He happened to know that Anna had an impressive blue mark on her shin at that very moment.

Sure enough, Anna gave an exaggerated groan. “She is a slavedriver, how in all the lands did you manage to keep her busy, Gobber?”

Gobber quickly slurped the end of his carrot into his mouth, and swallowed. “I’d say the dragons did most of the work on that one.”

“Maybe I should take Joan and Limmet to our next sparring session…”

It was easier. And somehow, Hiccup fancied that they sounded almost like a normal family, for all the strange ways that they had found themselves around the same table. Whether it was Anna flatly forgetting the word for cheese and coming out with a dozen unrelated words and sounds before she finally jumped to her feet and shouted it so loudly that Toothless almost fell out of the rafters, or Elsa getting a smear of lingonberries on her cheek and not realising what they were trying to gesture to her, or Gobber trying to change his hand and talk at the same time and ending up with his tankard upside down, conversation lurched from topic to topic, and Hiccup had not laughed so much in a long time.

By the time that Joan chirruped her demands to be draped around Anna’s neck, it was well into the night, candles burning down, and Gobber was challenging anyone to best him at saying particularly tongue-twisting lines of old Snoggletog songs. They were meant to be sung as drinking songs, challenging people to still be able to say them clearly, but in Hiccup’s experience they were more than difficult enough to say sober.

Once Stoick relented and attempted to say one, only to immediately have it turn to gibberish on his tongue, all of them were lost to laughter. Belly full and cheeks aching with a smile, Hiccup still felt a faint distant flicker of nothing more than relief, that he could have such a night at all.
It was probably gone midnight by the time that he actually fell into bed. Or at least onto bed, at first, with a groan that had little to do with how long he had been awake. He heard Toothless pad over, and was treated with a headbutt to the knee.

“I’m good, bud,” said Hiccup. He set about loosening his belt. “Probably ate too much, though.”

Sure, there had been a lot of food the previous year, but it had still not felt like this. Or perhaps they had simply failed to cook the right amount for five people, and overshot to a dozen instead.

A huff, and something fell heavily onto his bedframe. Hiccup moved his arm out of the way and craned his neck so that he could look across the bed at Toothless, who was regarding him curiously. Toothless flicked his flaps, and flared his nostrils.

“Really,” he said again, voice softening. “I’m good.”

He reached down and rubbed Toothless’s head, rewarded with a croon that reverberated through the bed, and smiled. For once, he felt something close to confidence that he would sleep through the night without any bad dreams at all. Such nights were becoming more common again, at last.

Then doors opened and closed downstairs, and he heard Anna calling… some word in Arendellen. Not one that he’d heard before. Hiccup frowned, and tried to remember what he knew that was close; gold, perhaps. That was faintly similar.

It was a fair reminder, though. He levered himself to a sitting position once again, then upright, wishing that he had not been so indulgent or so dramatic as to fling himself down in the first place. The more frequently he lay down, only to remember that he had something else which he needed to do, the more he appreciated why his father barely seemed to even sit down without giving it serious consideration.

He wandered over to the top of the stairs, then down just far enough to be able to stick his head round the corner and be visible. Anna, as he might have expected, had crawled under the table.

“Hey, Anna!” he half-hissed.

There was a muffled thud, an Arendellen curse, and Hiccup sighed. What else he had expected, he really did not know. Anna crawled back out from under the table, bringing the golden-yellow Terror by the scruff as she did so. They did not look remotely ashamed of whatever they had been doing.

She rolled over and sat down, Terror on her lap, to look around her. Hiccup waved until her eyes lit on him, and she waved back.

Maybe the round of hot cider before bed had not had quite the same effect on all of them.

“Anna, come up here a moment,” he said, waving up the stairs. Anna stared at him for a couple of seconds, glanced around the otherwise empty and mostly-dark room, then clambered to her bare feet and adjusted the yellow Terror onto her shoulder. She kept one hand there to keep them in place as she crept over to the stairs and up, with another look around as if they were somehow conspiring and trying not to be caught.
Well, he supposed that maybe there was an element of that.

Anna did not look concerned by the time that she reached the top of the stairs, more curious, and Hiccup hoped that an evening of relaxation had done her good. “Hey,” he said, as she joined him and he paused to stroke the Terror on the head. “What were you calling this one?”

“**Kulata,**” Anna said. “Um… in Northur it would be… Gold? Gold-ish? Goldie? Goldie, that works.”

Considering they hadn’t yet found out whether the dragon was male or female, it was probably for the best. Hiccup nodded. “Sounds good. Hey, Goldie.”

“Is everything all right?”

“Uh, yeah, sure. I just… I wanted to give you the main part of your Snoggletog present now. Most of the presents will be tomorrow morning, but…” he shrugged, backed up a step, then crossed to his clothes-chest where he was keeping everybody’s things.

“Oh…”

Still confused. He could work with that, and he suspected that she would understand as soon as she saw what he meant. Anna untangled Goldie from her shoulder again and lowered them to Hiccup’s bed, while Hiccup scooped up the box, wrapped in an old shirt, from its place and then let the lid of the chest quietly close again.

He unwrapped it to reveal a plain, polished wooden box. “Sorry about the wrapping.” He stuffed the shirt under his armpit. “Best way to stop things from knocking against each other. Here.”

“It’s lovely,” said Anna, smile spreading across her face again. She ran her fingers over the smooth oak surface, beeswax polish bringing out the warmth in the wood. Then she found the notch for her fingertips, levered up the lid, and gave a strangled gasp as the colour seemed to drain from her cheeks.

All right, he’d screwed it. He’d totally screwed it. Hiccup darted in to grab Anna by the arms, and for lack of another option almost tugged her over to sit down on his bed. There were tears in her eyes, and she clutched the box to her chest with one arm but then flung the other around his neck so hard that it was almost choking.

“**Thank you,**” she gasped, in Arendellen.

He tried to shift to a slightly less choking position, shuffled so that he was kneeling rather than standing and bending over her. One hand propped him up against the bed, and with the other he did his best to stroke her hair. **“Really?”** he said. He heard the note of hysteria in his own voice.

She nodded, almost headbutting him in the process. **“Yeah. I… thank you.”**

It had been more difficult to decide whether to give her the box than to come up with the idea in the first place. Inside were four wooden shelves, with spikes ready to hold short candles, painted in the four colours of her gods. Black and white, red and green, made up to look like thunderclouds and soft skies, like fire and like green leaves. Getting the painted textures just right had been tricky. But it was worth it for the way that Anna held the box to her chest.

Hiccup slipped back into Northur as he gently drew out of her arms. “I’ve still got something to give you tomorrow morning, in front of everyone. But I thought you might want this… private.”
This time, Anna’s nod at least did not run the risk of giving him a black eye. “Yeah.” She shifted the box so that it was in both hands, even if she was still gripping so tightly that her fingertips turned pale. “Is it, um, is it all right if I leave it up here tonight? I don’t know where to put it, yet.”

“Sure. You can think about it.” He put his hand over hers, on top of the wood. Her fingers were trembling slightly. “I’ll keep it up here as long as you want. I just… I thought that you should have it. Or something like it. While you’re here.”

It had taken racking his brains to remember the details. The Punishing Father in black and the Nurturing Father in white; the Punishing Mother in red and the Nurturing Mother in green. He knew that there were more details, more to it, stories and history and… all sorts of things. But he hoped it would be just enough, to remind Anna that she was free to worship her gods on Berk, that Berk’s gods did not preclude hers at all. Elsa’s issues were… different. They would have to be approached in another way.

Chapter End Notes

The disease here is heavily based on polio - anyone familiar with it might have recognised the leg - but made somewhat nastier than it was in history, with fewer infected-but-asymptomatic cases. I figure Berk hadn't been hit for a lifetime or so before the unnamed trader brought it to them, so it swept through basically everyone.

In languages, the first four colour words that appear are black and white, then red, then green (or green-blue). So I've applied them to the four deities of the Silver Priests; they also link to the four elements and four cardinal directions. But I went with those four colours for linguistic reasons.
Chapter 29

Chapter Notes

So, who has two thumbs and apparently still can't count to two? Yes, that would be me, having missed a week. I am so sorry, folks, total fuckup on my part. I bring a long chapter full of different languages to attempt to make up for it... and maybe a surprise reappearance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Normally, waking up on Snoggletog morning was a relaxed sort of affair. The smell of breakfast, the sound of the night’s snow gently thudding off the roof, or at most Gobber’s singing rolling through the air. Snoggletog was free of dragon attacks, and too late after Slaughter Day to worry about wildlings, and generally was the beginning of the most devastating depths of winter that let Berk keep to itself.

Which is why, when Hiccup awoke to the long-short-long-short blaring of the horn, he frowned in Toothless’s direction for about three whole seconds before he was actually certain of what he had heard.

“Oh, come on!” he said, flinging off his blankets and grabbing his leg. It was cold, but he was too annoyed to really pay attention to it, simply pulling his clothes on over his nightclothes without even bothering to get changed.

Getting dressed quickly was another useful skill in Berk, although historically it had been more to do with managing to not find oneself almost naked in the snow in the middle of a dragon attack. But Hiccup was fairly sure that he had not lost any of his pace, and he was already most of the way down the stairs when the door to the back bedroom opened and Stoick appeared, currently bootless, shoving his helmet onto his head.

“I told them tomorrow!” said Hiccup, before Stoick could even say anything. “Elsa and I said, the day after the solstice!”

Stoick merely muttered something beneath his breath and his beard, but Hiccup was fairly sure that it was not aimed in his direction.

“No time for saddle, going to run down,” Hiccup shouted to the house in general. “Elsa, meet me there when you can! It’ll be where the torches are!”

Of course, he had not taken into account the front door having not been used in half a moon. Instead he opened it inwards and found himself facing waist-deep snow that had built up against them instead.

“Oh, for the love of…” Hiccup stepped back, opened the door wide, and pointed in frustration at the snow. “Toothless!”

He heard his father starting to say something, which was probably going to be a protest, but there was no time for Stoick to get out even an entire word before Toothless’s fire smashed into the snow. It cut a swathe through it, a sort of semi-circular path, and as far as Hiccup was concerned it
was going to have to do.

He waved Toothless ahead of him, and was about to pull the door closed behind when Elsa came running out of her room, hair fluttering loose and Anna saying something incoherent behind her. Hiccup reached out his hand to her, and she simply grabbed it without missing a pace, leaving him to slam the door closed again behind them.

The first few yards were fine, cleared enough by Toothless’s fire and then just by his bulk as he forced his way through the snow, but then Hiccup found himself sinking into the snow even as Elsa continued to run easily across its surface. She looked almost devastated herself as she looked around, and for a split second he considered telling her to go on ahead, down to the cluster of lights and shouting that Hiccup could see on the west of the village which would, surely, mark where the wildlings were. But they needed both of them, he knew that as well, and instead he gritted his teeth and struggled to the first trampled area that even half-resembled a path, and wished that he did not look as dragged-along as he felt.

At least on the path it was a little easier. There had been a couple of inches of snow overnight, but that was honestly nothing to Berk, and he was able to release Elsa’s hand and simply run.

He trusted Elsa to have conveyed the message correctly. Perhaps the wildlings had simply become confused, perhaps they counted the solstice a day earlier than Berk did, perhaps something in the language barrier had meant that the word ‘solstice’ did not translate as easily as he had presumed that it would…

Perhaps he had put too much on Elsa, in a language which she had learned between the ages of eight and eleven. And if so, he knew that it was on him, and not on her.

Or perhaps, a worrying – and worried – part of his mind supplied, the wildlings had deliberately come a day early. To catch them off-guard. Perhaps these were not Rosa’s group at all, or the wildlings had decided to take advantage of the knowledge that Hiccup had given them, that this was the last day of the year for Berk and could therefore probably be presumed to be spent feasting. He really hoped that was not the case.

The cold air stung his face and burned in his lungs, and he really hoped that he was not going to reach the group just to find himself having a coughing fit in front of them. Stormfly shrieked above them and he thought that he heard the cut of her wings even above the pounding of his heart in his ears, but he did not dare look upwards for fear of losing his footing.

If the wildlings had been trying to hide, it would be impressive that they had been spotted. Actually, it would be doubly impressive; to have spotted them even if they were trying to be seen would be impressive, in the pre-dawn darkness and with snow still falling.

He cleared the last row of houses still at a run, and swore as he found himself facing a swathe of snow with paths still freshly-broken through it. There were a fairly large group of people out in the centre of the clear area, and he could see torches and fire and hear raised voices in both Northur and Marulosen.

“Weapons down!” he shouted, as best he could. He glanced over at Elsa, and for a moment was not sure whether or not she saw it.

Then she shouted as well, in Marulosen, something about weapons, and he was sure that it had to be the same thing. He aimed for the closest of the paths that someone else had taken, while Elsa simply ran onto the snow, a good two feet above him. At least, he was able to see that for a moment until Toothless crashed ahead, clearing a far wider path for Hiccup to follow.
He dragged in the cold air again, and gods, it ached. “In the name of Berk, weapons down!”

People were turning as they approached, and someone shouted in Marulosen again; Hiccup whistled for Toothless to stop and had to duck under a wing to get past, just so that he could see again. Not that staring straight towards the torches was the best thing for his night vision, but this morning had already gone entirely tits up.

“Hiccup?” someone called, and it took him a moment to be sure of placing the voice but yes, it was Rosa. He stumbled back into the trampled pathway and dropped to a jog for the last few dozens of yards, panting.

“Weapons down,” he said, one last time, as he reached them.

He could feel himself, sweaty and breathless, Toothless now behind him in the snow. Beside him, Elsa was standing on top of it, and only now did he realise that she was barefoot again, wearing only her black dress with a belt thrown over the top, her hair being blown by the breeze.

There were three Berkians, and five wildlings, in the field at least. He would eat his foot if there weren’t more wildlings waiting just within the line of the trees, a short distance away, with bows or slings readied. “Rosa,” he replied.

She finally turned her eyes from Elsa back to him, and raised her chin.

He straightened up, squared his shoulders as best he could. His father would not be far behind, was like a charging bull when he got running, but would need to show more dignity than Hiccup had bothered with. “You are early. One day,” he said, not able to say anything more sophisticated in Marulosen just at that moment in time. Part of his brain was still in bed, and he was not convinced that he did not have the dust of sleep still in the corners of his eyes.

Elsa snapped off something that had much the same words in it, but faster and more fluent than Hiccup would have been able to do. As Rosa looked back to her, he took the chance to glance around the Berkians again. It was a relief to see Melana among them, although she looked a lot more relieved than Hiccup was allowing himself to.

“You said the solstice,” Rosa replied, frowning now. Her hand tightened on the handle of the knife at her hip, and Hiccup saw Melana’s hand twitch where it held her axe. He raised his own hands quickly.

“We say solstice and one day, shit,” he really was not awake enough for this yet. He cleared his throat. “We said solstice and one day. Tomorrow.” A shake of his head, and he pointed to the forest. “Your others. They come too.”

She raised an eyebrow at him. “Your speech was better, before.”

Elsa spoke again, fast and honestly angry, in a way that Hiccup was not sure he had seen her in a long time. Even her frustrations at Anna had not come out like this – either that, or she was playing it up for the sake of the wildlings, he supposed, now that they had come to Berk uninvited.

“Elsa,” he said, and she cut off abruptly. There was fire in her eyes as she looked round, but as he held her gaze for a moment she relented, a little, and stepped down from the snow to join them in the sort of trampled circle that had apparently been made. “We invited them, even if they are a day early.”

“Something else is not right,” she said, quietly and in Northur still, her eyes never leaving Rosa.
Hiccup turned back to Rosa as well, and the other wildlings. He recognised the one with the flinttoothed club, the man with ash-blond hair, but none of the others had stuck clearly enough in his mind. “Your others,” he said, again, pointing at the treeline.

With a somewhat distrustful glance at the other Berkians, Rosa shifted in place and then whistled, trilling like the sound of some unknown bird. There was a reply from the trees behind them, a similar whistle, and then people moved forwards like shadows out of the trees, brown and green streaked across their faces to break up the pale lines.

“The Chief will be here soon,” said Elsa, slower and more controlled now. Some of her hair whipped across her face; irritation flickered in her eyes, then she raised a hand and made a swirling gesture. Ice glittered at her temples, spread like a circlet, sweeping back her hair and pulling it into a glittering ice band at the nape of her neck. It was not braided, as he was used to seeing it, but then again he had never seen her do that particular piece of magic before but doing it in front of the wildlings suggested that it was not new to her.

He wondered just how much of her practice he had missed.

“Will you still speak for him?” Rosa replied.

“The Chief speaks for the Chief,” Hiccup said, as best he could. “We speak now because we speak Marulosen. If today good,” he could not remember the grammar, and paused with a grimace. “If today is good, then the Chief learn maybe Marulosen. You learn maybe Northur.”

His words had become jumbled in the Wildlands as well, before, but it had not been as bad as this. And there had only been him, and Elsa, and Toothless, not the whole of Berk to worry about.

“You offered trade, before,” said Rosa. She nodded to one of the figures who had come out of the Wildlands, shorter and stockier, head pulled up to cover their face. “We have bought you a thing you will want.”

An hour’s warning for this conversation would really have been very welcome. Hiccup was not sure whether to tell Rosa to wait for his father, or tell her that they were not here to trade people and lives as if they were as bad as the Silver Priests.

As it was, he managed neither. Running feet announced his father’s approach; he looked round to see that Anna was there as well, in mismatched clothes and with her hair jammed under her hat but keeping up well enough. He was about to explain to Rosa that this was the Chief, knowing at least that she would not be able to read the signs that Vikings would spot in an instant, when the hooded figure pushed back the fabric to reveal their face.

“Kai!” Anna all but screamed. She ran faster, sprinted past Hiccup and flung herself into Kai’s arms. It knocked him away from the wildling standing next to him, sending them both staggering into the snow.

Hiccup thought that he saw her say something to Kai, in the spin of their embrace. He had to trust her that she knew as instantly as he did that Kai could not refer to Anna as the Queen.

Then Kai and Anna were babbling in Arendellen, too fast for Hiccup to catch anything more than the odd word, Anna delighted and beaming while Kai cupped her face and looked at her in clear bewilderment.

Hiccup forced himself to think of Marulosen, and turned to Rosa. “He is from Arendelle. You know it.”
She nodded. “He worked at the Castle. He helped the Wildling sikaapatohen the Queen, the Silver Priests say. They wanted the Trial of Fire.” The words sounded as bitter on her tongue as they had ever tasted on Hiccup’s. Rosa looked Kai over again, contemplatively now, as he held Anna close. “He escaped. She knows him?"

As if that was not apparent. “Her father worksed in Castle.”

Oh gods, no, he had butchered that completely. Mercifully, Elsa echoed him, this time with the words properly formed, and Hiccup saw Rosa nod. It was not entirely a lie, after all, and Elsa delivered it with a perfectly straight face.

A story he had been given no time to prepare; Anna would need a false name for them, as well, and damn it all. There would have been no need to give her name at all, at least for a good long time, had it not been for them having Kai with them. But at the same time, his mind was whirling, and he knew that he and his father had to hear what had happened in Arendelle after they left.

“Kai,” Hiccup called, and the man looked up. Anna was still clinging to him, so much that it made Hiccup’s chest ache. Arendellen, he had to speak Arendellen now. “It is surprise to see you.”

“And you, Hiccup,” Kai replied, with a bow of his head.

Northur to Arendellen, or Northur to Marulosen, was one thing. They were so different that it was possible to keep them sharply separated in his head, like looking in different books. But Marulosen and Arendellen were too close, and he could not remember which words and which formations were right for which. At least, not at this time in the morning, with the sky barely lightening in the east.

He glanced to Elsa, and settled into Northur for a moment like it was some sort of palate cleanser. “Elsa, I will probably need your help with languages.”

She nodded, without looking round.

Back into Marulosen, and back to Rosa. “Rosa – this is Stoick the Vast, Chief of Berk. Dad,” he looked round, “this is Rosa. The representative of the wildlings that we met after Slaughter Day. I think they thought they were supposed to be here today, not tomorrow.”

Stoick almost managed to hide his sigh. “Well, we cannot send them away again… the Great Hall will be empty at this time of day.”

“I’ll tell Astrid to get Phlegma,” he said, pointing with his thumb back over his shoulder where he could hear Stormfly not all that far above them. “At least the meat is already set by.”

Within crates, but also packaged up into smaller amounts that it would be possible to put into packs and carry, or put onto some sort of simple sled if the wildlings had access to one. That was something else which Hiccup had intended to talk to them about, before this morning had launched itself away from his plans and left his thoughts scrambling to catch up.

He paused, and sighed. “Merry Snoggletog, Dad.”

His father did not dignify it with a response.
As well as alerting Phlegma, he asked Astrid to let Heather and Eirik know what in the names of the gods the horn had been for, and what was going on now. The rest of Berk knew what it meant, and from the way it had gone quiet would have a good idea that they were not facing a threat, having been warned to expect a delegation the day after Snoggletog.

They got some looks from doorways and windows, though, as they made their way through the town. Accumulated a few more Berkians along the way, for that matter, but Hiccup realised that he was all right with that as long as contact between Berkians and wildlings was kept largely to wary glances and hands at the hilts of weapons. Hiccup really wished that he was just properly dressed.

The wind made it a struggle to get the doors to the Great Hall open, but at a clipped suggestion from Elsa some of the wildlings came forward and put their shoulders to the left-hand door, leaving the right hand to the Berkians. Hiccup eyed Elsa warily, not sure that he liked the sharpness in her but more worried than anything else. It was not like her, and he wished that they could talk about it but there was certainly no time right now, and no language in which they could have privacy.

At this time in the morning, the Great Hall was empty, the fires burned little more than embers. Stoick glanced around the Berkians they had gathered, and sent them to stoke them up again.

Stoick led them over to the closest table, with a wave of his hand rather than words, but the wildlings clustered together around Rosa as she moved to stand beside it. Her eyes were fixed on Stoick, now, piercing gaze having found a place to settle.

Abruptly, she looked back to Hiccup again. “We have seen this building from the outside, before. But we were not stupid enough to try to enter it.”

“Hiccup?” said Stoick, eyes still on Rosa.

“She says they’ve seen the Great Hall before, but only from the outside.”

Melana brought over a chair from one of the other tables, and set it at the head of the one by which they stood. It might not have been Stoick’s usual chief’s chair, but it was still rather more than the benches which lined the rest of the table. Stoick moved to step behind the chair and, guessing where this was going, Hiccup moved as hurriedly as he could subtly manage to stand at his father’s left hand.

“Sit down,” said Stoick, waving to the table before shifting his chair a fraction so that he could be seated.

Elsa beat him to translating it into Marulosen and, well, perhaps it would work better if they took one direction each. Hiccup gestured for Anna and Kai to join him, and Anna tugged Kai around.

Rosa took her seat cautiously, eyes fixed on Stoick but something about her making it very clear that she was aware of all around her. As she sat, Stoick did so as well, and Hiccup considered sitting for a moment but had to admit that it would only put him below everyone else’s eyelines.
“Unfortunately,” said Stoick, “you are a day early and we are not prepared. But we will uphold our end of the deal, and will have meat and trade items for you shortly.”

For a moment, there was silence, then he glanced over at Elsa. Hiccup rather wished that he had been with his father on more trips to different islands; he got the feeling that Stoick knew what he was doing even when nobody else did, and Stoick did not speak one of the languages in question.

Only Hiccup knew all three, he realised with a strange sinking in the pit of his stomach. He was really going to need to get better at Marulosen.

Elsa cleared her throat, stepped up to stand beside Stoick on the side where Rosa was sitting, and translated Stoick’s words. Most of the wildlings looked at her, but Rosa and Stoick were still watching each other.

“We have fur,” Rosa replied, then nodded to Hiccup, “like he said. But we do not know what plants you would want.”

Hiccup relayed it, and knew that Gothi was probably going to have to get involved, and then Gobber to translate for Gothi, and this was going to be a day full of too many languages and not enough opportunities to sit in a pile of baby dragons compared to last Snoggletog. Whatever Stoick thought of it, he nodded.

“We thank you for them. And for discussing our offer of peace, as well.”

This time, Elsa paused in her translation of one of the words, and Hiccup suspected that Stoick’s formality might have been giving her trouble. She did well enough to mimic him in Northur, sometimes, and the way that she had first learned it still left formal clips to her words, but he supposed that she had hardly been talking about peace negotiations at the age of eleven.

Stoick took a deep breath. “You have killed us, and we have killed you. We want to end that.”

He gave Elsa time to translate again. Hiccup could not read her expression, not beneath the concentration on her words, but there was a very faint chill in the air that might not have been due to the opening and closing of the doors.

There was a dark amusement in Rosa’s eyes as she glanced at Hiccup before replying. The curl of her lip had no humour to it. “Everyone has killed us.”

He translated it, softly.

But Stoick did not seem daunted; he placed one hand flat upon the table. “Berk has seen wars. Against dragons. Against Arendelle. Against the Berserker Empire. But wars can be ended. That is what I want to see today.”

Elsa did not translate Arendelle’s name, nor that of the Berserkers. Mercifully, neither Anna nor Kai flinched, although Anna must have understood at least the Northur part of the conversation. How much Northur Kai even spoke, Hiccup had no idea.

“We can move on,” said Rosa, bluntly. “We are mutakovaahen. But you have dragons, and,” she gestured sharply to Elsa, “magic. Those are bigger problems.”

“They are…” he looked at Elsa vaguely desperately, until she seemed to realise what word had left him floundering.

“They can change, to make use of things, they are…”
“Adaptable,” said Hiccup, in a rush of relief. “They’re worried about dragons and magic, not the history between us.”

“Why are the dragons a problem?” Stoick said. Hiccup had to admire his father for his dealing with their rather makeshift way of translation. Elsa was probably doing better than Hiccup, though.

Rosa shrugged. “We can fight humans. Dragons? You would kill us in a day.”

Hiccup’s first thought, even as he relayed the words, was to deny that they had any such ideas, but Stoick did not even flinch. It only caught up with Hiccup a moment later that such a denial was probably of no use, that if the doubt was there then there was no point.

“We would not have sought you out like this,” said Stoick; Elsa gave him a worried look and he nodded. “We would not have come to talk to you like this if we wanted to kill you. You are smart enough to know that. We want you to be our allies, to benefit us both.”

Rosa nodded, slowly, thoughtfully. The others were all still watching her, and Hiccup wondered whether she was the only one of their sort-of council to be here today, or whether there were others among them. Looking to her, or letting her be the focus of attention so that they could watch elsewhere. “Why do you not ask about the magic?” she said, for a reply.

“The magic was next,” said Stoick, calmly.

This time, even Rosa seemed to pause, looking almost critically at Elsa before folding her hands in front of her and leaning in. “The magic is dangerous,” she said, and the length of her pause made it clear that she wanted Hiccup to translate what she was saying in small chunks, not all at once. “The magic is very dangerous in children. When I was young, there was a young man, from Arendelle, who made fire. He burned the Village down. People died. So the adults killed him.”

Uncomfortable silence surrounded them. None of the other wildlings seemed surprised by the story, but Anna was growing pale and looked like she might faint as Hiccup translated Rosa’s words. The air around them was growing noticeably cold.

“Eight years ago, the last child from Arendelle, who had lived with us for three years, froze our houses. It was already autumn. It was already cold. People did not die that time, but they came close.” Rosa looked back to Elsa again. “She ran away.”

It made it all too clear that they had not been planning to let her live, and for one godsforsaken desperate moment Hiccup felt anger building in him like a fire. He clasped his hands behind his back to try to stop them shaking, but his nails still dug painfully into his palms. Because they had been willing to kill a child, a girl, and Berk might have killed wildlings as well but at least they had thought the magic was something deliberate in its attacks.

Desperation, he reminded himself. Desperation, and fear, and either one alone could make people do terrible things, let alone both of them put together. Berk could not make up for what had happened in the past, but it could take away the desperation and the fear in the future.

“And if there is ever another with magic, then Berk will help them, as well,” said Stoick, and waited for it to be passed along. There was a shake in Elsa’s voice. “Excuse me, Rosa, I need to speak to this man,” he waved to Kai, who looked up, “for a moment. Elsa,” his voice softened. “Speak to one of the others, please, and ask them to see to having some food heated up and water and ale brought to this table.”

Elsa did not reply, just nod, hands twisted tightly together and face pale. Stoick looked over at
Rosa again, something in his eyes – a disappointment, a disapproval – that Hiccup half-recognised, but cut through with more sadness. Rosa watched impassively. Clearing his throat, Stoick turned in his chair to more properly face Kai, and dropped into Arendellen.

“Kai, is it not? Are you well? How came you to be here?”

Kai blinked at Stoick for a moment. He still held Anna’s hand firmly, but did not look at her, at least, and Hiccup supposed that it would be understandable enough that he would cling to the one person that he knew. “Chief Stoick, I… don’t know how much you know of what happened over the summer…”

“I have heard plenty, believe me,” said Stoick pointedly. Neither he nor Hiccup had been entirely sure that none of the wildlings remembered any Marulosen at all, and they had agreed to keep their words from being incriminating towards Hiccup. Hiccup hoped that Kai would have similar discretion – but then again, as a high-ranking servant who had known about Elsa’s magic but still survived the years of the Silver Priests, including Anna’s reign, it could only be assumed that he did.

Tugging his cloak closer around him, Kai nodded. His clothes were Arendellen, but worn and grubby, torn around the cuffs. “When the Queen returned to Arendelle, I met her at the castle. I told her what they were doing to – to the wildling.” He seemed uncomfortable with the word, and that at least could be almost a relief. It was clear, as well, that he knew not to use Elsa’s name, for all that the wildlings already knew what had happened in the summer was due to her. “The Silver Priests found out. I said I was going to retrieve some things from my quarters, so that it would not frighten the staff when I was taken away… they allowed me to. They clearly did not know about the second exit from my rooms.”

“And you went to the wildlings?” said Anna. There was a gleam in her eyes that looked dangerously close to tears, and this was never how Hiccup had intended for them to be spending Snoggletog. Bad enough that she had just been forced to listen to one of the ways that Elsa could have been taken from her.

Kai patted her arm. “I could not stay in the city, and the ice harvesters are being watched as well.” That was new, and Hiccup gave Stoick a concerned glance. “It was either hide myself in a boat, or… somehow try to make in the Wildlands. Maybe even to Berk, though… I didn’t think I would make it this far.”

“I’m sorry that we didn’t know,” Hiccup said. “We would have come for you.”

“I appreciate it. But as it is, well, the wildlings found me first,” said Kai, with a nod to Rosa. “They didn’t kill me. I suppose I didn’t look like a soldier looking for them, or anything like that. I’ve learned a few words of their language, and drew a few pictures for them to show what had happened.”

Arendellen did not have different words for King and Queen Regnant. All that it had was something that probably best came into Northur as Monarch, but Vikings had long grown used to applying their own words to the southern rulers according to gender. Kai could have told his story, and Rosa still would not have known that he did not speak of King Agdar, as long as Anna’s name was not spoken.

With how hard Rosa was to read, though, she still could have been faking her surprise. The main reason Hiccup did not think that she had been was that he could see no good reason for it.

“You are welcome to stay in Berk,” said Stoick. “I remember that you do not speak a lot of Northur,
It was a short time before Elsa returned, still looking pale but with the air about her no longer turning cold. At least Phlegma arrived first, and even Hiccup could manage pointing and saying names to give everyone the general gist of who she was. Phlegma reported that the meat was ready to be split up, and not long afterwards Melana appeared with a small cask of ale, a pile of mugs, and wary looks at the wildlings.

With Elsa back, it was easier. Rosa waved off the idea of putting anything on paper, saying that there was probably nobody among the Village who could read it, but cut down to simple words and phrases that could be translated in clipped, clear words.

The wildlings could get furs. Plants. Items of the Wildlands. Hiccup decided somewhere along the way that he would at least ask Runa if she would consider learning Marulosen; enough, at least, to talk to the wildlings. She had been the main source for so many of their needs from the Wildlands for so long; even with a source of trade, it would not supply everything that Berk needed. Not take away her role. Especially since working with Stormfly – or, presumably, another dragon – seemed to be working well for her.

Berk could provide farmed meat, larger quantities of flour, a steady supply of food even within the harsh winter months. They could make no promises for Arendelle yet – both Stoick and Rosa openly blamed the Silver Priests, and there was something that passed between their gazes which Hiccup watched warily. Words that were not translated back and forth, and which Hiccup suspected would have been better spoken leader to leader.

Words that maybe were about a regime change in Arendelle.

But Berk would give shelter, if the winter got really bad, Stoick said. Rosa’s eyebrows just about hit her hairline. Tents, if they would rather, or barns, or if the weather became truly awful then they would be free to sleep on the floor of the Great Hall. If their people became ill, Berk would be willing to help – probably with the very plants that the wildlings would be able to provide.

And, in return, they would be interested in maps. At that, Rosa’s look became more thoughtful, but it was clear that she understood as she traced lines across the surface of the table. Stoick admitted that Berk had large gaps in its knowledge of the land, once they were much north of Arendelle or much south of Berk itself, or away from the line of sight they had from the sea. But they had better knowledge of the tides and ocean currents than the wildlings did, generations of knowledge charted and recorded, and on that front, they could trade, as well.

It was probably clear to them both that Berk had the upper hand. Now that they had dragons…
well, if they’d had Dagur’s hot blood, it would have been all too easy to find the Village and destroy it in the space of a night. The wildlings did not have the experience, or the resources, to fight or to rebuild in the way that Dagur had, and it had rapidly become clear that dragons directed by riders could be much more destructive than dragons raiding for food. But Rosa seemed to understand that Berk did not want that.

They hashed out details, and set a schedule: every full moon, at a field which they would decide the first time that the wildlings visited again. It gave them half a moon until the wildlings visited again, which would not be long, but would at least give them more of a chance to speak to others and figure out who would be handling the interactions. For Elsa to teach a few more vikings some words of Marulosen.

There was something wry to Rosa’s smile as she offered her hand for Stoick to shake, and she looked surprised when he not just clasped her hand but then reached further, to clasp her wrist in turn. All the same, she nodded approvingly, and clasped his wrist in turn. She also gave respectful nods to Hiccup, to Elsa, and even to Toothless.

By the time that they left the Great Hall again, the sky was light, and it felt like a different world. They escorted the wildlings back to the edge of the village, helped them load their packs with bundles of meat and useful trinkets, and bade them farewell. They left behind them furs, and most of all Kai, his hand still clasped in Anna’s.

And then it had happened. It had happened, they had just treated with wildlings, and it was all that Hiccup could do to stop the delighted, bewildered laughter that threatened to rise up in his chest.

Instead, he caught hold of Elsa, and pulled her over into a tight embrace. She grabbed at him, putting her face to his shoulder, and something of his jubilation faded when he realised how much she was shaking.

It could not have jubilating at all to hear the explanation of why people had once tried to kill you.

“It’s done,” he said, softly. “It’s done. There’ll not be any more.”

Elsa’s fingers dug painfully into his shoulders, and he pressed his cheek against her hair. He wasn’t sure whether he heard her making a whimpering sound, or whether it was just the squeaking of his belt or his foot or gods even knew what. Either way, he reached up to cradle the back of her head, and felt the ice band holding her hair in place wither away beneath his palm.

“They will be back,” said Elsa, muffled by his shoulder.

That was true, and she might have to see them again and again, but gods, he hoped that it felt as different to her as it did to him. She was a Berkian now, she had a home, and people and dragons who would not hesitate to defend her.

“They won’t hurt you again. They won’t even threaten you again, you hear me?” He drew Elsa back, far enough that he could look her in the eye. “You are not their ‘ice girl’. You are Elsa, of Berk, and we stand behind you.”

“Thank you,” she said, and it concerned him that he wasn’t sure that he could read her expression, tell whether she believed him or not. But she blinked a few times, and no tears came, and finally she reached up to push her hair back off her face where it was getting blown there again.

Taking a deep breath, Hiccup turned towards his father, who was still watching the treeline where the wildlings had long since disappeared. Of course, it was possible that someone would remain to
keep an eye on Berk in the coming days, but they had – well, it would not be true to say that they had no secrets, but their secrets were down to a minimum, at least. The wildlings could know about the dragons, about Elsa’s magic, about the tensions with Arendelle. The fact that Berk was harbouring the exile Queen of Arendelle was probably not much more than a footnote at this point.

Knowing vikings, a somewhat misspelt and wonky footnote, at that.

He heard the beat of Stormfly’s wings above them, and looked upwards to see Astrid flying one last sweep along the edge of the treeline. A patrol, or a show of strength, he was not even sure, but he trusted her either way. They had made things clear to the wildlings, after all.

As if noticing his gaze, Astrid turned Stormfly into an elegant descending turn, bringing her in to land just yards away, and sprung down from her back. She was pink-cheeked in the cold, hair tucked up beneath her hood and, if Hiccup were to be so bold as to guess, it looked as if she had gotten dressed as quickly and haphazardly as he had.

She nodded to Stoick in passing, and he vaguely acknowledged her before turning to speak to Phlegma in an undertone. Hiccup itched to go over and ask, but had to trust that if he needed to know, Stoick would fill him in later on.

On the bright side, it meant that Astrid was able to walk over to him, wry smile in place. “So, has your day gone to plan so far?”

This time, he let himself chuckle. “My so-called plan involved sleeping late, eating leftover boar sandwiches, and swapping Snoggletog presents. I think it’s safe to say that if I’d had a plan, this would not have been it.” Hiccup rubbed his forehead. “I’m looking to spending the rest of the day speaking the same language.”

“You did it, though,” said Astrid.

Not that he didn’t want to kiss her in sheer exhilaration, as he had after putting Camicazi on a dragon, but at least this time it had been planned and drawn out enough for him to know better. He glanced at her lips for a moment, then pulled himself together and his gaze away, and it was worth it to look into her eyes instead. “Again, team effort. It definitely took more than one person translating,” he added, pointing a thumb at Elsa.

“I saw bits of it.” Astrid scanned Elsa over. “How’re you doing?”

Elsa’s smile looked fragile. “I think my accent might be strong today.”

Hiccup caught the movement of her thumb, rubbing hard at her opposite wrist where her hands were clasped together. He definitely wasn’t bringing that up in public, though. Instead, he leaned to the side to look past them both. “Dad? We good to go back to… Snoggletog?”

“For now, I believe so,” Stoick said, though his words were careful. “Yes, Hiccup, I do believe so.”

Chapter End Notes

sikaapatohen = (v) kidnap
mutakovaahen = (adj) adaptable
Chapter 30

Chapter Notes

Sorry this chapter is a day late! One of my cats ate something unwise yesterday, which meant a vet visit and a day which generally disappeared on itself. Cat is fine (and back to being as much of a dick as ever).

They took Kai back with them, which Hiccup supposed was probably the only thing that they could really do. The only people in Berk who spoke anything like fluent Arendellen were Stoick and Hiccup; others spoke snatches of it, enough to get by, but when Kai spoke no Northur at all and had been dropped on them with nothing more than the clothes on his back that was not really going to be enough.

“I am afraid you have come to us at the time that you would call Yul,” said Stoick, as they reached the house again and Gobber, who had joined them back in the Great Hall, held open the front door. Kai looked twice at the edges of the icy semi-circle through which they passed, waist-high, the inner surface a smooth ice surface where it had refrozen after Toothless’s blast. “I assure you, though, that we will find you a place to stay with someone who knows some Arendellen, though unfortunately there are no longer any rooms in my own house.”

“Toothless and I could share the floor again,” said Hiccup, with a gesture to the corner where they had slept when Heather had been in their room.

Stoick gave him a significantly look that Hiccup nonetheless struggled to read, while Kai shook his head vehemently and raised his hands. “No, no, sir, I could not think of doing that! I–”

“Do not worry,” said Stoick, in a voice that Hiccup better recognised from his chiefing in Berk than anything he had ever said in Arendelle. “I will handle this. I hope you will not be offended if we have go through our usual Yul routines, however – exchanging gifts, and the like.”

This time, Kai’s shake of the head was more relieved. “Not at all. If there is anything I can do to help… to cook, or tidy… I would appreciate it,” he said, rushing in the last words as Stoick seemed likely to protest.

Stoick paused, then nodded. “If you wish to familiarise yourself with the pantry, you may do so.” He nodded in the direction of the door.

With one last squeeze of Anna’s hand, and a smile in her direction, Kai released her, peeled off his cloak to gently hang it up beside the others, and hurried over to the pantry. Hiccup had strong suspicions that he simply wanted some time to breathe for the first time since being escorted to Berk, and before they would have to sit down and hear his story in more detail, but certainly would not begrudge him the time.

Elsa was fidgeting with the sleeves of her dress, wrists now a painful-looking pink, as she looked between them. Gobber patted her on the shoulder. “Nothing important, lass, I’m sure. I don’t speak a word of Arendellen either, don’t worry.”

Though it did not seem to fully smooth the furrow between Elsa’s brows, it at least let her
shoulders soften a little, and she nodded. Truth be told, Gobber knew a few words of Arendellen, but most of them were curses or learned from inns, and not likely to be help him understand Stoick’s formal, respectful words.

“Go on,” Gobber added, with a nudge to the back of Anna’s shoulder in turn. “Go get those gifts you’ve been hiding wherever. Hiccup got us to wrap them in a blanket last year, that worked well.” He shared a look with Stoick as both Elsa and Anna turned towards their room, Anna scooping up Joan along the way.

Deciding to take the hint without having to be directly told, Hiccup whistled and gestured for Toothless to stay downstairs, then trotted up the steps himself. It took some work to even find a blanket that did not have dragon slobber on it or stray claw and teeth marks, and a little less to wrap everything up in one relatively neat bundle that he could hold with one hand as he made his way back down.

Gobber dumped a blanket onto the table with a clink, then gave Hiccup a look which very clearly said that he had not heard that. Not being in the least bit surprised that Gobber’s gifts involved metal, Hiccup just grinned, and staked out a space himself. Elsa was the next to rejoin them, followed by Anna who seemed to have accumulated Limmet on top of her own bundle of blanket, before Stoick finally rejoined them with a blanket tucked under his arm and his helmet removed to set on the table beside him instead.

“Unfortunately, there are a few too many dragons in the house for them to receive individual gifts this Snoggletog,” he said, with a glance at Toothless who had taken up position in the rafters above them again. “But there will be some fish coming later on which neither Toothless nor Thornado are to hog.”

“I’m not sure it’s Toothless who is likely to be the biggest problem,” said Gobber, looking pointedly at Limmet. Limmet continued attempting to chew on Anna’s blanket, as Anna attempted to prize him away from doing so.

“Not by the pound, at least,” said Hiccup.

“In any case,” Stoick said, with a strong sense of pressing on before the conversation got further away from him, “Since we have already had part of this day given over to… other matters, it would be best to not give too much over to this, I would imagine.”

Chiefing words for ‘don’t faff about’. Apparently it had been enough of a morning to leak into Stoick’s very words. From Gobber’s snort, he had arrived at the same translation, and before it Gobber could say it aloud Hiccup quickly whisked out the first of his presents and proffered it in Gobber’s direction.

“In that case,” said Hiccup, “Merry Snoggletog.”

Gobber looked at the hand in bemusement, then took careful hold of it and held it up to the firelight to examine the delicate and bristles. “And when the bloody hell did you have time to draw the wire for a dragon toothbrush?”

“Did you think that I always asked for permission before going to the forge?” Hiccup said. Gobber snorted, which was more than answer enough, but he was grinning. “One of the batches of metal that Heather cooked up turned out to be better than steel for making those wires. Spent an evening or two testing it out.”

With only a moderate amount of cursing and accidentally breaking wires along the way which,
considering Hiccup had struggled to work anything resembling a wire from their usual iron or steel, said an awful lot about the alloy which Heather’s tests had turned up. Berk had long known that dragon claws could make perfect holes for draw plates, but it had never been Hiccup’s greatest skill.

“Are you giving me a hint about that one?” Gobber pointed into the rafters.

Toothless took the opportunity to chirrup at him, and Hiccup coughed to hide a laugh. “No, I just remember you complaining about the other one getting overworked and worn.”

“Ah, hoist by my own petard,” said Gobber, putting the wire-brush hand aside. “Well, I must have missed you in there while–”

Hiccup finally relented, revealed the bottle of rye whiskey and slid it across the table. “Oh, and there is this.”

“Grevious’s?”

Hiccup nodded.

“You’re my favourite apprentice,” said Gobber, grinning. “Well, in any case, I somehow missed Hiccup while I was making this;” he withdrew a small, light hatchet and handed it across the Stoick. “Since your last one met such a terrible ending at the bottom of that well.”

“I thank you for the present, if not the commentary,” Stoick said, but his tone and expression were both fond. He picked up the axe and spun it over, movement fast and fluid in a way that had always surprised Hiccup from his father’s large hands. “Aye. Perfect balance, as always. Now this,” he laid it down, and looked under his blanket for a moment before withdrawing a smaller, fabric-wrapped bundle, and pressed it into Anna’s hands. “Did not come from the forge, though I don’t know whether you’d be relieved or disappointed…”

Anna had, very steadfastly, refused Hiccup’s offers of help in finding or arranging for presents. He knew stubbornness when he heard it, and knew as well that Elsa had done perfectly well the previous year, but Anna did not really have the option of going into the Wildlands for things. Now, Hiccup thought that he could feel nervousness about her again, something in her tightness of her smile and the way that she took the gift from Stoick with both hands.

Berk was not a rich island. But Hiccup knew that his family was not the poorest of them, and that their presents would be more substantial than most, even if they were likely a step down from what Anna would have received in Arendelle. There was a reason, after all, that he had been very careful in what he had chosen for Heather.

“Thank you,” she said, before even unwrapping it, and Stoick’s expression softened. Paternal. Hiccup recognised that, as well, though it seemed at times that he had done all he could as a child to not deserve it.

Anna licked her lips as she unwrapped it, to reveal a single-piece comb of carved bone, with Arendellen patterns across the centre of it, sturdy metal tweezers, a pick and nail cleaner. Not silver – again, that would have been something for richer islands – but Hiccup knew that Johann had been enough of a state of nerves to be honest when he told Stoick that it was brand new, the comb not even carved at the time.

There was something shaky about Anna’s nod. “Thank you,” she said again. “Thank – yes.” She put the grooming kit down beside her, in its large handkerchief, and glanced over at Elsa this time
with nervousness not even veiled as she took hold of something under her own blanket. “Um, Elsa, this… I’ll understand, if I’m wrong, and if you don’t want it back. But I found it, and I got it fixed, and…” she trailed off, swallowing hard, and withdrew her hand from beneath the blanket.

Her lips trembled as she offered up the brooch to Elsa. It had been Hiccup who plucked it from the snow just outside the twisted dome of icy thorns that Elsa had created, but he had handed it back to Anna. Not sure whether Elsa would want it back again, and hoping in those original, heady days that it might make a good gift from one sister to the other.

It had been unwearable, though. The metal twisted, the shell cracked. But the brooch that Anna now held had been straightened out again, pin newer and shinier, the two pieces of shell aligned so tightly that the line between them was barely even visible. Elsa took it from her as if it were fragile still, running her thumb over the face, expression sad and distant for a moment before she folded it up to her chest and wrapped her other arm around Anna to pull her into a hug.

Hiccup glanced over at Gobber with the unspoken question, and Gobber nodded. It would have taken heat and delicate work to get the metal straightened out, after all.

There was a moment almost long enough to be awkward before Elsa let go of Anna again. “Thank you,” she said finally, and it was hard to tell whether it was her accent or the threat of tears that was thickening her words.

She raised her free hand to the neck of her shirt, but must have come to the same conclusion as Hiccup that the shallow scoop of a neckline was not going to work, and set the brooch carefully down again.

Instead, Elsa folded her hands and looked up to Hiccup, smile solidifying and a mischievous glitter coming back into her gaze. “Merry Snoggletog, Hiccup,” she said.

He was not sure where this was going. “Merry Snoggletog?”

Elsa giggled, the sound a good enough present by itself, eyes fluttering away before she met his eyes again. “I am afraid your present will not be here until spring, when the weather is better.”

Well, that was new. Hiccup raised his eyebrows.

“I have spoken to Holsen – and to your father,” she added, with a nod to Stoick, “and come spring, Holsen will be putting a large enough window in your room for you and Toothless to get out.”

It was its own brand of genius. Hiccup burst into laughter, looking up to Toothless who was regarding the scene below with a sort of polite confusion. “Looks like you’ve got to share my presents this year, huh, bud? Should go get your helmet back out again. Show Anna,” he said, as he realised that Anna had never seen that particular delight. “And come spring, Holsen will be putting a large enough window in your room for you and Toothless to get out.”

The back door, not so wide as the front, had proved to be something of a trial for Toothless. And, in turn, annoyed flaps of his wings that had knocked things over or pushed them aside had proved to be something of a trial for Stoick and Gobber. So perhaps it made sense, even if it felt like an extension of huge amounts of trust to be able to come and go without notifying anyone else.

“You’re welcome,” she said, deadpan, and he snorted and patted her hand again before turning to his father.
“I’m guessing that we’re going next round in the circle?”

“It sounds wise.”

Hiccup blew a raspberry. “All the more reason not to expect to find it in Berk. Still. I probably blew my chance for a good joke with Gobber, even if I should have kept it for how I was going to tell you that your present was getting the academy organised and keeping it that way, up to and including removing other people’s underpants from the storeroom.” Naturally, Stoick did not look remotely surprised, and given the close quarters in which folks had probably been on ships during the days when they searched for Dragon Island, Hiccup could not blame him. “But I’m not going to try the same thing twice, so I’m simply going to say–”

His father’s present snagged on the blanket and refused to come out, and Hiccup sighed as he fished underneath with both hands.

“Going to say that I could have timed this better – all right,” he got it loose, and carefully raised it clear of the table, dangling straps and all. “There we go. One improved saddle for Thornado, now that I’ve had time to do some more Thunderdrum observations.”

And more observations of what Stoick was like while on dragonback, but Hiccup was going to at least try to go through the day without coming out with anything that could be taken the wrong way.

“No’ that you managed to get nearly the same amount of joke out of that, or anything,” Gobber said. Hiccup tried looking at him sternly, but should probably not even have bothered as Gobber just raised one eyebrow and picked his teeth. “Aye, sure, you try that. Right, lass,” he gave up on his teeth, hooked up the blanket, and scooped out a pile of folded fabric with a pair of boots on top which he plunked down in front of Anna. Limmet gave a squeak of protest, despite the fact that the pile missed his tail completely. “Might feel like it’s late in the season, but I promise you we’ve got more winter yet to come.”

Anna’s laugh was a little bit nervous as she looked at the solid, fur-lined boots and presumably thought about the intensity of winter which they implied. There were two pairs of gloves which she glanced over as well, one set slimmer-fitting and leather, the other thickly lined and warmer even than the mittens which Astrid had managed to obtain in Arendelle. Beneath them all was a cloak, again heavier than the one from Arendelle, and a more muted green rather than the outrageous pink.

“Now,” said Stoick, voice more serious, as he slipped out a second, larger fabric piece from beneath his own blanket, and held it up to Elsa. Elsa’s smile faded at the sight of the cream gambeson in Stoick’s hands; then it returned, sadder and older, as she reached out to take it. “I hope this will have as little use as we can. But I would still see you have one, rather than not have one.”

The fabric rumpled under Elsa’s hands as she accepted it, the armour that Hiccup had deliberately avoided giving her. He had not known that his father was going to, and at least the gambeson, a padded long-sleeved tunic, would be of use in sparring and for anyone else would even have done as another layer against the cold. The undyed linen looked soft, Hiccup could at least say that much, and would probably make it more comfortable for her to create her ice over the top. But Hiccup had wanted, privately and desperately, to leave war behind for a day.

Whatever it was that made Anna decide to clear her throat and produce a handful of quills to brandish in Hiccup’s direction, he had no idea, but he appreciated it. And the quills, which clattered down into his hands, a mixture of feathers from different birds.
“Do I even want to know how long you spent collecting these?” he said, admiring the well-cut points. Anna pulled a face. “Or the techniques used to chase the birds, I’m sure.”

“Not as hard as chasing Terrors.”

In Hiccup’s experience, the Terrors seemed to rather flock to Anna, but catching them once they considered themselves part of the household and got it into their heads to roam freely about the house was admittedly another matter. He gave it to her, with a nod and a flick of the quills. “Well, thank you. The new Book will appreciate them, I’m sure.”

To his relief, by the time that he glanced at Elsa again she seemed to have collected herself from being given the armour, and was smiling. She pulled out a glass bottle from beneath her blanket, but unlike the clear bronze liquid that Hiccup’s had contained, this one was thick and orange, and around the neck was a spray of small, oval berries of the same bright orange.

Gobber pointed at the whiskey with his hook as he accepted the bottle. “Well, I can tell that you two weren’t coordinating. No good putting sea buckthorn with rye. This is sea buckthorn, aye?” he cocked an eyebrow at Elsa. “I’ve heard there’s some parts of the shore that it grows, but nobody’s been able to reach them, even good climbers.”

Truth be told, Hiccup was only mostly sure that he had actually seen sea buckthorn juice before. Elsa must have processed it from the berries to the juice somewhere else, probably with someone who had a press; that narrowed it down to a handful of families. But the cream and liniment layers she would have been able to trade, besides.

He had been truly bored, the winter that he had read all about fruit processing.

“There are some to the west of Berk,” said Elsa. “I could not quite land that close with a dragon, but it was close enough that the climb was easier.” A chuckle, rueful-edged, escaped her as she reached up to rub her left shoulder. “I do not think I will win in Thawfest this year.”

A strange regret caught at Hiccup’s stomach, as he remembered the surprise and delight on Elsa’s face as she realised she had won their age group’s climbing. “You never know,” he said. “I get around well enough on this,” a wave to his leg. “and you’ve escaped that, at least.”

“I will keep working on it,” she said, sounding a little like she was assuring him. He hoped that he hadn’t sounded that serious.

It took a moment for his brain to catch up again. “Oh, right! It’s me. Right, yes.” Of course, he had given Anna the main part of her present the night before, and then sat with her until there were no longer tears in her eyes and she had seemed to be able to bear parting with the box again. Now, he pulled out six small bricks of soap and stacked them in front of Anna, making a triangle which Joan approached, sniffed, and then backed away from with a sneeze.

Anna picked up the top one of the blocks, translucent with strands of lavender visible inside it, and smiled as she gave it a sniff. “Wow, that smells really good. Really good. Like, Joan-might-eat-this good.”

“Its – er, let me see if I can remember;” he pointed to the one in her hand. “Lavender, obviously. Then gorse and honey, rosehip, er, they did tell me all of these…” Elsa was giggling behind her hand, and Anna was clearly struggling to hold back from laughter as well, but Featherbrain had told him what each of them was and he was determined to remember. “Woodbine and dandelion, mint, and… seaweed. She said she put flowers or leaves or something in all of them, so you should be able to see the difference.”
Looking more curious, Anna dismantled the pile and looked between them, before picking up the one with ghostly strands of bladderwrack visible through it, and sniffed that in turn. Joan, apparently having recovered from her sneezing, came in for another look, and huffed at the soap when Anna offered it to her.

“Well, I like them. I think she’s still making up her mind.” There was only the slightest shiny edge to her eyes as she caught Hiccup’s gaze, and smiled. They both knew this was not the real bulk of the present, but it was still enough that none of the others would be concerned or confused. Good soap, rather than the more practical, plain stuff that had always dominated in their house because of the necessity of scrubbing to remove soot from the forge, would probably still make a nice change. “Thank you.”

“It’s nothing.”

“Right,” said Gobber. He set aside both of his bottles, rummaged under his blanket, and scooped out a roll of something that looked concerningly like parchment to hand over to Elsa.

She did her best to hide the trepidation, Hiccup thought, but it didn’t quite work. Elsa was still not a fan of written words, and Gobber knew as such, but when Elsa unrolled the outermost layer of the parchment her expression moved to one of amazement, and delight.

Hiccup stood on tiptoes, trying to crane over and see what was on them, until Gobber tugged him playfully back down again. “Blueprints, you over-curious fool.”

Rather unnecessarily, now that Gobber had explained, Elsa turned the parchment around to reveal the outlines of a house frame, with numbers sketched onto it to give a sense of proportion. There were more numbers than words, in fact, and Hiccup suspected that alone would let it go down better than his previous offering of a book on mathematics had done.

“Numbers are easier,” said Elsa, turning the blueprint back towards herself to look at more closely. “These are runes, but the southern numbers, it is not difficult to change between them. Thank you, Gobber. This is… very interesting.”

“You can probably ask Holsen about them,” said Hiccup. “When he comes to sort out my window come spring.”

Elsa was nodding, but Gobber looked unimpressed. “And where do you think they came from?”

He had rather walked into that one. Hiccup opened his mouth, wagged a finger at Gobber, and closed it again as he realised that he did not have a good response.

“I will ask him before that, though,” said Elsa, and Hiccup was about to ask whether anybody else would like to join in before he realised that she was looking at Gobber. “I promised to show him good, tall trees in return for Hiccup’s window. Before the shipwrights lay claim to them.”

“Oh, gods, Brynhild’s going to accuse us of picking a side,” Hiccup said, laughing again. “Probably better if she doesn’t find out about that.”

There was always competition for wood, and he remembered telling Elsa about it at some point or another. Of course, he should have guessed that once she had an idea of what Berk wanted, she would know where it would be possible to find it. Even if trees were on a rather larger scale than truffles, that probably only made it easier to find them.

His laughter died away as he saw his father’s expression, sadness tinging his smile. This time, what Stoick withdrew from his set of gifts was not armour; it was a sword, slender even its sheath, with a
leather-wrapped hilt and a shining crossguard.

“I talked to Gobber about this,” said Stoick, and perhaps it shouldn’t have made Hiccup feel that much better but it did, all the same. “Usual swords aren’t the right build for you, so this,” he handed over the sword, and Hiccup accepted it with two hands and a racing heart, “well, Gobber made it specially. The length should be better for you.”

Hiccup drew the blade, perfectly quiet as it left the sheath, and did his best to look at it with a smith’s eye. It was a little easier, that way. The blade was narrower than a typical Viking one, a little more like the Arendellen swords, deeply fullered to keep down the weight. As for the length, well, he suspected that Gobber had fitted that to Hiccup rather than bothering with the usual Viking approach that more was better.

He swept his left underneath it, balancing it on the side of his hand to feel the balance point. It was a hand’s width from the hilt, and sat easily in place, glinting and beautiful in the firelight.

It was a wonderful weapon, and he set his eyes firmly on it as a smith, and put aside the knowledge that his father meant for him to use it when they faced the Berserkers again in the spring. “It’s stunning,” he said. “Thank you.” He made sure to catch his father’s eyes, and then Gobber’s, knowing who it was that had been doing the smithing as well as who it was that had been arranging and trading for the material.

But it still weighed on him, too heavy in his hands as he sheathed it again, and he looked over at Anna as much for hope of moving on as anything else. His heart was pounding so hard that he felt like his face had to be reddening, and he wanted a moment to breathe but knew that he could not have it; in its place, he would accept a moment not being focused on.

Anna, gods bless her, whipped out a something of grey fur and presented it to Gobber with a little too much of a flourish. He blinked, took it carefully with his hook, and let it settle down into something like… well, something like a hemisphere.

“The fur goes inside,” said Anna, making a complex gesture with her hands which probably meant she was asking Gobber to turn it inside out. “Like, next to your head. It’s a helmet… liner? Thing. For inside a helmet.”

Despite the jumble of words that her explanation became, it got the idea across. Hiccup nodded in understanding, while Gobber beamed, flipped off his helmet, and then slipped the fur back on to cover his bald scalp. His helmet fitted snugly back on, although there was still a hint of grey fur visible just around the band.

“Oooh, that’s nice,” said Gobber. “That’ll keep the frost out.”

“I thought about putting, like, flaps.” Anna flapped her hands over her ears. “But I wasn’t sure they’d work with the helmet.”

“Don’t worry, lass. This is just perfect.” Gobber grinned, leaning his hook on the table. “One less place to worry about frostbite.”

Stoick shook his head, smiling fondly, then looked around as Elsa cleared her throat. She proffered him a large ceramic jar, two-handed, although he only needed one hand to take it from her. There was a label tied around the neck, which made Stoick raise his eyebrows as he turned it around.

“It was written for me,” said Elsa. “I… hope it says what I expect it to say.”

She managed to have enough amusement in her voice to take out any sting, and an easy sort of
chuckle ran around the table. Hiccup glanced over to the pantry, where there was still no sign of Kai returning; whether he did not want to intrude, or was taking the time to himself, was impossible to say. But more people meant more gifts to hand out, and more time taken up by it.

“Saddle soap,” Stoick read, and looked between Elsa and Hiccup. “Were you planning together, on this one?”

It was Elsa who managed to reply first, ghost of a laugh in her voice. “No! I did not know the saddle would be changing…”

“I mean, you did have a saddle before,” Hiccup pointed out. Though hopefully the new one would suit even better. “And that, I believe, brings it round to me again.” He picked up the blanket altogether, considered folding it for a moment, then stuffed it under the table instead. All that was left was his gift for Elsa, and he scooped it up to give it to her.

Her expression, and her smile, softened. It had taken some fiddling with both the black leather cord and the steel wire to get quite what he wanted, but Hiccup liked the outcome: a necklace of dragon scales, Toothless’s, falling in a triangle that rippled in shades of black. To his surprise, the scales could be polished, and it bought out shine in them like a magpie’s wing.

“It’s beautiful,” said Elsa, softly, flattening one askew scale with her thumb. She looked up at Toothless, and smiled. “And thank you, as well, for your part in this.”

Setting the necklace down carefully, she reached out and pulled Hiccup into a hug again. This time it was less desperate than many of her touches had seemed to be recently, and when he rubbed her back it was good to feel that she was not so cold to the touch. It had not been hard to work that out. He let Elsa choose when to pull away, and wished he did not see the flicker of pain that Anna did not quite hide quickly enough.

It was far from the time to bring that up, though. He turned to Gobber and put on an exaggeratedly innocent expression, which only made Gobber scoff and poke him in the chest with his hook.

“It’s been fifteen years since I fell for that malarkey, lad. Anyhow, it’s probably about time you got one of these.”

Gobber opened his hand to reveal a buckle, and Hiccup had to blink before he recognised the elegant, curved lines. It was the silver that got him, that was the best defence that he could have given; the lines of Toothless in silver on a darker background were very different than seeing him in black.

The breathless laugh that escaped him, though, was not just from the joy of seeing Toothless on one more thing that he could wear, one more subtle than his leather vest when he might be in places less… amenable to such a sign. Especially on Berk, where dragon buckles were not at all uncommon.

But it was more than that. He had made his father a new belt buckle with the last of the Gronckle iron last year, but it had still been a Monstrous Nightmare, and for more reason than just because the previous one had been. If he were to make his father a buckle now, he would not make it a Thunderdrum. Because Monstrous Nightmares were the chief’s symbol. The fact that Hiccup had not worn one had been another, subtle, sign that Hiccup was not really considered the heir.

And yet. That was not what this meant, he could feel it in his bones and in the warmth of the room around them. In the fact that he had translated while his father treated with the wildlings, that he had gone to the Quiet-Lifes with him. It was not a rejection of him as chief; it was offering him his
own symbol, Toothless, to go forward with.

He was almost surprised that his hand did not shake as he took the buckle from Gobber’s hands. It had to have his father’s approval; Gobber was no fool, when it came to chiefing, no matter that he waved away any claim of knowledge.

Stoick was treating him more and more as his heir, and still offering him Toothless as a symbol. He was going to need time to figure out all of his thoughts on this, he knew.

For now, he smiled. “I’ll put it on later, rather than risk introducing my underwear at the table,” he said, for want of a more serious response. When all else failed, he supposed, he had levity on his side.

Even so, it raised a vague chuckle from both Stoick and Gobber, and Stoick set about folding up his blanket. There was nothing left behind. “As you will notice the next time you enter the forge,” said Stoick, smiling at Gobber, “there is a new whetstone to be found there. Hopefully that will not be inclined to turn pink when introduced to water.”

“Not planning on getting water near it,” said Gobber, grinning, “but it’ll be a welcome thing.”

“Uh, right.” Anna tucked her hair back behind her ear, and Hiccup recognised the way that she puffed out her chest and drew herself up as something which usually came from feeling very small beside his rather aptly-named father. “So, I don’t know if this is a thing you have in Berk, but I remember it from some winters in Arendelle and I thought it was a nice thing, so…”

She pulled off the blanket to reveal the last item, a log somewhere over a foot long and a good six inches across. It was covered with sprigs of pine, holly, juniper, trailing ivy, and other things which Hiccup could not identify just at a glance; had three slender tapers lay beside it. Putting the blanket on the chair beside her, Anna set about putting the candles upright in three holes that Hiccup had not been able to really see beneath the greenery around it, the one in the middle standing slightly taller than the ones on either side.

“It’s something that they – we – normally light just before midnight. It’s all… evergreen plants, you know? And things that smell nice. I mean, it’s not that strong until you light it. Usually you burn the candles first, and when they burn down you use the log to start the first fire of the New Year. Or something. I never really got to see it too close.” Her smile turned a little wan.

Ah, another one that the servants of the Castle had continued, more than the King or Queen. It also didn’t sound particularly like something that the Silver Priests would appreciate, at least to Hiccup’s ears; there would be four candles, at the very least, if it were.

“Thank you for bringing it to us,” said Stoick, gently. Hiccup had to tamp down a stab of jealousy at just how paternal it sounded, and closed his hand a little tighter around the Night Fury buckle. They had fixed things. Changed them. For all of the mistakes that they had both made.

Stoick nodded towards Elsa before Anna actually thought to turn around; Elsa had already set her blanket aside, and had before her on the table folded fabric, in shades of soft green and cream.

“Snoggletog clothes,” she said voice tender as she pushed them towards Anna.

It had been half a year, Hiccup realised. Half a year since the madness of Arendelle, since Elsa had ripped through its walls and Anna had seen through its lies. No, that was not fair; the lies belonged to the Silver Priests, and Arendelle was as much a victim of them as, he could only presume, other islands would be. But half a year without new clothes, without clothes that even fit her properly
sometimes, would probably feel like a lot more to an exiled Queen than they ever would to even Hiccup. He knew that both Anna and Elsa had needed to alter the clothes which had been found for them, that to this day the only truly new clothes that Elsa had were her black dress and teal apron from the previous winter.

He also caught Anna’s gasp as Elsa hugged her, slow and tender, rocking very slightly from side to side as she did so. Anna’s arms wrapped around Elsa, and she said something which sounded approximately like ‘thank you’ but was rather muffled by being directed into Elsa’s shoulder.

Elsa kissed her sister’s temple before she let her go again, and for a moment Hiccup could see the big sister there, could see Anna as not just his own younger sister but Elsa’s as well. But then he blinked, and the moment passed as Elsa turned back to the table and began carefully folding up the leather armour.

It seemed like an unspoken cue, and Hiccup glanced down at the items in front of him. At least it would still be possible to get them upstairs in one arm full. But Stoick caught Gobber’s eye and nodded to his items, Gobber simply nodding in return, before going over and into the pantry in turn.

Whether it would be better to sit in a pantry out of the way of such a family occasion, or stand awkwardly at the edge and watch it happen, Hiccup could not say. Though it did remind him in an absurd way of the times he had been locked in his room away from the dragon fighting. At least Kai had seemed to choose to step aside, this time.

“Let’s get these away and the table straightened up,” said Gobber, perhaps a little more loudly than was necessary. “Then we’ll get some milk warmed up and rest our feet for a few bloody hours before this evening.”

Anna paused, blanket in her arms. “Is it going to get… raucous, tonight?”

“In some parts of the Great Hall,” said Hiccup. “But even I managed to avoid most of it last year, and I am apparently fishbone-esque enough to be picked up and carried over to the raucous parts when people want me. You’ll find it only as raucous as you wish.”

It could have been simply that she let out a deep breath, but it felt a little like a sigh of relief. “All right. That’s good to know. I mean, I survived Slaughter Day, right?”

“Much less yak to worry about, this time.”

“Great.”
Despite the warmth that felt like it had seeped back into the room, Hiccup did not need anything more than a glance from his father to know what was coming. He bundled up what he had received and extricated his blanket from beneath the table again; it was at least much easier to carry, with only the sword giving it any real weight.

“I’m going to get dressed properly,” he added, hoping to keep something approaching levity in the air. He waggled the new buckle, very aware of its weight in his hand. “With this. And matching socks.”

Honestly, he had not even paid attention to what socks he had grabbed that morning. He was halfway ready to return to bed again, and it was barely even properly light out. As it was, though, he kept on the best smile that he could manage, and held his head high until he was at least out of sight at the top of the stairs.

The sword felt like it burned in his hands. All the same, he smoothed out the sheets on his bed before carefully laying the sword down in the middle of it, sheath and all, like laying it out on an invisible body for its final voyage.

Gods, that image came to mind far too easily. Shaking it away, Hiccup put the quills on the table beside his bed instead, and set about changing into actually clean clothes, without his nightshirt underneath. Usually, Snoggletog meant Snoggletog clothes, not doing much work, and starting the evening’s celebrations before the sun had even set. This year, it was clearly not going to plan.

Dressed and with his hair vaguely battled, he returned downstairs to find his father and Kai seated at the table and talking quietly, while Toothless watched them from the far side of the room. Toothless’s flaps were pricked up, eyes wide and curious, and though Kai glanced over at the sound of Toothless shifting in his place he did not seem overly frightened. Either the wildlings had managed to warn him, Hiccup supposed, using simple words or drawings, or there was simply little that could horrify him after… whatever he had seen.

“I’ll head up to the Great Hall and make a start on the early bits,” said Gobber, brushing off his hand against his vest. He nodded to Kai. “As I won’t be speaking enough Arendellen for this. Let him know?”

“Thank you, Gobber,” said Stoick, looking up. For a moment, Hiccup was struck by how different he looked, on the bench beside Kai and without his helmet or cloak, from the figure he usually cut on his seat at Great Hall meetings or even at the head of the table. Stoick’s voice softened. “I do appreciate it.”

It was only as Elsa delicately cleared her throat that Hiccup realised she had stepped out of her room. “I… will not understand, either,” she said. Her eyes flickered between Kai and Stoick, with only a fleeting glance for Hiccup. “And I have some other Snoggletog presents to deliver.”

Last Snoggletog, he might have teased her in an attempt to find out who, the world having felt lighter with Alvin seemingly at bay and Dagur not even a whisper on their horizon. True, the dragons leaving had been a scare, but they had managed to retrieve them again before Snoggletog itself. A reprieve, at the end of the insanity of the year.

This year, it seemed, there was to be no such reprieve.
“We can translate for you, if you wish,” said Stoick, still gently. “It will not be so hard as this morning.”

Elsa shook her head, though, and Hiccup felt that she fixed her eyes rather firmly on Stoick, then. “It will take more time. If there is something I need to know—” Hiccup watched her take a deep breath, and her hands tighten around the wrapped bundle which she held; “I will not be gone too long.”

It was Stoick who looked over at him first. Not knowing what else to do, Hiccup nodded. “Of course,” Stoick said. “Just take care, in the winds.”

Not the cold or ice, at least. Perhaps it was that which made Elsa’s lips twitch in something almost like a smile, before she turned, walked straight past Hiccup, and paused at the door only to pick up her cloak. But given the way that her hand shook as she did so, Hiccup could really not be sure.

Elsa was gone before Anna emerged from her room, hair in her two usual braids, wearing a long-sleeved green tunic, with her usual leggings beneath, and a darker green vest with laces at the side that let it fit tightly to her. The neckline of the vest was still a little more Arendellen than Viking, the tiny white flowers embroidered around the waist a little wonky, but the clothes were fresh and she looked more collected than she had before.

Suspecting that their voices would be worked, Hiccup grabbed four mugs for the table, and dipped a jug into the water bucket to fill it. As long as they could keep Joan out of everything, they would be fine.

“Very well,” said Stoick, settling back into Arendellen again. Hiccup sat down opposite him, Anna settling opposite Kai and immediately reaching out for his hand. “Kai, I thank you for your patience in waiting for us.”

Kai’s eyes were red-rimmed, and shadowed. By the light of the fire Hiccup could get a better look at the man, and realised with a twist in his gut that Kai had lost weight, and no small amount of it, since the summer. The top of his head had been bald even then, but what remained of his hair was speckled with white, and it looked like frostbite had made its mark on his nose.

“It is nothing, sir,” Kai replied, Arendellen accent crisp but voice still lowered as if they were likely to be overheard. He swallowed. “I… appreciated the time to think.”

Anna squeezed his hand, and Kai offered her a fleeting smile.

Stoick opted for a reassuring nod, it seemed, instead. “If you want more time, I understand. But if you would be willing to tell us what happened to you… we would appreciate it.”

“I will, yes, I… I have to ask,” said Kai, the words coming out a little rushed; “the other girl. You…” He looked to Anna. “You called her Elsa.”

“It’s her,” Anna said, barely above a whisper.

Kai looked at her in clear disbelief, his hand even sagging in her hold, then he looked away to take several deep breaths. It was almost like sobbing without tears, desperately sucking at the air, and even Stoick put a cautious arm to his shoulder as Kai stared down at the floor.

Finally, on the table, Kai’s free hand curled into a fist. “They told the people that she had been kidnapped. But those of us who knew, to make sure we didn’t speak…” He shook his head. “Your Majesty, I cannot say this.”
“I already know, Kai,” said Anna. But Hiccup could see her face, and the flicker of fear in her eyes. They knew what Elsa remembered, one traumatising night seared into her memory when she had blocked out everything else, but Kai’s words concerned Hiccup just as much as Anna’s quiet lie.

Kai hung his head for a moment, then pulled himself upright and turned back to Stoick. Even with his shoulders set and head up, he was noticeably the shorter, but at least there was a little of the in-control head servant that Hiccup had occasionally seen during their days in Arendelle. “They told us that she had faced the Trial of Air,” Kai said. “And that she had failed.”

“The Trial of Air?” said Stoick.

They knew Fire, and they knew Earth. But the Silver Priests had two Mothers and two Fathers, and no doubt they had a Trial for each.

“The tower within the temple,” said Kai. “They said she had been taken to the top of it, and…”

His voice cracked, and beneath the table Anna grabbed Hiccup’s right hand and clung so tightly that it hurt. But gods, he could not blame her, quite sure that he was struck by the same image that he was. A young girl, a child, thrown from the top of the tower in some sick mockery of a Trial.

The gods might have their heroes and make their presence known, certainly, but it was not at the demands of men. Bile rose in Hiccup’s throat. He had seen enough sheep or yaks knocked out of the claws of dragons to know what a long fall did to a body.

No wonder King Agdar had begged for the Trial of Earth, instead.

“They lied to keep you quiet,” said Stoick, as Kai’s pause turned to seconds and it became clear he could not finish his words. “The fear is their fault, not yours.”

“There were… a handful of us, that knew,” Kai said. His words were still quiet and slow, and delivered very deliberately to Stoick alone. “I was the under-butler, then; the old butler has retired now, the… Silver Priests offered him shelter in his old age. Gerda was already housemaid, new to the position. Elsa’s tutor… he was replaced, as well, by the Silver Priests. They say that he left for another isle. And the princesses’ nanny. The five of us were told… that. We were told that the kidnapping story would be less frightening for the city, and… that was likely true.”

Too true, for Hiccup’s liking. To think that the idea of a princess and heir stolen in the middle of the night could be more accepted than the idea of one with magic in her fingertips.

But perhaps Arendelle, like Berk, had only known of the powers as destructive forces, as terrible and as random as lightning strikes. For such a blow to have befallen their own royal family would have been unthinkable.

Stoick nodded. “Did King Agdar and Queen Idunn tell you this? Or the Silver Priests?”

“One of the Silver Priests. We… were told that the King and Queen were being given time to mourn, and were being checked for signs of enchantment themselves.”

Now Hiccup could hear it, the edge of the control that Kai was holding over his words. A control that was a necessity, not just a choice, a dam holding back the words beyond. He looked sideways to see a tear on Anna’s cheek, but she did not say a word.

“And so the story remained until this summer,” said Stoick.

Kai nodded, one sharp movement. “When they said that the cold was because of magic… I
remembered Princess Elsa, but I did not dare think that it was her. Everyone at the Castle was confined to it – as you were, if I recall. I was patrolling the kitchen walk to make sure that everyone was in out of the cold when Princess Anna appeared, with… this young man,” an inclination of his head to Hiccup, “beside her.”

He could still remember it too clearly. Anna cold and stiffening, like she was turning to ice from the inside out, but all that they had been able to think of was getting to Prince Hans. The desperation trying to hold back the cold.

Finally, Anna released Hiccup’s hand, to reach up and rub tears off both of her cheeks. “We came in by the jetty,” she said, voice shaky. “The old servants’ entrance there. We were looking for Prince Hans.”

“You looked–” Kai began, then cut himself off and clamped his lips tightly shut. When Anna squeezed his hand and nodded, Hiccup got the sense of what she meant. That she knew, and that Hiccup had known. For now, at least, Stoick did not need to have done. Kai glanced back to Stoick. “I told them that Prince Hans had gone with the Silver Priests, and warned them… about the Trial of Fire. That, that is–”

“We know of that one,” said Stoick, a little too quickly to quite be grave.

“When the storm passed, we thought it was over, but… Queen Anna did not return. The servants were gathered together, all of us, and told to act as if she had. That if we breathed a word otherwise, it would be treated as treason.

“I don’t know how they found out that I had seen you. Kai swallowed. “Nobody could have seen too closely, or…” His eyes met Hiccup’s, pale hazel-green. “Your face was not covered.”

And he could have implicated all of Berk. Hiccup tried to swallow, but his throat felt dry, and he was grateful that his father did not turn to look at him. He had covered his face in the final desperate act of their fight, but had not thought to do so when they had entered the castle.

“But a little under a moon after it happened,” Kai continued, “the Silver Priests came, with some of the guard, and said that I was to be taken to the temple for… questioning. I asked to take some of my things, so that people would not be alarmed, and… well, as I said.”

“You said that the ice harvesters are being watched,” said Hiccup. That, of all of it, had stuck out to him. That the Silver Priests were seeking out people to accuse of treason… did not surprise him, in some terrible way. That they had found out about Kai worried him more. But the ice harvesters were unconnected, other than through Kristoff who was one of them and not really one of them at the same time.

But Kai nodded. He disentangled his hand from Anna’s, long enough to pour himself a cup of water and take a shaking sip, before keeping both hands wrapped tightly around the wood. “I do not know how much Berk knows of the history of the ice harvesters…”

“Not much,” Stoick admitted, and Hiccup was sort of glad that it was not him who had to say that.

“They are the same people, who settled Arendelle,” said Kai. He sounded a little more comfortable, and Hiccup wondered whether he had told Anna a similar sort of history, when she was young. Perhaps whether he had even told Elsa, once, before time and her own will had pushed all of her earliest memories from her mind. “They even followed Queen Joan. But as the Silver Priests came… a divide grew. Between the ice harvesters, who dared to go into the mountains and who did not follow the Mothers and Fathers, and the people of the city.
“The ice harvesters have some of their own words, their own customs. And… the followed the older ways, the gods and powers from before the Silver Priests. Eventually, though, the Silver Priests became powerful enough to force them.” Kai’s voice was grim. “They converted, or were branded traitors. I… have spoken, to some of them, and from what I have seen I think that a number of them still do not truly follow the Silver Priests. But they say that they do, for their own safety. I do not blame them.”

Perhaps the Trial of Earth would seem like less of a threat for people who regularly went north of Arendelle and into the mountains, but the other Trials retained their horrors. Fire and Air, they had heard; Hiccup could think of any number of terrible things to do with water, and did not want to know which one of those the Silver Priests had chosen.

“The Silver Priests have never trusted them,” said Kai, grim now. “They are viewed with suspicion, at best. With what happened this summer, they are now almost kept under watch. The Silver Priests review every shipment of ice before it is brought into the Castle – or they did, at least, over the summer. They discussed not accepting ice at all, but the Castle could not run without it. Much of the town could not.”

“Certainly not the fishing,” said Stoick. Looking closely, though, Hiccup got the unsettled feeling that his father was 

rattled, that this had shocked Stoick as much as it had shocked Hiccup.

In the years before the dragon attacks had reached their works, Berk had still parlayed with other islands. Had attended Things. Over time it had dwindled, and they had grown ever more isolated, but Stoick had once moved among enough leaders to have experienced something that Hiccup might call politics. It was discomforting to think that the Silver Priests could shock him.

“I assume there are more Silver Priests in the Castle, as well,” Stoick continued. Kai nodded, and Stoick looked over to Hiccup and Anna. “I am glad you did not meet with them when you went there.”

A look of alarm crossed Kai’s features, and Hiccup was struck by the absurdity that Kai would be worried for them after everything that he had clearly been through. “Your Majesty–”

“We spoke to Gerda,” Anna said, quickly. “And to Hans. Offered him to come back with us. What – do you know, what happened to him?” Her hand tightened on Hiccup’s again. He did his best to shift his hand, both to a position where he could better hold hers and so that he could continue to feel his fingers.

“They took him to the Temple, at first,” said Kai. His own hands were still wrapped tightly around the cup. Grime was crusted under his nails, and into the creases of his hands. “For several days. When he was returned, he had one of the Silver Priests with him at all times. To advise him. He told us that they had been kind to him and helped him to understand that the – the wildling had been warping his mind, taking on the form of an innocent.”

“Elsa can’t do that! And even if she could, she wouldn’t, she–”

“I know. But the Silver Priest never left his side. Even slept on the floor below his in the tower. He was never alone to tell anyone what really happened.” Sadness filled Kai’s expression, and he sighed. “I’m sorry. I don’t know what really happened to him. I spoke to the footman acting as his manservant, though, and… he had no marks, when he came back. No scars, or bruises. We can at least be sure of that. You – if you offered him to come here, why did he not take it? I assume I would have seen him by now if he had, and from how you said it–”

“He is gathering information on Anna’s behalf,” said Stoick, “and has assured us that he feels safe
enough to do so, for the time being.”

“He said it might be safer for the rest of the Castle, as well,” said Anna.

From the way that Kai’s lips pressed together, and he looked down at his hands, Hiccup got the strong suspicion that he agreed.

Kai started to talk in more detail about what had happened in the days following the events in Arendelle, naming particular Silver Priests as having seemed to take charge – more than that, being able to give information about how many years those Silver Priests had been visiting their Castle, what their history had been before Anna had become Queen. Kai had become butler in the years between Elsa’s banishment and Agdar’s death, and in some ways knew more than Anna had done.

Before too long, Hiccup retrieved a piece of paper, and found himself scribbling notes that were gradually getting messier as he made his way down the page. Elsa returned at around halfway down the parchment, looking windswept but smiling faintly, and crossed to squeeze Anna around the shoulders without even saying a word. Anna looked confused at the hug, but did her best to squeeze back with her one free arm, before Elsa released her again and slipped back into their small bedroom.

Even Kai ran out of information to give, though, and both Hiccup and Stoick let the conversation shift to Anna telling Kai about everything that had happened. She spoke excitedly about the dragons, about finding Elsa again, and insisted on introducing him to all of her Terrible Terrors in quick succession.

Hiccup caught Stoick’s eye, slid the notes across to him, and tilted his head towards the door in lieu of asking aloud and potentially disrupting the flow of Anna’s words. She looked happy, excited, as young as she had looked in… longer than Hiccup wanted to admit to. It felt only fair to let her have that happiness.

But he needed some fresh air. Slipping his hand out of Anna’s and his backside out of his seat, Hiccup returned to his room long enough to bundle up more warmly before shouldering the front door open again and letting Toothless lead them out into the crisp, cold air.

It didn’t help as much as he hoped it might, but it was at least something. And more than that, throwing sticks into the snow for Toothless to retrieve in great black bounds, sending snow in all directions, made his heart feel a little lighter in his chest again.

And for most people, at least, Snoggletog had not been changed. He leaned on the wall of a house, arms crossed, to watch a gaggle of younger children chasing each other around the centre of the village with snowballs and shrieks of laughter. There were a couple of snow-dragons again, as well, although this time they seemed to have proliferated from Gronckles to include something that was probably meant to be a Nadder, something that might have been a Night Fury, and something which looked like multiple people had been trying to create multiple different dragons and had ended up with the unholy offspring of chaos and mess itself.
It had three front legs, for one thing.

There had been an attempt to make the Nadder green, it also appeared, and Hiccup smiled as he admired the handiwork. Two pieces of coal for eyes gave it the impression of trying to look in two different directions at once, but it was a fair try.

He turned around, just in time to see Snotlout readying a very large handful of snow at approximately face-height.

Hiccup sighed. “Just do it. It’ll make a nice break from today.”

Snotlout rolled his eyes and huffed, breath cloudy on the air. “Whatever. It’s no fun if you see it coming.” He tossed the half-formed snowball back down on the ground, scowling at it a little more than was really necessary.

“You could see if Wartlout is available,” Hiccup suggested. “Closer cousin, gotta be a better target.”

His only reply was a vague, wordless grumble. As Hiccup straightened up, brushing a stray splatter of snow off his hip, Snotlout slumped back against the wall. He seemed to fold in on himself, arms across his chest, chin dropping until his glare fixed on Hiccup’s foot.

Right, the foot. That had preyed on Snotlout’s mind, before. Hiccup doubted it was top of the list right now, and what Brynnhild had said in the forge was lurking in the back of his thoughts, but at least it meant that Snotlout could focus on something.

Hiccup scanned him over, and noted the new additions. “Nice gauntlets,” he opted for, with a gesture. It looked like Snoggletog clothes, for Snotlout, had meant swapping out plain leather gauntlets for darker, studded ones.

Snotlout looked down at them, then folded his arms more tightly, tucking them up almost into his armpits. “They were from my mother,” he said, and the way that he swallowed and his voice tightened up, Hiccup could tell that they were getting closer. “Adelaide got me the boots.”

A glance down told him that the boots were definitely new as well, with fur around the top and more heft to them. Probably more room inside them, as well, and Snotlout’s old boots would either have been put aside for Adelaide or handed off so that the leather could be reworked and handed on to another family. Wartlout was definitely too young to be next in line.

“Looks like you could kick some serious butt with those,” Hiccup offered.

Snotlout grunted, shifting back against the wall again. With a hint of a sigh, Hiccup leant against the wall beside him, but kept away from mimicking the folded arms. “I hope your day is going better than mine, so far,” he said. “I got to translate about people previously killing each other, and now there’s another exile from Arendelle in my house… just for helping me and Anna in the summer.”

He did not add that Kai had been the highest servant of Arendelle Castle, but Snotlout knew who Anna was and might well be able to hazard a guess as to where Kai had been to help them.

“Hey,” Hiccup added, “at least I didn’t bring a girl back this time.”

He was hoping for either laughter or, failing that, mockery. What he got was a sigh, and Snotlout shaking his head.
“At least your parents probably didn’t get into a massive fight,” said Snotlout. Hiccup tried to look sympathetic without looking pitying, but to be fair Snotlout was not even looking round. Snotlout opened his mouth, shut it, licked his lips, then forced out a huff. “My mother’s leaving.”

Hiccup’s mouth went dry, and Brynhild’s words in the forge took on a new meaning. The entire village would see, of course, and would gossip as to why whether anyone actually knew or not.

“Adelaide’s going with her,” Snotlout added, through gritted teeth. Hiccup got the sense, deep in his gut, that he was the only one other than Hookfang that Snotlout had dared to talk to. “She’s a kid, you know, so my mother has her say. But I’m an adult, yeah? So my father says I can stay with him.”

Which, from Spitelout, probably didn’t really mean can. Hiccup suppressed the urge to grimace, and pushed aside the immediate upwelling thought of whether it had just become a worse idea to have Spitelout be trained with dragons in the coming winter.

The tone of Snotlout’s voice, and the way that he stood, made it pretty clear what he wanted. For all that he had started feigning independence younger than any of the rest of them, for all that he tried – desperately, at times – to imitate Spitelout, it was Brynhild that had always been there. Had not been viking, or seeking dragons, or at Stoick’s right hand on distant islands, the way that Spitelout had. Looked proud even when Snotlout came second, or third, or lower, in a Thawfest event.

Had not said a damming word about Snotlout’s eye, or how his bond with Hookfang was becoming more and more of his life.

But… Hiccup had known Snotlout all of their lives. He knew as well as anyone that Snotlout would not want Spitelout to think he was turning against him.

Hiccup reached up and rubbed his chin with a chilly hand, turning it over in his head. There had to be a way around it, the right words, the right choice, that would not end in fury from one or more parties. That would not end as disastrously as it seemed Hiccup’s choices had, this year.

Maybe this was a sort of chiefing, as well.

His eyes fell on Toothless, nosing in the snow until a scatter from the roof above him fell onto the back of his neck and made him look up at the sky suspiciously. Wherever Hookfang was, it was doubtless warmer than here.

“Seems a pity,” said Hiccup, slowly, “that there aren’t many houses that Hookfang could fit into easily. I guess anything like that would be bigger than your mother would want…”

At least letting Snotlout take over the idea meant a second mind to work it over, he supposed. Snotlout still knew his parents better, and was likely to know how they would react if Snotlout were to make such a suggestion.

He cleared his throat and continued. “I mean, Elsa has made a deal with Holsen to get the window in my room made larger, for Toothless, but that still wouldn’t work for a Monstrous Nightmare. You’d need to make a lot of changes. Probably more than someone who doesn’t have a dragon would really want.”

If he had been hoping his attempt at manipulation would go unnoticed, such thoughts evaporated when Snotlout looked up and narrowed his eyes. “Are you suggesting I get my own place, and blame Hookfang?”
Well, at least any pretence could go out the window. Hiccup shrugged. “Not blame him. Just… get somewhere that’s the best for him, as well as for you. And maybe that this is… the time, for that to happen.”

They were adults, after all. Not that being an adult meant that you had to have a house of your own; most people didn’t until they were looking to marry. But if the family home was crowded with younger siblings, or there were already tensions, it was not unheard of for someone to move out almost as soon as they had been through the Arena.

Heather was only a couple of years older than them, after all. And for all that her father was nominally the head of the house, nobody in Berk would expect to deal with him even after everything. They all knew what injuries like his could do.

Snotlout fell silent again, although the working of his jaw suggested that he was chewing on the inside of his cheek. He shuffled his arms again, within their folded position, then suddenly pushed upright and reached round to pull something out from the small of his back. Hiccup was not even going to ask where exactly it had been. He was just thinking on how much he was not going to ask when Snotlout thrust the book in his direction, and he had to rather hastily catch it or face fishing it out of the snow.

“For Snoggletog,” said Snotlout.

Hiccup looked from Snotlout, to the book, and back again. It looked quite new, pages still crisp, and when he cracked it open he could see that it was still blank and waiting to be filled. “You didn’t have to, really—”

“I owed you from last year,” Snotlout said, and this time it was rather more defensive. Hiccup dropped the sentence like a burning-hot stone. “Anyway, it’s empty. So you and Fishface can fill it with all your nerd stuff.”

Hiccup weighed the book in his hand. “Well, we’re always producing more nerd stuff, that’s true.” Perhaps they could use it to talk about the growth and development of dragons, from hatchlings to adult. He hoped so; he rather feared that the alternative would be fighting techniques. “Thanks, Snotlout.”

“Whatever.” Snotlout waved as if sending him away, and half-turned, then paused. “And… I’ll think about it. The house with Hookfang.”

“Merry Snoggletog, Snotlout.”

The reply was mumbled but at least, Hiccup supposed, Snotlout had tried.

Snotlout trudged away in the snow, arms still wrapped around him. If Hiccup had been more foolish, he might have pointed out that going bare-armed in a Berkian winter was not the best of ideas, but he was years past that sort of thing. Instead, he crouched down, cupped Toothless’s cheeks to a concerned chirp, and waited to feel less like his hands were shaking.

The world was trying to recede into a fuzzy tunnel, and he could not let it do that. Not even after how long the morning had felt.

“Should have put your saddlebags on, huh, bud?” At least his voice only shook a little. “Then you could carry this for me.” He gestured with the book. The words felt like formless sound even coming from his own lips, but as the mist of uncertainty cleared and he rubbed Toothless’s jaw he felt like he could breathe more easily again. Strange, how it had only really overtaken him after
Snotlout had left.

Then again, before that, Snotlout had needed him. The fights of their childhood would have been supposed to be put behind them when they became adults even by the old ways. Becoming riders along side each other had just made it… easier. To start over.

A glance the other way told him that the snowball fight was still going on, that the rest of Berk had not even seemed to notice. That… felt good. Solid, in his chest, something to press other things against. Hiccup straightened up, flexed his right foot where he could feel it getting cold from standing still too long, and tucked the book from Snotlout beneath his arm.

“Come on, Toothless. We’ve got a stop we were supposed to make.”

There had, after all, been more of a point to getting outside than just getting some air, although Hiccup would be lying if he said it hadn’t appealed. He turned, more purposefully, towards the edge of the village and the small house which Heather shared with her father, Toothless at his side.

At least, at his side until the snow began to build up, and the paths began to narrow where fewer people had walked through them. Then Toothless slipped behind him. Finally, the path ran out altogether, several yards of unblemished snow around Heather’s house save for a path that Hiccup could just see between the front door and the woodshed.

It wasn’t that late in the day, certainly, but the rest of Berk was already criss-crossed with footsteps. He wished abruptly that he had asked some of the other riders if they might drop in on Heather as well.

At least Toothless made it easy to clear a path. Snow flew in all directions as Toothless bounded over, ignoring the front door and heading straight for the woodshed with a soft bark. Grunts answered him as he stuck his head inside, and Hiccup laughed and picked his way through the wide, ragged area that Toothless had trampled down along the way.

“Really?” he said, as Toothless murred away, tail swishing and knocking more snow about. “You’re precise as an arrow in the air, and down here you crash about like a concussed yak?”

The Nadder stuck their head out of the woodshed, looked at Hiccup with each eye in turn, and cawed softly. He raised a hand, but from the far side of Toothless it was more of a wave than anything else, and made a note to bring some sort of fish or treat with him in the future.

“All right, bud, you want to stay out here?” Toothless turned to face him, grinning, tongue lolling out. “Well, I’ll be round by the front door if you want to find me.”

Toothless turned back and rumbled into the woodshed again, this time earning a reply that sounded much more Gronckle-like. With a smile, Hiccup followed the single-person trail round to the front of this house, raised his hand to knock, and was surprised and heartened at the sound of voices and laughter coming from inside.

Would it be interrupting, to knock? Eirik had liked him well enough the times that they had met, and Heather had said that he seemed to have more good days, now, and fewer bad ones. But at the same time he could not shake the feeling that he could not wholly trust Heather’s words, that she would not try to hide any difficulties which they still had. There was something too proud in her, for that.

He caught a peel of laughter which was definitely hers, though, and as it died away he brought himself to knock firmly on the door. Heather said something, surprise in her tone even through the
door, then he heard a soft thud and silence before the door was opened to him.

Heather was smiling. That was the first thing that he noticed clearly, then the warmth and the smell of good food in the room. She had a wooden flute in her hand where it leaned against the doorframe, her hair damp and loose over her shoulders, and even through the surprise her smile did not waver.

“Hiccup! I… didn’t expect you!”

“Some folks make calls on Snoggletog,” he said. “Some just wait until the evening, when everyone will be at the Great Hall.” He wasn’t sure whether it answered her question, whether she simply had not known that Berkians might visit each other during the day on Snoggletog or whether she had simply not expected visitors. “Anyway, I had something to give you.”

Not stuffed down the back of his trousers like Snotlout had opted for, but rolled up and tied onto his belt, instead. He slipped the knot free one-handed, and offered up the roll of parchment to Heather.

She cocked her head, probably exaggerating the raised of her eyebrow, put held open the door with her foot and tucked the flute under her armpit so that she could take it with one hand and slip off the leather band with the other.

“Is that the – chief boy?” said Eirik, voice slightly muffled.

“Yes, it’s Hiccup,” Heather called back over her shoulder. Hiccup had the faint, absurd thought that he would have preferred ‘dragon boy’, as much of Berk seemed to tend towards, but supposed that to Eirik there were any number of them who came with dragons. It was never worth taking offence at a choice of words from those from whom words had a tendency to slip away, anyhow.

“Bring him in, bring him in,” Eirik said.

Heather glanced up at Hiccup in lieu of a question, and he gave a willing shrug. A look to the side told him that Toothless did not seem to be interested in following, and as Heather held the door open he stepped inside and let the warmth of the room fold around him.

It was only as Heather closed the door behind him that he got a proper look at what she was wearing. The long-sleeved shirt was just a shade darker than her eyes, and new, markedly so compared to the patched and worn clothes that he had become used to seeing her in. He glanced over the rest of her clothes to see that she was wearing dark grey leggings and a simple, black skirt, new as well, unadorned but clearly well-made.

As quick as he had tried to make his glance, it apparently wasn’t quick enough. Heather caught his eye pointedly. “Apparently Snoggletog clothes are a thing, on Berk,” she said.

“Oh… yeah.” He had told Elsa about it last year, and Anna this; anybody could have told Heather the same. “You’ll probably see a bunch of new clothes at the Great Hall tonight, if you’re coming.”

“Oh, I am not going to miss that.” There was a hidden joke in Heather’s voice which almost concerned him, but the glance that she exchanged with her father was oddly reassuring. It was difficult to believe there was anything too sinister about some inside joke she was sharing with Eirik. “But it’s good to know that Elsa wasn’t making up excuses to foist clothing on me.”

Elsa? Hiccup’s brain went blank, for a split second, then all of nonsensical things he found himself thinking about the unblemished snow outside, the lack of footsteps, and how Elsa must have simply walked over the snow rather than through it. He blinked at Heather, told himself to take
what good news he could, and smiled. “Elsa does not tend to go for making up excuses.”

“I didn’t think as much.” Heather glanced down at herself, smile going from impish to warm. “It’s sweet of her. She said that the food was because nobody in your house knows how to do portions, but…”

“Oh, no, Gobber definitely cooks for a dragon or two at a time. And my father would not thank me for saying that.” The words came glibly. He had no doubt that Elsa would have checked with Gobber before taking food, especially as much as she would consider two reasonable portions.

Heather laughed. “Well, I’d managed some cooking, but… we appreciated it.” Just a hint of brittleness, at the edge of her smile. “And she said that the clothes are more a tradition, but the food was definitely a present. I’ll figure out something in return this evening.”

“Oh, it doesn’t… have to be like that,” said Hiccup, quickly, not just because the parchment she still held in her hand was not a present he expected something in return for. Elsa, he knew, would not want Heather to feel like there was something owed.

However, Heather’s response was to waggle the parchment in her hand. “If that’s about this, then don’t worry. I’ve already got yours ready to hand over this evening.” She finally set about unrolling it.

“I’m not sure whether that should alarm me or not…”

“Is this…” Heather cocked her head as she looked over the plans which he had carefully drawn out. “Is this the idea we were talking about? For making the glass vertically, so it doesn’t cool on a surface?”

“Well, yes.” Hiccup rubbed his cheek with his knuckles. “I figure now that we’ve got more Gronckles, it would be more possible to get a real reservoir of molten glass built up all at once. Then if we can get together a nice clean system to release the glass in a line, all at the same time, and drop it down into air that hasn’t been superheated by the Gronckle fire…”

“You think you could insulate? Have a solid floor between the two?”

Hiccup shrugged. “If we can build houses to keep the heat in, we should be able to come up with a ceiling that can keep it out. I mean, I know this isn’t exactly a traditional Snoggletog present, since it’s still going to be more work for both of us – and probably for Fishlegs, since he’s the best with Gronckles and will be best to get them to eat what we need them to.”

“I’ll think of it as a practical gift. Thank you.” She rolled the parchment back up again, put the leather tie back in place, and held on to it very firmly. “It’s just what I need for my deal with Phlegma, as well. The glass.”

“You finally got the chance to speak to her?” For over a moon, Heather had been saying that she would, but it had always seemed that there was some excuse, some reason that she was busy or that Phlegma was not around. Heather nodded, and Hiccup let himself grin. “That’s great! Honestly, Berk soil can be pretty temperamental, never mind the weather, but Phlegma is great. If she says they’ll grow under glass,” he pointed to the plans in her hands, “then they’ll grow under glass.”

“Yeah. If we can just get that sorted by spring, then I think we’re in a good place.”

“We are in a good place,” he said, trying to make it sound reassuring rather than correcting. It had been a rather mixed bag, so far. From the comfortable way that Heather spoke, he could only assume that she had spoken with her father about her decision to plant and grow the Moonless
Night seeds, and hoped that Eirik saw it a sign of settling down, rather than of giving up. “So, you’re coming to the Great Hall this evening?”

“Wouldn’t miss it for the nine worlds,” said Heather.

Eirik chuckled. “I’m looking forward to seeing how Berk celebrates.”

“Probably not as impressively as some islands.”

“Even with the dragons?” Heather teased.

That, well. That, he probably had to give her.
Chapter 32

Chapter Summary

What do you get if you cross workplace harassment with rampant misgendering? A pretty apocalyptic writer's block, apparently. I can't apologise enough to the people whom I have left hanging for the last, uh, let's just go with while. I'm gonna do my best to get back on schedule in the next couple of months.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The day grew easier. Hiccup would not be so foolish as to say that it could not get worse, as that would be just asking the gods to find some way to give him a bigger headache, but he would allow himself some relief, at least. By the time that he returned home, Anna seemed to be acting as translator between Elsa and Kai, while Kai looked awed to see the long-lost princess again and Elsa looked more than a little confused by the matter. Although it had been clear that Kai remembered her, Hiccup doubted that Kai had been among the few fragments of her early years to which Elsa had held on.

All the same, she was politely answering his questions, and Hiccup was about to head upstairs when he caught sight of his father, in the back bedroom. Stoick looked up, caught his eye, and gestured for him to come through as well.

Sighing, he joined his father, only to find Gobber there as well. Both of them looked thoughtful.

"Everything all right?"

Stoick nodded, but wearily. "Aye, but we will need to find somewhere for Kai to stay. With someone who speaks at least some Arendellen, at that."

"I've spoken to Anna and Elsa about having their own house before," said Hiccup, with a scrunch of his nose, "but neither of them thought it was a good idea." Well, it was more complicated than that, but that was all that his father or Gobber needed to know.

"Almost a pity," Gobber said.

"Neither of them would know how to run a house," Hiccup added. It was a reasonable excuse, and Gobber nodded and shrugged.

Stoick, though, huffed through his beard. "Maybe, but Kai certainly would. He ran a house far larger than three people in Arendelle, after all."

Before the idea could take root too firmly, Hiccup raised his hands. Elsa had not wanted their own house, and Anna had made it clear that she would also have said no to the offer. Kai spoke no Northur, Anna had collected the Snoggletog presents that she had given, and only Elsa showed signs of knowing how to trade in a Berkian manner. "They've made it clear they don't want one. But – Gobber, I know you know something from the forge – Dad, have you heard from Brynhild?"
“About leaving?” said Stoick, bluntly. Hiccup nodded. “Not in as many words, but I know where paths like this lead.”

“I spoke with Snotlout. We said… I think he might move out on his own, with just Hookfang.”

“Just because Spitelout knows Arendellen doesn’t mean I’d punish Kai with him,” muttered Gobber.

Stoick, who had more chiefly tact than to say things like that, nonetheless did not pretend that it had not been said at all. He simply sighed. “Brynnhild knows far less, and I don’t think she would want to take in a stranger either.”

Well, that left only one place even approaching a good option. “Snotlout knows some Arendellen,” said Hiccup. He could feel Stoick’s unconvinced look before he even looked round. “I know that Spitelout ensured that he spoke it.”

Back when Spitelout had fancied that Snotlout would make a better heir than Hiccup. Snotlout had not exactly had a talent for it, and would be rusty at best by now, but he had shown off when they were children with the mere fact that he knew any of it at all. Going to Arendelle, and needing more than numbers and a few nouns, was a point of pride in and of itself.

“You are suggesting,” said Stoick, slowly, “that we put the former butler of the late King of Arendelle in the same house as… Snotlout.”

“Yeah. I think I am.”

Hopefully he could at least get a normal afternoon out of this day, that was all he could say now.

In a way, at least the day got easier. Leftover yak for lunch, while Stoick explained to Kai what Snoggletog was and Hiccup or Anna passed pertinent sentences in Elsa’s direction, was better than pre-breakfast surprise appearances. Anna changed into her new Snoggletog clothes and presented them with a twirl of delight, then sat on the floor for Elsa to redo her hair in careful, delicate braids that they discussed their way through.

Hiccup warmed water by the fire to wash, then retreated upstairs with it to actually do so, scrubbing down his face and arms and the sweaty small of his back before scrubbing his hair clean and running thin oil through it as he dried it off. It was marginally less unruly if he managed to comb it before it dried fully, and it was unlikely that anybody would be paying much attention in the Great Hall that night either. Not when there was gossiping to be done, mead to be drunk, and dances to be mutilated. Interest was only likely to turn in his direction when someone inevitably attempted to drag him into the dancing as well.

Hiccup dredged up the one book in the house – possibly the only book in Berk – in Arendellen, and he and his father took Kai round to Phlegma’s to introduce them. Since Melana had moved out with her wife during the summer, Phlegma had a spare bedroom, and Kai seemed more than a little
relieved to be offered a quite place for the evening away from the party due in the Great Hall. Phlegma’s Arendellen was rough and rusty, but she made herself understood well enough, and welcomed Kai inside in a businesslike manner.

The previous year, Elsa had been treated to the whole Snoggletog experience, waiting for sunset and the sound of the horn. This time, however, Anna declared that she had a final piece of decoration which simply had to go up before too many people arrived, and with a shrug Stoick conceded. Anna hurried to her room, and bounded out with an armful of some sort of plant that Hiccup could not, at first, identify.

“What is that?” said Stoick, smile faltering.

“Mistletoe!” said Anna, as if that explained anything. She had asked Hiccup for the word some days previously, without explaining why, but since it was one of the few plants still green he had not thought it overly strange. She hefted it into one arm, nearly dropping a bit, and managed to pick out a small piece to dangle in the air. “It’s old, I guess, in Arendelle… it was something I learned from the servants again… you hang it in the air, and when people meet under it, they kiss.” She twirled the little sprig between her fingers. “And take a berry off for each kiss.”

“They know it’s poisonous, in Arendelle, right?” said Gobber, raising an eyebrow. “Gothi uses it for a couple of things, I think, but she knows how to prepare it.”

“You don’t eat it!” Anna protested. “Just kiss under it!”

Gobber looked round to Stoick. “Well, I see the chance to get some laughs out of it, at least.”

Stoick considered a moment longer, then nodded. “All right, then. But not where children could reach it. I’ll not have that happening tonight.”

At least Anna beamed.

She managed to keep most of the mistletoe in her arms all of the way up to the Great Hall, although a few stray sprigs flicked loose and Elsa collected them up again. There were already people there, rolling barrels into place and deciding on the positions of tables under Phlegma’s direction. She raised a hand in greeting to Stoick, and with a pat to Hiccup’s shoulder he slipped away to join her.

Anna’s arms tightened around her bundle of mistletoe. “This seems… pretty quiet,” she said.

There were maybe thirty people altogether, including a cluster of children in one corner playing what Hiccup rather suspected was a game of Dragon Master. Over the course of the moons, it had shifted from holding a hand up to people to smacking one’s palm into their face, which was significantly more Viking-like but which he hoped was not going to be replicated on real dragons.

“It’ll get busier after sunset,” said Hiccup. “But you can find a good spot to people-watch by then. And the rest of the riders will be here.”

He carefully included her in the term. She was more a rider than Wartihog, or Speedifist, or Clueless, he had to say that much. She rode more regularly than them, and had dragons which he would call hers, even if they were Terrors rather than anything big enough to ride. It was not quite the same, but she was close, and he knew that was important to her still.

Gobber clapped Anna on the shoulder, enough to make her jump and for a few more pieces of mistletoe to fall away. “Want a hand putting those up, lass?” he said, pointing to them with his hook. It had been years ago that Stoick had stopped him from wearing his tankard to the Great Hall, and Gobber had blithely agreed to make his right hand his drinking hand instead.
Blinking, Anna looked at Gobber for a few seconds before it seemed to sink in, and confusion turned to shock. “You… really?”

“Aye, it’s not like anyone’s going to be leaving ladders around here for people to make drunken fools of themselves on. And if there’s one person who knows where the nails are in here, who do you expect it to be?”

“Nightmane Holsen,” pointed out Hiccup.

Gobber pointed a warning hook at him, but was barely suppressing his smile. “Careful, you.”

“Favourite apprentice status didn’t last long, did it?”

To that, Gobber simply scoffed, and put his good arm around Anna’s shoulders to lead her away. Hiccup smiled as he watched them go, just catching Gobber asking about the tradition, and turned to Elsa with a huff.

“Shall we find a safe seat away from when the hordes arrive?” he said.

Elsa tucked her hair behind her ear, and smiled. “Away from the dancing?”

“Sounds like an excellent idea to me.” Most of the benches and chairs that had been put out were rather too close to the probable dancing area for his taste, and instead he headed over for some of the crates that had been piled up in one of the corners, picking up two mugs of ale along the way. “Here. Something in your hands will stop people from trying to give you other drinks.”

“You are learning, then, from the poteen,” said Elsa mildly.

Hiccup groaned. “Who even told you about that?”

“You did. The same night.”

To be fair, the events of the evening were fuzzy at best after he had stood up from the table, and pretty much faded away after his father had escorted him out of the Great Hall. “Well, the moral of that is to ask what is in drinks rather than just accept whatever anyone gives you,” he said, hoping that it passed for dignified.

Instead, Elsa chuckled. “You said that, that night, as well.”

At least he would not be the newest member of stump club by the following Stump Day, even if there was likely to be less fun found in teasing Snotlout than there had been in teasing him. Hiccup scooted to sit on the first of the crates, then ducked a wing as Toothless climbed up onto one of the high levels. Elsa opted to sit beside him instead, which was not surprising but still managed to feel like a relief.

“Well, Gobber had stopped me by that point anyway. And the rest of them from trying to give me drinks, for that matter.” He had a faint memory of asking why he was being given water, but forgetting to wait for an answer. And it was, to be fair, an important lesson for him to learn. At least they had all been well-intentioned. “This year, I am going to try to stay out of the Pegleg Polka.”

“And do you think you will succeed?” said Elsa.

He pulled a face. With her, at least, he could be honest. “Probably not, but I figure I might have a chance if I manage to start walking around the Hall right before it starts up. Just make myself
harder to find."

“You will have to leave Toothless behind for that.”

True, the swathe being cut through people tended to be rather a giveaway. “Maybe you can watch him for me. Get you out of the dancing as well.”

This time, Elsa’s laugh as more self-deprecating, as she wrapped both hands around the cup. She was only wearing the black dress this time, without the teal apron, and he almost went to ask but was not sure whether he ought to. Clothes meant more, to her and Anna, that was clear. “It may be for the best. Astrid told me what they were dancing was simple, but…”

“It’s simple when you’ve been brought up on it,” he finished. Elsa nodded. “And when you happen to be so good a fighter than positioning your feet comes naturally, of course.” Her look was knowing, and he felt heat crawling up his cheeks. But it was true; Astrid’s footwork outshone them all. “What? It must make dancing easier.”

“I suppose so,” Elsa relented. She ran her fingertip around the edge of the mug – wooden, the better to actually be usable the next day, never mind the next Snoggletog. “Although it is probably easier when the people you are following are all doing the same thing, as well.”

“That is certainly true,” said Hiccup, with a laugh, thinking of the Pegleg Polka and its strange rules. “Hey, maybe you could learn one of the instruments,” he added, nudging her in the side and pointing up to the top dais where large drums and a couple of horns had already been placed. Yakskin drums, mercifully, or it might have spoiled the warmth in his chest. “Can’t get dragged down to dance when you’re the one making the music.”

He was surprised to hear Elsa all but scoff. “I think that would be a bit much.”

“Why?” Hiccup softened his voice, and waited for Elsa to pull her eyes away from the instruments and look at him again. He shrugged. “It’s just… another thing to learn. You learned Northur, you learned archery, you learned dragon-riding…”

Her nails scratched lightly against the wood; he heard it, but forced himself not to look down. “When I was young, there was… I think…”

She looked down, half shaking her head, and breathed out slowly. Hiccup brought up his hand to rub her shoulder, glad to find that it was still warm to the touch, and cocked his head. “I think I played something. Once. I remember the strings on my fingers.” Elsa huffed, not quite a laugh. “I am not sure. There are still little bits, sometimes.”

And there was no purple stone to bring everything back. Elsa had put aside her memories, not had them taken from her, and there was nothing that Hiccup or anyone else could do to help her with them. Well, unless she made it to being able to speak to Anna about those days, but things were still so tense that it was not something he would suggest right now.

Or something to bring up on Snoggletog. “You could try something different,” he said, instead. “The wood or the bone flutes. They’re practically…” he tugged at the whistle, still on his belt, “this. But actually audible to humans, not just meant to confuse dragons.”

“Perhaps. When this is over,” she said, and did not have to say anything more.

“By next Snoggletog, it will be,” Hiccup replied. It came out more confident than he either felt or expected, and he was rather surprised with himself, but at least it made Elsa smile. “Now, which
dragon did you borrow to get to that sea buckthorn? And where in Frigg’s name was it?”

She laughed, though he suspected that it was at the transparently abrupt change of topic rather than anything which he had actually said. “Bashful,” she said. “I thought that a Gronckle would be best. And I can show you, if you wish, but it is a…” she made a gesture in her hands which was probably a shelf on a cliff-face. “A place, west of Berk, on the shore.”

“You notice plants,” said Hiccup, simply.

A shrug. “It helps.”

“Well, those trees are going to get you in good with Holsen, at any rate. You really good with those blueprints?” He had not dared ask at the table and in front of Gobber, but number-heavy or not there were still words involved.

Elsa nodded, shifting in place and ending up with her shoulder closer to Hiccup’s than before. She looked out over the crowd. “The numbers, I will change them to southern ones. Probably check with Heather.” There was definite pink in her cheeks. “Numbers make more sense. And single words are easier than whole sentences. Heather showed me some sheets her parents had, about,” she set down her mug to make angles with her hands. “How when something is this tall, it will make such an angle, and the piece to it from the ground will need to be such a length.”

“We do that by eye when we’re blacksmithing,” Hiccup admitted. “But yeah, I know that Holsen can do numbers in his head.” Most of them could do a little, counting and dividing numbers, but Holsen could juggle them about in strange ways, figuring out what sizes and weights of trees that he needed in a way that was almost uncanny. It was one of the reasons that he had come to be the first one that people turned to when their houses needed work, although from what Gobber had said Holsen had also honed the skill with time.

“The southern numbers are nice for that,” said Elsa, almost eagerly as she scooped up her mug again. Neither of them had even drunk from them, but at least the wood was warm and comfortable to the touch.

Hiccup flapped a hand. “It’s all… multiplying. Not adding. Strange way to do things.” But he was still smiling, and kept his voice light. It was good to see Elsa enthusiastic about something, especially something that seemed so random. It was not dragons, it was not magic, it was not her knowledge of the Wildlands. It was nothing at all to her, simply a skill that she had found, and he hoped that she settled into it. At least that, unlike her climbing abilities, could not be damaged by a crossbow bolt. “But if it makes sense to you, then keep going with it.”

Elsa opened her mouth to continue speaking, only for Tuffnut to appear seemingly out of nowhere and fling himself onto the crates beside them. His landing was probably not made easier by the fact that his second hand was clamped over the lid of his mug.

“Hey, H,” he said, squirming upright and peering into his mug. He grinned, and shook off his left hand. “Laid claim to the corner, eh?”

“H?” said Hiccup.

“Yeah. Like, it’s a shortened version of your name,” said Tuffnut, so earnestly that Hiccup wondered for a moment whether he was drunk already. But no, drunken Tuffnut tended to be louder in his grandiosity. “Come on, man, you call me Tuff all the time.”

“Not… all the time,” Hiccup said, but he could already feel himself losing the fight. He gave up,
and took a gulp of his ale. “I’ll try to remember that means me.”

“Oh, don’t worry.” Tuffnut grinned, and pointed at him. “We’ll teach you.”

Ruffnut sauntered over to join them, a mug in each hand, and Hiccup wished that he had saved the gulp. Ruffnut was wearing a clinging green dress, with some sort of leather strips in layers around her hips and a deep slit down the front that was only haphazardly done up. Even less subtle was the long, dangling necklace of green glass and silver beads which Hiccup found his eyes following until he realised where it ended up.

“Happy Snoggletog,” he said, fixing his eyes firmly on her face. Her smirk told him that he had not gotten away with even the briefest moment of looking elsewhere.

“Happy Snoggletog. Has Tuff given you our present yet?”

Nervousness shot through him, and he looked at Tuffnut while trying to hide the absolute fear of the unknown that was striking him.

“He said he’d try to remember it,” said Tuffnut, then set about licking his palm clean.

To remember – oh. That probably meant the nickname. That, at least, he could handle. Hiccup carefully kept a straight face, and his gaze just above Ruffnut’s eyebrows. “I deeply appreciate it.”

As the confusion was passing, he supposed that he did, a warmth in his stomach vaguely reminiscent of that which usually came from the mead instead. The closest he had come to a nickname before had been ‘Hiccup the Useless’, and that had been… well. A very different thing. It was nice to think that he had people who would give him nicknames, now.

Even if he did suspect that he was going to forget about it on a regular basis.

Ruffnut clicked her tongue and pointed at him. Carefully, from around the mugs, but still. “You’re welcome.” Hiccup had not even managed to figure out whether she wanted a reply before she set to work downing the first of the mugs, and he instead glanced over to Elsa.

The mischievous curve of her smile was the only warning which he received. “Ruffnut, you should ask Anna about what she has brought to the Great Hall tonight,” said Elsa. Ruffnut surfaced, one eyebrow lifting in intrigue. Elsa took a sip from her own cup, although Hiccup doubted she was drinking much at all. “I’m sure she would be glad if you helped her spread the news.”

“Say no more!”

Ruffnut turned on her heel and headed straight into the middle of the hall again; it was only as Hiccup raised his eyes to follow her that he realised that numbers were really starting to gather. He looked around as Tuffnut groaned dramatically, spreading his arms and looking at the retreating back of his twin.

“So early in the evening?”

“It’s probably best if you stay out of the way of this one,” said Hiccup, and wondered when he had become the one advising against foolish things. “How’re the new Zipplebacks doing?”

It was, of course, like a magic all of its own. Tuffnut launched into the explanations of the names he had given the new Zipplebacks, names which Hiccup suspected would change three times before the moon was out, and how he had been trying Barf and Belch’s old saddles on their necks to see how they reacted. Somewhere along the line, it segued into an explanation of how difficult it
was to put a dragon saddle on a boar, and Hiccup almost felt like he should intervene but was not even sure of how to do so.

The most that he managed to get out of it was that the boar had been named Björn, which was probably the least of his worries, by the time that the horn started blaring to announce that the sun had finally set.

People started filling the Hall faster, then, and Tuffnut eventually left them to their crates to go in search of Ruffnut despite Hiccup’s recommendations to the contrary. Finally giving up as Tuffnut disappeared between vikings both taller and broader than him, Hiccup sighed and shook his head.

“Did you have to tell Ruffnut about the mistletoe?”

“She would have found out before too long,” said Elsa, in far too reasonable a voice. Because she was right, of course, Ruffnut had a nose for gossip and would certainly have discovered the mistletoe before she was even drunk enough to be distracted from it. “This way, she might be able to give Anna suggestions for where to put it.”

“Oh, gods.” His voice half-cracked, a laugh threatening to break through, at the thought of where Ruffnut would come up with. “Just… if she puts it in the privvies, we disavow all knowledge, all right? They can do that on their own.”

Elsa did not bother restraining herself from giggling. He considered teasing her further, the words ‘unholy wildling charms’ lurking on his tongue, when she sat up straighter and gestured towards them.

Hiccup looked round, half-wildly, but it was not hard to know in an instant who she meant. Astrid was approaching them, balancing three mugs while Heather walked beside her, Eirik holding onto her shoulder but seeming to walk securely enough. Heather was still laughing, head tilted back, at whatever Astrid must have said, but Astrid acknowledged Elsa with a slight raise of the drinks in her hands, then caught Hiccup’s eye and smiled.

It was… reassuring. Even just a smile reminded him of everything that she had said, the promises of a better future which he could trust in, as long as she trusted too. Her hair was only mostly loose this year, the uppermost parts twisted back off her face, but it still brushed over her shoulders as she set down the mugs beside Hiccup and he shuffled sideways in case she wanted to join them. Her dress was different than the previous year, cream sleeves and shoulders, but he thought that from the… armpits down it was the same colour, probably the same fabric, pinned at her chest and with a lower-slung belt on her waist.

“I’ll find a proper chair,” said Astrid, to Heather and Eirik.

“You’d think the chief’s son would be able to find one,” said Heather, with a toss of her hair and a glance up at Hiccup.

He shrugged. “I like crates. They’re taller, and less likely to wobble.”

“I’ll find one that doesn’t wobble,” Astrid added, with a pointed look, and Heather laughed while Eirik thanked her, more softly.

“You know, I would almost think that I had chosen a bad corner, with the way that people are coming and going this evening,” said Hiccup. He crossed his ankle over his metal foot and shook his head.

Eirik carefully released Heather’s arm, though her smile faltered for just an instant as he did so, and
leaned against the crate beside instead. “Or a good one, for people to want to visit,” he said. His words were a little slow, a little careful, but still better than before. A particularly good day, Hiccup suspected, and was glad that it had fallen on Snoggletog.

“I’d take that explanation,” said Heather, grabbing a mug. She was wearing the new clothes that he had seen her in earlier, hair in its usual braid, but something of the fragile edge had come off her. “How many have come and gone?”

“Well, admittedly mostly Ruffnut and Tuffnut, but believe me when I say they are making an impression this evening…”

Ruffnut was, at least, but Heather was bound to notice that herself and he did not intend to spell it out any more clearly in front of her father. However, Heather looked over at Elsa and gave a smile that was almost wicked, and Hiccup whipped round to see Elsa looking down at her lap, blushing, but with a smile on her face. She looked up again, eyes glittering, then reached to tuck a tiny curl of hair back behind her ear.

“Is this the trick that you’ve been practicing?” said Eirik. Heather gave an exaggerated sigh, dropping her hip and giving her father a look that was almost frustrated, but too fond. “I did not say what it is,” he added, more careful. Less planned, perhaps, if Hiccup had to guess.

That, though, was hardly the most pressing matter. He put down his cup so that he could cross his arms and try to look anything like stern as he looked between the two of them. “Trick?” he echoed.

“Anna should be here,” said Elsa, immediately. She was still quite endearingly pink-cheeked, though, as her left hand smoothed her skirt over her legs. “To see. She… started this.”

Right. Probably something to do with her magic, then, considering Anna had been the one to encourage her to make dice and spheres and little shapes. Even if she now practised by herself, far larger and more complex structures, more novel uses, Hiccup was glad to know that she still traced it back to Anna’s excitement and hope.

“I should make a whistle for the riders, never mind the dragons…” said Hiccup.

Heather pointed upwards, which only had Hiccup frowning at her for a second before looking upwards, at more crates – and, right, yes, Toothless. That would be what she meant. Hardly a whistle, but he supposed that if anything was going to get the riders together it would be a dragon’s call.

“Go on, then, Toothless,” said Hiccup. He was not quite surprised when all the response that he got was the cracking open of an eye and the twitch of a tail. “Hey. Come on, bud.”

This time, the flick of Toothless’s tail felt a little bit mocking. Considering the tail was the only part of Toothless in reach, Hiccup reached over, took hold of the tip, and gave it a waggle.

“Bud. Not time for that yet. I’m sure folks will be giving you food before the night is out.” After enough bones, bread and dripping, it would be far more justifiable for him to want to curl up and digest his spoils, but nobody had started the game of throwing boar trotters to the dragons just yet. “Come on. Call them over.”

With a grumble, Toothless lifted up his head from his front legs, smacked his lips, then barked into the air. There were some gasps, people looking round, but as Hiccup glanced around the crowd he was actually glad to see that there was much less of a flutter than there would have been even last Snoggletog.
It was Astrid who reappeared first, having managed to find a chair lightweight enough to carry but which still looked sturdy. “You didn’t have to be *that* dramatic to get me to come back,” she said, putting the chair down beside Eirik. He patted the arm, a flicker of regret crossing his face before he settled down into it. “What, did you think I’d gone home to get one?”

“Well, I was mostly trying to get Anna’s attention, but since I haven’t managed to train humans to respond to whistles like the dragons do, I figured a dragon himself was the next best thing.”

She paused, then shrugged. It made the hair move on her shoulders like gold, and Hiccup had a moment of wishing that he could think of any way of saying it without it sounding absurd. “I’ve heard worse logic.”

“Hiccup! Is everything all right?” Fishlegs burst through to them, eyes wide, and Hiccup hastily raised his hands. “Toothless—”

“Sorry – sorry, Fishlegs! I was just trying to get Anna back. Well, get the riders around,” he said. As soon as the words left his lips, he realised that he should have checked with Elsa exactly how many people this trick was meant to be performed in front of, but a glance over saw that she was still smiling. Slightly nervous, but smiling all the same. “Uh, Merry Snoggletog, Fishlegs.”

Anna emerged not much later, looking slightly ashamed for no reason that Hiccup could see until he realised that Ruffnut had apparently managed to claim some of the mistletoe and hook it into the laces of her shirt so that it dangled in the middle of her chest.

For lack of a better response, Hiccup took another drink. Perhaps he should consider taking up a flute or something similar, just so that he would have an excuse to not be able to talk. Not to talk and not to dance; it was sounding better and better by the second, come to think of it.

Tuffnut reappeared not long afterwards, having accumulated a chicken leg somewhere along the way, and Snotlout shuffled up still scowling and looking like there were a dozen places he would rather be than here.

“What is this?” said Snotlout, perhaps predictably. “Some sort of last-minute rider meeting?”

Hiccup tried to communicate, in the look that he gave Elsa, that he would still turn the conversation away and allow her to bow out gracefully. There was none of the look of panic that would need him to immediately drag everyone’s attention away, though, and as a moment became a couple of seconds, Elsa smiling shyly up at him.

It was Heather who firmly put down her mug, stepped forwards, and extended a hand to Elsa. Elsa accepted it with her right hand, which would not have been strange for anyone else but which made Hiccup cock his head, and Heather led her into the centre of what had become a small circle around them.

Watching closely, he could see their gazes lock, the minute nod that Elsa gave.

Heather raised their joined hands and let Elsa twirl. For a split second, Hiccup wondered if that was it, if Elsa had in fact learned some semblance of dancing and this was their reveal of it. But then Fishlegs squealed in delight, and Hiccup realised what he had seen: light sparkling into being on the hem of Elsa’s dress, spreading round, then streaking up the fabric of her skirt like bare tree branches against a winter sky. The same light appeared around her wrists and spread along her sleeves, but this time it was like the very bark itself of trees, patterning and glittering against the plain black.
It was Eirik who clapped first, the sound a little hollow from the shape of his hands, but Hiccup hurriedly joined him and before long not only the riders but several other Berkians who could see were also applauding.

Elsa stumbled out of her twirl, almost tripping, laughing as Heather caught her by the shoulders. She stepped back, looking over to Hiccup for a moment, but then turned and stepped over to Anna. Anna’s hands faltered in their own applause, and Elsa reached in and took them as the clapping died down again.

“All right, that?” said Tuffnut, because it had quite become quiet again. “Was cool. Eh?” He looked across to Ruffnut, but it might have been too early as she did not respond.

Elsa held firmly to Anna’s hands, even as Anna looked uncertain for a moment again. “It was your belief that started this,” said Elsa, words more bald than Hiccup would have expected in front of others. But then again, he did not even know whether this was impulsive on Elsa’s part, or whether she had planned this in the same way that she had clearly planned, with Heather, to show her control of her powers in such a way. “I want you to know. You made this possible.”

Without giving Anna the chance to really reply, she hugged her, apparently a little too tightly to judge by Anna’s squeak. But then Anna hugged her back, and only then did Elsa let her go, stepping back far enough to let Anna look over her dress with clear admiration in her features.

For it was stunning. Simple, true, the bodice still bare, but the ice glittered as if it had all been embroidered with silver thread or studded with tiny jewels or something equally absurd, looking all the more dramatic against the black and with Elsa’s hair done up. She was wearing the simple, very flat boots that she preferred, leaving her shorter even than Anna, never mind the Berkians around them, a scrap of magic among their sea of brawn. But even so, the way she held herself made her look less like she did not belong, and for that, for that at least, Hiccup was glad.

Chapter End Notes

aka Hiccup tries to set up a weird roommates sitcom, Anna introduces mistletoe to Berk and is going to regret it, and I wrote a scene which had me saying to my writing friends "what makes for a slutty viking?". Ruffnut is going to try to define the look, I think.

In the medieval period, at least in Britain, long multiplication was so rare that it was considered a form of street theatre to watch people multiply large numbers in their heads. Much of Britain was still sort of struggling with the concept of zero at the time, so long multiplication seemed a bit witchcrafty. Sines and cosines, to which Elsa makes a vague reference, started being studied in Babylon and Ancient Egypt, and the knowledge sort of travelled from empire to empire over the years. But it wasn't until the late Medieval period and the early Renaissance that it started getting towards northern Europe, so their mention is something of an anachronism. (But really, are folks in HTTYD for historical accuracy?!)
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

Well, I hope at the very least this round of poetry is better than Tuffnut's.

They sat. They drank. Tuffnut expounded on his plans to write an epic poem about his meeting with the boar, now apparently called Bjorn, while Heather barely restrained her amusement and Eirik looked on in polite puzzlement. Twice, Ruffnut rolled her eyes, before finally downing her drink and making an exit, waggling the mug in a way that, at a guess, meant she was going in search of a replacement.

Hiccup took the opportunity to interrupt when it looked like Snotlout was on the verge of knocking Tuffnut to the floor, talking at first about new pages for the Book of Dragons then, as even Astrid shook her head, changing tack to telling Eirik about the songs and dances which he could expect to witness before the night was through. Eirik sat forwards in his chair, looking interested, even when Tuffnut insisted on demonstrating a few of the steps himself.

Astrid dodged his attempt to use her as a partner but, apparently undeterred, he simply grabbed Fishlegs instead. Which worked for about three steps, until they headbutted each other.

Tuffnut groaned dramatically. “Fine! You lead!”

At least, Hiccup supposed, it was keeping him out of the dancing ring. And Elsa, who had returned to the crate next to him in her now-glittering dress, Heather leaning against the wood on her other side. Heather’s other hand was on the back of Eirik’s chair, though, and her smile would occasionally falter as she glanced down towards him.

Fishlegs did better at leading than at following, apparently, although it broke down into an argument between them again when the music changed but Tuffnut failed to alter the tempo appropriately. Or something. Hiccup was not totally listening by that point, having reached the bottom of his drink and wondering whether it was worth getting another one and risking enforced dances.

It was Gobber who found them, mistletoe and holly both wrapped around his antlered helmet, mug smelling of a suspiciously strong drink. He ruffled Hiccup’s hair, and laughed at the spluttered protest.

“Come on,” he said. “Yer father’s giving a speech, figures the riders had better be in line of sight for it.”

Better than being hidden at the back of the hall, he supposed, but Hiccup hoped that not too much of the speech was going to mention him. He went to finish his drink, remembered it was already empty, and with a deep breath dropped to the ground instead.

“All right, gang, guess we’d better make a decent show of it,” he said. “Uh, does anyone know where Ruffnut went?”

“I have a couple of ideas,” said Astrid. “I’ll meet you up there.”
Elsa hesitated in slipping to the ground as well, even when Hiccup extended his hand to her. She looked down at her dress, the patterns of the branches picked out in ice. “Should I... remove it?” she said, eyes searching his.

In truth, he was not sure. He might have trusted himself to make a call at the beginning of the mug, but not so much from the bottom of it. A bigger problem, though, was just how little he could imagine needing to hide something so beautiful, made with such skill and delicacy. “Um...” he said, intelligently.

“You’ll be fine, lass,” said Gobber, who among his other talents certainly did have the reading of a room. “Those folks that might mind will be drunk enough by now they won’t remember tomorrow, and there’s few enough of them anyhow. Plenty more’d think it pretty.”

He took hold of Elsa’s hand, for want of a better thing to add, as she slipped down beside him. “Let’s go for the backs of the table,” he suggested. “Get some protection between us and the ravening horde.”

“Oh, I suspect the yak is long gone by now. First victim of the evening.”

Hiccup was intending to pick his way around the edge of the Great Hall, even as Gobber turned and waded straight through the middle. There was more than one clang, and at least a little swearing.

“Yeah, I think I’ll give that route a miss.”

The edge of the hall was easier, even if there were stray stools and lost mugs along the way. Even the two, completely separate, boots were not all that much of an impediment.

His father was standing on the dais at the top of the Hall, talking with Phlegma, who had let her long hair loose for the occasion and was, at least, smiling. Spitelout was hanging back from them, leaning against one of the tapestry-hung pillars and scowling. Hiccup felt sorry for whoever had been minding him the rest of the evening.

Most of the tables already had people, both at them sitting and milling around them, and Hiccup suspected that the empty one right next to his father had been kept that way for a reason. No way to escape it. He felt Elsa slip her hand out of his as they approached, and to save anyone else from it he took the top chair at the table.

“Ah.” Stoick approached and clapped Hiccup on the shoulder, almost hard enough to knock him into the table. “Nice of you to join us. I figured this year, folks would need... a little more said.”

Last year had been a giddy sort of celebration, three months of peace with the dragons a sudden and incredible rush. Even the rising threat of Alvin, and the tensions within the village itself, had not managed to dampen it; the new tensions had only replaced older ones, after all, and at the time it had seemed that Alvin had been easily dispatched. But the year since...

The year since.

Hiccup just nodded, and lowered a hand behind him until he felt Toothless nudge against it. Elsa sat down beside him, and Fishlegs was the next to join them. Snotlout flopped down at the far end of the table, going to put his feet up on it until Stoick looked at him pointedly and he put them back down again. Tuffnut appeared from the crowd having somehow acquired another chicken leg,
closely followed by Astrid, Ruffnut, and the entire tray of drinks which Ruffnut slid onto the table in the middle of them. Finally, Anna settled in next to Elsa, and reached over to take hold of her hand.

It was for the best, he supposed, that Heather and Eirik took seats a couple of tables over with the Ingermans. While Anna was a breath away from being one of the riders, and certainly part of their family, Heather was still an outsider to much of Berk. She had won herself some favour by fighting alongside them on Outcast Island, and every family had known enough loss to sympathise with her for the loss of her mother, but she still was not... one of them.

She was smiling, though, and from the gestures of her hands was introducing her father to the others at the table. At least she had a good memory for names on her side.

“All right.” Stoick stepped up, squarely in the centre of the dais, and raised his voice. “I said all right!”

He gestured to the group playing music; Umbra spotted it first, put aside her horn, and grabbed the drumsticks off Bogson, leaving the band squawking and clanging to a halt. Stoick remained unperturbed, though Anna looked alarmed at the splatter of sound. Hiccup opted for taking a second mug, instead, to give his hands something to wrap around.

“I know it’s been a long year,” Stoick called, as the sounds in the room simmered down. More and more people turned towards him, and Hiccup concentrated fiercely on not dropping anything, breaking anything, or otherwise doing something that would stop him from fading into the background. “But I wanted to say that I’m proud of you. I’m proud of you all.

“We stand tall, this year!” He made it sound like a toast, and people cheered for it, and Hiccup almost wondered whether it was a sort of magic itself. “Stand tall in the face of the Outcasts, in the face of the Berserkers, in the face of all of those who would see Berk struck to its knees. We – stand – tall!”

Roars, thundering, pounding of mugs and hands on tables. Hiccup opened his mouth, intending to cheer with the others, but did not manage to make any sound.

Stoick spread his arms wide. “I thank you, people of Berk, for your strength! Your courage! And I thank, as well;” there was the slightest pause in his voice, before he half-turned, and gestured to the table, “our dragon riders, who have been at the forefront of every battle we have fought, and every foe we have defeated.”

Defeated was a strong word, when it came to Dagur, and even Alvin had been run through at Dagur’s hand. But it was what Berk needed to hear, Hiccup understood, and the wave of support that came back from the Hall was welcome in return. He hoped that one day he would be able to frame the truth as kindly as his father did.

The cheers went on for longer, and Stoick had to raise his voice to its fullest to shout over the top of it again. “This year has shown how strong we are! Shown that our dragons make us stronger, that our alliances make us stronger, that we make each other stronger! And as the new year dawns, we will put that strength to use, put down this Berserker strike, and rise stronger than ever before!”

Stoick picked up a mug from the table closest to him, raised it high, and from the further round of roaring and cheering that answered him it was clear that the rest of Berk approved.

Hiccup wished that those sorts of words worked on him. But he had spent so long hearing other words from his father, in other tones, that Stoick the chief sometimes seemed like a very distant
man. And he could hear the clever phrasing that did not lie, that encouraged, but which hid the failures of the year behind their successes.

“Could’ve been worse,” he said to Astrid, gesturing with his mug in time with the rest of the Hall.

She smiled at him over her own drink, and reached to pat Toothless’s head beneath the table. Her hand brushed against his wrist on the way back, and it felt like a tingle running down his arm.

A flicker of movement caught his eye, and his stomach did a strange flip as Heather walked behind their table towards the centre of the dais. She leaned in to Astrid, a smile tugging at the corner of her lips and a near-manic light in her eyes.

“Horrendous, right?” she said.

“Horrendous,” said Astrid.

“What’s horrendous?” Hiccup said, warily, but Heather was already on her way past. She brushed a hand over his shoulder, then was gone, even as he turned in his seat. He went to shout after her, before realising that shouting anything was going to gain him attention, shouting part of his own name was only going to make him the butt of jokes for moons.

Heather stepped up onto the bench beside Sanguina, whose look of surprise was nonetheless matched with a hand to help her up to step onto the table in turn. Laughter burst out around her, and Heather flourished with her arms to acknowledge it.

“People of Berk!” she declared, and oh but it was a declaration. Her voice rang, confident and melodious, and Hiccup wondered for a fleeting moment whether it was not too late to stop her from doing whatever memorable thing it was that she clearly intended to do. He craned his neck to look for Heather’s father, knowing that he was the most likely to be able to stop anything, but Eirik was sitting beside the Ingermans with a smile on his face and his hands folded peacefully on his lap.

Hiccup had the distinct feeling that something had been set up, and it was all he could do not to let his heart race as fast as it had in the ambushes of the winter.

“People of Berk, I have not known you long, nor you me,” said Heather, “but I have certainly found you brave, and compassionate, and welcoming.”

Another polite lie, Hiccup had to say. But Heather had been easier for them to take than Elsa, or especially dragons, had been. And people were in a good mood after Stoick’s speech, ready to cheer, ready to celebrate… whatever poem it was that, he really hoped, she was about to recite. Because there was no way that she could follow his father for a speech.

“But still, there is one among you that I have found to stand out, and it is in his honour that I am glad to speak tonight.”

She pointed, and Hiccup felt like his chair was about to fall out from underneath him. A terrible realisation dawned that she was not just intended to recite some poem that she already knew.

“It is an honour to present to you, then, these humble words,” Heather continued, that slightly formal skald’s style without claiming the title for herself.

And then she turned back to the room again. Hiccup wondered for a brief moment whether he and Toothless would be able to make it to the doors without being stopped.

“Oh Hiccup Horrendous,” she said, “heeding no danger,
Daring on dragonwing dawnwards did fly. 
And foes would have fled him – if forewarned he ranged there, 
Riding and ranging, a-roaming the sky.”

He had to admit that she had a certain something which Tuffnut’s poetry for Anna had been lacking. The sense not to wake someone up at dawn to proclaim it, perhaps, but that was certainly a start. But still, it did not mean that he did not want to sink into the floor and disappear.

“Till Alvin came creeping, for craven his tactics,  
Turned treachery outwards, to trap in the night.”

The simple gestures of her hands probably helped, as well. Her eyes scanned her audience, and the movements of her hands were expressive but simple, following the swell of her words.

“Not knowing his foes then, that ‘neath masks unflinching--”

There was actually good potential that he was going to pass out from sheer embarrassment. Hiccup forced himself to breath as Heather spoke, forced himself to remember that the eyes and ears of Berk were on her, not on him. And true, her words had a far-off feel, turned into a story rather than something that he remembered, and out of the fractured pieces of what she had heard Heather had somehow managed to make it sound almost… mythic. Ambush, captivity, Hiccup’s treatment of the dragons as he planned his escape, all laid out in words.

It made it – at least a little bit – easier to breathe. All the same, his hands tightened around his mug, and maybe it was the heat in the Hall or the lingering desperation that had chased him through the winter that hurt so much. But the Hiccup of Heather’s words didn’t sound like a scared, desperate boy making things up as he went along, he sounded…

Like a hero.

And the last thing that Hiccup felt like was a hero. He could see, from the corner of his eye, Spitelout still scowling at him. Could feel too clearly the scar in the palm of his right hand, where the wood pressed into it. Knew too well the scars that the others bore. Bore now, in the present, not in the past or in some far-off time of legend that could be tidily wrapped up in songs. Their fight against Dagur was not even finished, for Thor’s sake.

But there was something magnetic about Heather as she spoke, in her plain clothes and with no music, no stand but a table and no actors but the movement of her hands. His chest just felt tight, head heavy, and he only realised that his left hand was trembling against his thigh when he felt a touch wrap around his.

He jumped in place, and looked round at Astrid with wide eyes. Her smile had faded, and she cocked her head at him, gently squeezing his fingers. He peeled his hand away from his leg to take her hand properly, daring only because it was on the side away from the Hall proper. There was an energy and a fierceness to Heather’s words, but he had to tune them out for at least a little while before he became just too aware of the picture she was drawing with them.

“It’s all right,” Astrid mouthed.

“Thank you,” he mouthed in reply.

Had he really wanted glory, once? He guessed so, though he had been wildly unaware of what glory actually meant. Had looked at the feasts he was unwelcome at and the jokes he didn’t get to share, and missed the weight on shoulders and the blood on weapons.
Respect, sure, a year and a half down the line respect was still looking like something worth fighting for. But glory looked more like bloodied iron, and less like shining gold, than it once had.

He hid behind his drink, but didn’t quite taste it as it went down.

“The dragons they answered,” said Heather, voice rising to something triumphant.  
“Flame-forging, fight-blooded, 
Shield-sundering, rage-raising 
And all ‘twas for him. 
Rock rent and steel shattered, 
Cruel cages they crumbled, 
To dust and destruction, 
And there stood he grim. 
Called clearly his challenge, 
Laid loudly his warning: 
‘If my people you plunder, let this be your plight.’ 
With dragons deserving 
Now dream of fair future 
And turn now to outlands this Treacherous blight.”

People clapped, stamped their feet, whooped and hollered. Hiccup wasn’t sure whether they were for Heather or for him, had the strange feeling that it was both, but made sure to withdraw his hand from Astrid’s to clap for Heather all the same. She took a sweeping bow, pointed to Hiccup one more time, then accepted Sanguina’s hand to step down to the floor once again.

Heather paused at the table as the clear applause died away and the normal sound of the Hall took back up once again; she laughed, exchanged words with Phlegma, before turning away only to stop short as she came face-to-face with Stoick. Unable to see his father’s face, Hiccup went to get to his feet, but had barely stood when Stoick just nodded, stiffly, to whatever it was that Heather said to him, and let her pass.

As she got back to the table he could see a slight tremble to her hands, but she was smiling as wide and as true as he had ever seen her do as she perched on the corner of the table between him and Astrid and scooped up one of the unclaimed mugs.

“Horrendous,” said Hiccup, flatly, not sure what else he could say.

Astrid punched Heather in the thigh, though it looked as light as any of her blows ever did. “I thought you’d perform that for the riders, not the whole village.”

“The riders already knew it,” said Heather, with a shrug that just missed looking careless. “Mm, hang on.” Raising a finger, she drank deeply, which at the very least gave Hiccup a little more time to get his brain and his tongue working in cooperation. “All right, that’s better. Couldn’t very well stop for a drink midway through.”

“I should thank you at least for not presenting me like the fool that I made myself look,” Hiccup said. The fact that all of them had returned filthy, hungry and cold was only one of the details that Heather had flatteringly changed. He was not sure whether he should mention that he had not expected it, whether it might be insulting, whether it might be a polite way to explain the shocked look which he had no doubt would still be lingering about him. Probably not, though, at least not publicly. “Although—”

Tuffnut launched himself past Astrid to latch onto Heather’s arm; Heather yelped, and Astrid swore. “Oh – my – gods!” said Tuffnut, a little too loud to be sober. “Did you write that all
“Yourself?” His words came thick and fast, eyes fixed adoringly on Heather. “You have to help with me with my ode to Bjorn. I’ve got an idea for how it starts, I should tell you sometime, it–”

“Iiii have to get my father home, I’m afraid,” said Heather. She managed to put down her mug, turn and scoop herself upright, and slip free from Tuffnut’s hold all in the same movement. Hiccup was almost as impressed by that move as he had been by the poetry. She turned to face Tuffnut, with a sympathetic smile. “And my father did help me with it quite a bit. Which is why he wanted to be here to see it,” she put a hand on Tuffnut’s shoulder, “but I insisted that he not stay long afterwards. If you’ll excuse me…”

She stepped quickly around Tuffnut, who turned to watch her go but did not follow. With his senses more recovered, Hiccup was relieved to note that everyone at the table actually seemed more fixed on Heather than on him, although he would have rather Anna’s look involved a little less of a scowl.

Then Snotlout raised both hands, and turned back to the rest of them with his eye wide and his brows raised. “Wait, did that just happen?”

“Depends what you mean by ‘that’,” said Ruffnut, before anyone else could get a word in. “If you mean–”

“If you even think of saying–” Astrid began.

“Heather wrote a very skilfully-made and overly-flattering poem and performed it very nicely for everyone,” said Hiccup, a little more loudly than he meant to, over the top of everyone. “That is all that happened.”

It lasted for about three seconds before Snotlout snorted with laughter. “Wow, when did Princess Hiccup come join us?”

Hiccup opened his mouth, then closed it again, as Tuffnut started chuckling as well. Ruffnut was openly smirking.

“Well, we’ve established Berk does poems for royalty,” said Anna, in a dry tone that wouldn’t have surprised him too much from Elsa, but which worried him from her. He would have to store that away to talk to her about in the morning, and hope that the rest of the night did not drive the memory from him.

On the other hand, it was probably good that Ruffnut was the one to tell Tuffnut what everybody was probably thinking. “Hers was better than yours.”

For a moment, Tuffnut simply gawked, while Snotlout’s expression slowly turned to delight. Fishlegs put his face in his hands. Then Tuffnut slammed down his mug on the table, splashing ale as he did so, snatched something out of his belt, and slapped Ruffnut across the face with it.

Which all looked more dramatic than it sounded, considering it only produced a fabric thwap, before Tuffnut deposited a single glove in front of Ruffnut.

Ruffnut looked down at it, then back up again. “Really?”

“You,” said Tuffnut, puffing out his chest and pointing one finger at her, “have besmirched the name of Thorston, young lady! With this, an insult upon all my house–”

“Nope,” said Ruffnut. “Just you.”
Hiccup had never been so grateful to hear the refrain of the Pegleg Polka which, though he still did not intend to get involved, would at least form a distraction from whatever was about to unfold on the dais. “Uh, guys…” he began.

“You bring shame upon my name!” Tuffnut declared.

“I hope *that* rhyme wasn’t deliberate.”

A hand landed heavily on Hiccup’s shoulder, and he almost jumped clean out of the chair. He whipped round to find himself looking up at his father, or mostly his father’s beard, and wondered whether he should actually have finished the second mug of ale as quickly as he had.

“A word, Hiccup?” said Stoick.

Actually, that sounded like an excellent opportunity to escape. Hiccup put his mug aside, got quickly to his feet in lieu of actually answering his father aloud, and had a stab at a smile. Stoick’s brow was furrowed, though it was hard to be sure whether it was confusion or concern with so much of the rest of his expression hidden behind his beard, but he simply guided Hiccup towards the back corner of the Great Hall as the music started up behind them again.

It sounded *distinctly* like the Pegleg Polka, and Hiccup felt a rush of relief that at least he would be able to avoid that. Stoick tucked them behind one of the huge firepits; heat streamed off it, but it was at least a quiet area perhaps some ten feet deep. Hiccup felt heat rise in his face, and hoped that his father would blame it on the fire and not on the two individuals that he could see, wrapped up in each other and pinned to the wall, behind the other firepit on the other side of the Great Hall.

Stoick reached up to rub his temple for a moment, then sighed and looked Hiccup in the eye. “Did you know that was coming, son?”

Honesty was probably going to be the best option, he supposed. “If I had, I would have tried to either stop it or hide from it,” said Hiccup. Stoick raised an eyebrow. Hiccup gave a vague shrug and a wave of his hands. “I… no, yup, that’s the best reply I can give.”

“Hide from it?” echoed Stoick. His second eyebrow had joined his first, and he put his hands on his hips, but Hiccup thought there was at least a faint sound of amusement in his voice. In any case, given the alternatives it made sense to keep his eyes fixed firmly on his father.

Perhaps Stoick was the right person to talk to about glory and respect, and the difference between the two. But this was far from the right time, far from the right night. Stoick, as much as the rest of Berk, had a right to enjoy the evening. Hiccup ran a hand through his hair. “No, Dad, I didn’t know it was going to happen.” He was not going to implicate Astrid in any part of it. “I… suspect that Heather wanted to get on a better footing with Berk, and doubtless she’s heard enough of her father writing poems to be able to… yeah.”

Another movement, sort of a shrug, sort of a gesture off to the side at nothing in particular, escaped him in lieu of words. Hiccup reached up to rub his eyebrow, eyes closing, not realising how tense he was until Stoick’s hand landed gently on his hand and guided it away again.

Hiccup looked up. He could feel the questions in his eyes, questions he couldn’t even find the shapes of yet. Almost tenderly, Stoick drew Hiccup’s hand away, and Hiccup let it fall back to his side again. “You did well,” he said. It was as quiet as Stoick the Vast ever got, meant just for Hiccup in the noisy hall, and Hiccup felt his shoulders unwind a little. The clenching in his gut did not fade as quickly, but when Stoick smiled beneath the beard that helped a little as well. “A little like a sheep in a dragon’s sight, but you didn’t throw up, so that was good.”
Hiccup frowned. “Throw up?”

Stoick lowered his voice just a little more. “I wasn’t even your age when one of the warriors praised me at Snoggletog for… er, for my fighting,” he said, quickly enough that Hiccup knew it was to do with his dragon-killing. “They gave me a horn of mead for the celebration, and I thought I needed to drink it all. Then I threw up on my father’s shoes.”

It was surreal to think of his father doing such, and before Hiccup knew it he was laughing, not quite holding back the incredulous curls of sound as he searched for any sign of joking in his father’s expression. There was nothing.

“I’ll do my best not to make it a Haddock tradition,” he said.

Stoick’s smile widened, and as he straightened up he clapped Hiccup on the shoulder. Hiccup managed not to stagger sideways from it, just about.

“Now, go back to your friends, and enjoy the night,” said Stoick. Words that hadn’t been necessary the previous year, Hiccup could not help but think. “It’ll be a new year come sunrise.”

He did not bother to ask who had ended the argument between the twins, or how. He was just happy to see that it had somehow ended, as the circle of them were now staring intently at each other and almost snapping out words.

“Crack,” said Ruffnut, which didn’t surprise Hiccup but did not immediately explain anything.

“Snack,” said Snotlout.

“Yak attack,” Tuffnut said, slamming his hand on the table.

“Uh… black?” Anna said, looking around uncertainly and looking relieved when several of the others nodded.

“Stack,” said Elsa.

Hiccup lowered himself into his chair, fairly suspicious that he knew what they were doing.

“Aback,” he said, hoping nobody had already said that word.

“Knack,” said Astrid, tapping her finger on the edge of her mug and watching the others. The look in her eyes rather suggested to Hiccup that she was playing to win.

Fishlegs did not look as intent on the game as the rest of them. “Bladderwrack,” he said, in a rather put-upon tone of voice.

“That’s not a word!” said Snotlout. He gestured to Fishlegs, waving a hand in front of Ruffnut to do so, and looked around at the rest of them for something like backup. “That is not a word!”
“It’s a type of seaweed,” said Fishlegs, with a roll of his eyes that rather suggested he had seen a protest like this coming.

Astrid looked almost offended. “You’ve *eaten* it. We’ve *all* eaten it!”

“Which means,” Ruffnut pointed a finger at him, “you drink.”

Snotlout looked around the table as if looking for backup and found none. Grumbling, he drank, then slammed the mug down onto the table. “*Fine,*” he said. “Then it’s me to start. Rock.”

Ruffnut’s smile said that she had spotted an opportunity and intended to take it. Hiccup closed his eyes, sighed, but was more than a little grateful if it was the worst thing with which he had to deal. He could throw the round himself, of course, to prevent it reaching Ruffnut and preventing Anna’s blushes.

“Sock,” said Tuffnut.

“Block,” added Anna, expression turned to one of intense concentration. In other situations, it might have been a good way of practising her vocabulary.

“Mock,” Elsa said, so straight-faced that Hiccup did not even know where she knew where this was going or not.

Might as well let it happen, he supposed. “Clock,” said Hiccup.

“Shock,” said Astrid grimly.

Fishlegs was eyeing Ruffnut cautiously, and hesitated almost long enough that Hiccup wondered whether he should call Fishlegs as having lost the round. Finally, though, Fishlegs winced and spat out a word. “Dock.”

Ruffnut opened her mouth, Hiccup readied his pained expression, only for Heather to reappear with snow still on her shoulders and slam her hands down onto the table corner between Snotlout and Ruffnut.

“Hello again,” said Heather. She seemed to become aware of Ruffnut’s glare. “Am… I interrupting something?”

“Yes,” said Astrid, perking up slightly in her seat. She pointed at the couple of mugs still left in the middle of the table. “You lost the round of rhymes, so you have to drink and start the next round.”

“Oh, come *on!**” said Ruffnut.

Hiccup caught Elsa giving the slightest twitch of a smile as Ruffnut threw her head back with a growl of annoyance. Heather, blithely unaware if he were naïve enough to judge solely by her expression, took a mug from the centre of the table, drank, and straightened back up again. “Sounds fair. Where do I sit?”

“Looks like it’ll have to be someone’s lap,” said Snotlout, with a sudden grin. Ah, Hiccup realised; all of their eyes were at approximately chest height. That would explain it.

At least Heather seemed undaunted. She sauntered along the side of the table, waggled her fingers at Toothless in a wave, and without ceremony or warning sat in Astrid’s lap. Astrid laughed, catching her, and Hiccup could not help a relieved chuckle as well. Heather slung her left arm around Astrid’s neck, back mostly to Hiccup and Toothless but facing the rest of them. “My start,
then?” She saluted Tuffnut with her mug. “Rhyme.”

Well, at least Tuffnut looked delighted. And, off the top of his head, Hiccup could not think of any obscenities that would work for the round. Though he would be the first to say that he expected to have a far better vocabulary than him when it came to that topic, years at the forge or no.

Hiccup could work with that.
Okay, I think that I’ve got all of the coding sorted this time! (And corrected all the times I failed to spell *dais*.)

Snotlout learns how to use his missing eye as a convenient excuse to escape.

*Rhyme* made it round the table a few times, *big* petering out rather quicker, only for Anna to say *red* and for the round to go on so long that it deteriorated into them arguing over whether certain words were repeats of each other or not. Snotlout tried for another round of I’m Awesome, at least until Fishlegs mercifully pointed out that there was nowhere to keep score but on the table and that was likely to get spills on it anyway.

Hiccup immediately vetoed five-finger fillet, and never thought he had seen Astrid so close to pouting.

“Come on, Heather!” said Ruffnut. “You must have learned some!” She had managed to successfully send Tuffnut on a quest for another round of drinks, though Hiccup had hastily added to keep it to ale rather than going for the stronger mead.

Heather, still in Astrid’s lap, laughed. “Well, there’s a category game?” she said. “It’s a bit like your rhyming one, but you might have to say different colours, or different plants, or different,” she pointed with her mug to Hiccup, “dragon species.”

“That does sound like Berk,” he allowed.

“I saw a few dice ones. They seemed different on each island, really. Oh, there was this great one where when someone puts their forehead on the table, everyone else has to do it as well. Tends to end with bruises, though.” She drank again, then looked up at the ceiling thoughtfully. “Hmm… oh, there’s one where when you count, but instead of saying a multiple of seven, you have to curse or insult someone. The better imaginative the better. If you don’t do a good enough insult, you drink.”

“That sounds like an excuse for skalds to learn new ways to insult people,” said Hiccup.

The look that Heather gave him, half over her shoulder, was flirtatious enough to leave him disconcerted. His alarm must have shown on his face as she laughed and shook her head. “Not necessarily, but playing against them is usually a bad idea.”

“Yeah, this definitely sounds like these games would be in your favour,” put in Astrid.

“Oh, and five-finger fillet wouldn’t have been in yours?”

“Pff, fine. How about we flip Snotlout’s game over, and if you *have* done something, you drink?”

Snotlout frowned. “What? Make it like… an I’m *Not* Awesome game?”

“You can brag, or you can drink,” said Heather. “Or you can just cause trouble. Like saying…”
everyone gets to drink who’s had baby Nadders in their house.”

She looked pointedly at Astrid, who narrowed her eyes. “You are a cold son of a troll, you know that?”

She drank, though, and nobody seemed to pay much notice to the fact that Hiccup did as well. Lowering her mug again, Astrid sighed. “Fine. Everyone gets to drink who’s got green eyes.”

“Would you guys stop catching me in the crossfire?” Hiccup leaned forwards to talk around Heather. “If you want to have a private drinking contest, go ahead, but I am not doubling you.”

He would, after all, end up under the table before either of them, and he really did intend to remember the entirety of the evening. Heather put down her mug, leaned over, and ruffled his hair, to general laughter from the rest of the table. With a sigh, Hiccup leaned back once again, and gave up on retaining anything resembling control over the direction of the game. To be fair, protesting too much would probably make him look like a better target to the twins and Snotlout.

Ruffnut gleefully took up with another question, and Hiccup watched with moderate surprise as the others joined in without protesting. Then again, perhaps they were as relieved as any of the rest of Berk to be able to let their hair down for a night. Either that or Fishlegs was also just beyond arguing.

They went around several times, the twins quickly ganging up on Snotlout; Astrid and Heather were apparently not being averse to the idea either. He did retaliate well with mentioning shoulder-length hair, though, and wearing women’s underwear, which made Ruffnut laugh as Tuffnut drank and grumbled something about the Thorston Challenge. Before too long, though, it had deteriorated into telling Heather – and to a lesser extent Elsa and Anna – embarrassing stories about each other’s childhoods. At least bearing the brunt of that did not leave Hiccup constantly drinking, even if it made the Pegleg Polka look more inviting than usual.

Fishlegs left them first, not even bothering with an excuse, before Ruffnut announced that she was going to dance and, with a withering expression, turned down Tuffnut’s eager offer to be her partner. Heather gladly took her seat, despite Snotlout’s grumbling, as Tuffnut pouted for a few moments before perking up again and asking Anna if she wanted to teach Berk some Arendellen dances instead.

Anna hesitated, and Hiccup wondered whether he needed to tell Tuff to back off, but then she raised her chin and looked him in the eye. “You know what? I think I do.”

“Anna–” Elsa began, softly, putting a hand on her sister’s arm.

Without looking around, Anna shook Elsa’s hand away, and Hiccup wished that he could unsee the look of pain in Elsa’s eyes at the movement. Instead, she grabbed Tuffnut by the arm and pulled him to his feet as she stood up. “Let’s go teach some Berkians how to dance.”

She immediately dragged Tuffnut away, across the dais and down the steps, even as Elsa raised a hand uncertainly after them. Snotlout looked around the abrupt awkwardness of the table, downed his almost-full mug of ale in one go, and on reaching for the last one still full before them knocked it over instead.

“Oh, whoops!” he said loudly. “Looks like we need some more drinks. I’ll go get on that.”

He stood up, chair scraping on the floor, and hurried away. While it was not the most dignified of exits, Hiccup could not help but think Snotlout was making a wise choice given the circumstances.
Hiccup cleared his throat, and reached out to put his hand on Elsa’s where she still rested it on the table. She jumped and looked round quickly, then her expression softened a little as she caught Hiccup’s eyes.

“I promised her some raucousness,” he said. “If she thinks she can teach Vikings how to do Arendellen dances, I wish her luck. I’ve seen Arendellen dances. They are… not like ours.”

The music alone was going to be a challenge, in rhythm as much as anything else. It was a weak attempt at humour, and Hiccup knew it, but it was all that he could think of to say at the time. Elsa’s smile suggested that she was humouring him in return. With a soft sigh, Elsa turned back in her seat to face the table, right hand fiddling with her hair.

Heather glanced across at Hiccup pointedly, eyes asking a question that he could not properly read, then at Astrid, who shrugged. Pushing aside her mug, she spun and slipped to her feet, smoothed down her skirt, and walked around the table.

“I have been warned,” said Heather; Elsa looked up, blinking uncertainly. “That you do not dance.”

“I… do not know how to dance,” said Elsa, though her eyes did not leave Heather’s. Hiccup looked over at Astrid, who gave a half-shrug. “I never really have, before.”

“Then I think that it is only right that someone teaches you how.” Heather extended a hand, almost formally, wrist turned upwards and hand gently proffered. It was strangely reminiscent of a hand held up to a dragon, only this one was palm-up, not palm-out; the same soft gesture, the same curve of the fingers.

“I…” Elsa glanced over at them. Hiccup froze in place, not sure how to respond, but from the corner of his eye he saw Astrid nodding.

“I saw more than one dancing circle on my way back in,” Heather added. “We can… find a small one.”

An unspoken offer not to be wherever Anna – and possibly Tuffnut – were trying to teach Arendellen dances. Elsa swallowed, then tentatively slipped her hand into Heather’s and allowed herself to be drawn upright. She glittered in the torchlight, in the firelight, crystal on black. Even as she did so, Hiccup could see emotions vying in her eyes, but then her smile became more firm and she stood up straighter, clearly having made a decision.

“As long as we avoid one with too many flying boots,” said Elsa.

Heather’s expression became relieved, but she kept hold of Elsa’s hand. “I think that can be arranged.” Tossing back her hair, she smiled over at Astrid and Hiccup. “We’ll see you two later.”

Hiccup’s heart seemed to ache a little in his chest as he watched them go, slipping around the edge of the crowd rather than delving straight into the middle of it as he was fairly sure Anna had done. He needed time, he supposed, time with both of them to talk. But Elsa had been smiling at Heather throughout the evening, looking at her with warmth, and Hiccup knew that she had already risked so much just to continue their friendship and interaction. He could not, in good conscience, have begrudged either of them looking happy in that moment, not having seen both of them struggling so much in recent moons.

But Anna… worried him more, perhaps. Some of the sharp words she had said that evening, the way that she had shaken off Elsa’s hand. There had been smiles from her, yes, even laughter and jokes, but something about it all had seemed fragile. He hoped that she would find some genuine
enjoyment in the evening, or that at least in coming days with Kai in Berk and a hope of moving forwards with the wildlings, things would help her.

He was jolted from his thoughts as a hand slid into his, fingers twining together. For a second, he stared down at his hand blankly, then managed to bring his brain back into the conversation and looked up to see Astrid, smiling tenderly at him.

“They’ll be all right,” she said.

“I… didn’t even say anything.”

“You don’t need to.” Astrid squeezed his fingers. “I can see when you’re worrying. Besides,” she glanced into her empty mug, then put it aside. “I think that even Snotlout noticed something was off there, so if one of us had missed it we’d deserve a quick snow bath for our troubles.”

He wasn’t sure whether or not it really should have made him feel a little lighter, but he suspected that it was at least meant to. Hiccup laughed half-heartedly, eyes on a point over Astrid’s shoulder for a moment, before sighing and meeting her eyes properly again. They had agreed to talking, after all. And even if there was plenty that he could not say to anyone, there were still things that he wanted to say to someone.

That is, someone other than Toothless, who was usually a good listener but not great when it came to the advice part.

“I just… wish the academy could go back to being fun again,” he admitted. Astrid raised an eyebrow. “You know… arguing about unclogging drains, or finding giant cabbages, or all the dumb fun stuff that came with having dragons. Without…”

He waved vaguely with his spare hand, not sure whether he meant the world in general.

Astrid nodded, smile slipping to something a little more resigned. “I get it. But we still have those moments. Dagur being… Dagur doesn’t take away from that.”

He grimaced, turning his face away. The wood of the table was scarred with knife marks, singed in places from who-knew-what over the years, but it was probably older than a good number of the houses on Berk. Even when the Great Hall had been used to store what food they had, in the worst winters, it had not been so often attacked. “Yeah, but the dragons have given him an excuse to attack us, as well.”

“Exactly,” said Astrid. He frowned up at her, at the way that her voice made it sound like something he should already understand. “It’s just an excuse, Hiccup. Dagur wanted to go to war with the entire Archipelago, it’s just that Berk having dragons means he sees us as more important. And it gives us the chance to stop him.” Her thumb ran along the back of his. “Which might not be fun, but gives us a chance of freedom.”

He wanted to brush away the sad experience written in her eyes, or at least let it be overwhelmed for a short while by something that would put the spark of laughter back there instead. Wanted it for all of them, really, but perhaps a selfish part of him wanted it for Astrid most of all.

“Better face him now than when he’d claimed half the swords of the Archipelago, anyway,” she added after a moment. Oddly, he appreciated the bluntness of it, not trying to hide behind more delicate phrases what Dagur would have done to the Berk of two years ago. Before the dragons, before Elsa, the Berserkers alone would have torn through them. With allies or vassals on their side…
A brief image of blood flashed behind his eyes when he closed them for an instant too long. He pushed it away as he opened them again.

“And his plans are blown.” Astrid’s squeeze of his hand might have been to make sure she still had his attention, as he realised his gaze was focused on nothing and dragged it back to her again. “Berserkers might not be much for plans, but I like our odds better this way.”

“Blown up, maybe,” Hiccup replied. “That’s the more common outcome of tangling with dragons, after all.”

“Blown up or stolen by bloody Nadder shortwings,” said Astrid. Hiccup half-expected this to be about her mother’s axe, and prepared his wince. “I swear, if I didn’t know better I’d think Camicazi was back – you know where I found my third-favourite knife this time?”

“In the picture of Snotlout’s face in the academy stores?” he suggested, all innocence.

She knocked her knee against his with a huff. “Under the skinning table. Along with every spoon in the house. And a ladle. Which was, of course, what Green grabbed and ran off with while I tried to catch her.”

For some reason, the image of one of the Nadders fleeing with a ladle in their mouth was the image that he needed to finally crack a laugh again. “All right, at least Toothless doesn’t do that. It’s just not great if he gets dust up his nose and sneezes.”

“Nope,” said Astrid, popping the word. The shake of her head made her hair shimmer. “That’s true of all dragons. Can’t claim that as a Night Fury-only problem.”

“The other morning a fly got into my room and he woke me up by thundering around chasing it,” Hiccup volunteered. “He jumped clean over my bed in excitement.”

It earned him a smile, and heat spread in his chest. “I’ll accept it,” said Astrid. “And probably be glad that Stormfly isn’t so inclined to chase flies. I suspect she’d shoot spines at them.”

At least Hiccup had been able to simply put his pillow over his head to block out the worst of the thumping and barking, he supposed. Although unfortunately it had not worked for blocking out Gobber’s growling – Stoick already having left to chief for the day – that had followed shortly afterwards.

“And come the new year, the shortwings are big enough to go into the woodshed with Stormfly, I swear to Odin…”

They talked about nothing for a while, about misbehaving shortwings, about misshapen snow-dragons, about the Snoggletog presents that had been passed around within their families. Hiccup kept away from talking about weapons and armour, and only as he did so realised that Astrid’s axe was still hidden away at his house and he had not managed, during the day, to deliver it back to
her. As much as he wanted to see her smile – hoped that it would make her smile – he did at least know better than to flee now and present it to her in the middle of the Great Hall. Some privacy would also go down better if she turned out to be angry about the whole affair, a fear which still nipped at his heels.

He told her about Snotlout’s unexpected gift, just needing to wonder about it with someone without it turning into a broader discussion about where Snotlout was going to live. Astrid had been above much of the petty bullying when they were children – she would round on anyone whom she thought was endangering themselves, her, or others, but kept out of the throwing of food, the tripping, the name-calling. Someone less skilled in fighting, less clearly a Viking, would have made themselves a target because of it, but even the older children didn’t usually dare to take Astrid on. But Snotlout had made sure to make enough of Hiccup’s humiliation public that he was sure she knew about it.

He’d thought he’d understood Snotlout, once. That Snotlout was easy to understand. Though he didn’t say as much aloud to Astrid, her slow nods and the way she wrapped both of her hands around one of his made it clear that she could read more than just his words.

They could see across most of the hall, at least when people weren’t standing right in front of them. Anna and Tuffnut had apparently staked out quite a large area right in front of the musicians for their attempts at dancing lessons, and there was certainly some enthusiastic if slightly off-beat clapping going on. Once or twice, Hiccup thought that he caught a flash of Elsa’s hair, further away, but it was hard to be sure with firelight flashing on metal or people in pale clothing.

Before he knew it, Hiccup was talking about the strange numbers that Heather used, trying to explain them through his own confusion. He glanced down at his hand in Astrid’s, fingers now twined together, looked away and then back again as it sunk in that they were sitting in the Great Hall, where anyone could see, with their hands clasped.

The smile vanished from Astrid’s face as he looked from their hands to her with an expression which, he knew, was more wide eyes than common sense. His mind tumbled over itself, tripped on its own words at the thought that people could see, that perhaps they already had, that did Astrid realise?, that her hand suddenly felt burning in his and his heart was thundering in his chest.

Astrid snatched her hands away from his, looking to the side at the same time. Her lips pressed to together, all too close to pained, and Hiccup winced at his own stupidity.

“I didn’t mean–” he blurted. Words wouldn’t put themselves into the right order. “I wouldn’t… aren’t you embarrassed by me?”

At least it made Astrid look back at him again, even if she was looking at him as if he had sprouted a second head, Zippleback-style. The moment hung heavy in the air between them, not enough to call silence when there was music and chatter all around, but for a moment it seemed like they, and the table, were a small world within a world. Hiccup wasn’t sure whether it was appropriate, or terrible, for them to be in such a public place.

“Embarrassed by you?” Astrid managed, finally.

Hiccup waved a hand. “You know, because of…” He fumbled for words that could sum it all up, the humiliation to his family he had been, the stupid things he had done. “All of me.”

For a moment, Astrid simply blinked at him, hands still pulled back and curled into fists. Then she cautiously leant her elbows back on the table, folding her hands just a little too tight to look casual. He wouldn’t have noticed things like that before Elsa, he supposed.
“You know that people don’t still look down on you, right?” her voice was soft, but her words still struck him to the chest harder than any of her punches ever had. He stared at her. “I know – I saw how it was, when we were kids, but don’t you see how people look at you now?"

He tried to summon up a picture in his own head. Still scrawny, still short no matter how many times Gobber muttered to himself and adjusted the metal foot, now with a scar through his right hand and another like a band across his chest. Still prone to slipping and falling over, to saying the wrong thing at the worst time. Still with a fool head full of ideas that weren’t his place to have.

“You brought the dragons to Berk,” said Astrid, slowly. Her eyes remained fixed on his, and he was struck with the sense that she was trying to tell whether what she was saying was sinking in. “You showed us what they were. What widlings are. What magic is. You saved a Queen and defeated a would-be Emperor. How many people died to dragons, before… before Toothless?"

He didn’t know. It had seemed so normal, boats where the bodies had to be covered because they were too burnt for children to see, or where Stoick had quietly asked one of the woodworkers of the village to craft rough replacement limbs so that the form beneath the covers would at least look human.

His mother. Astrid’s uncle.

“Don’t you get it?” said Astrid. “That’s what people see in you.”

“That’s not me,” he said. Or at least, tried to say; it came out as more of a whisper. “That’s… the Dragon Conquerer. That’s not Hiccup.”

“The one in the Heather’s song,” Astrid said, and yes, perhaps that was the best way that any of them could have put it. When stories of his childhood failures had spread, they had been all too accurate, but now he felt like there was a shadow of a story growing behind him. Something he was casting, but which wasn’t him. “I… I see you both,” she added, gently, and his next breath had a slight shiver of relief to it. He reached out for her hand again, scarred palm turned upwards, not meaning for it to look so pleading but unable to stop it from being so. Astrid hesitated for a moment, then unfolded her arms to place one hand in his instead. “The riders will too, and your father and… your family,” she finished, with a slight shrug. “We know there’s both. But… you’re not someone that anyone would be embarrassed to be around, Hiccup.”

“I don’t know, my father and Gobber remember plenty of embarrassing stories,” he said, still weakly. Astrid’s hand felt like his safety strap, holding him to the evening rather than to a saddle, and he half-laughed, breathless, at the thought of it. Astrid cocked her head at him. “Sorry. It’s… pretty absurd, to think of that being me.”

Astrid squeezed his hand, but he caught a twitch in her jaw, the way that her lips still pressed tightly enough together to make them pale. Through the buzz of fear, and probably the mead as well, he followed along the thoughts. He had thought he could never hold a candle to her flame, had felt his hand shake at the thought of holding hers. If she had also flinched and drawn her hand away…

“Did you… think I wouldn’t want… this?” Words escaped him again, the pounding of his heart forcing fragments of sentences out of his chest. Astrid looked down, the closest to a flinch that he remembered her doing, and he wondered whether it was his terrible attempt to string a sentence together or the thought of something similar to the thoughts that had been haunting him. He swallowed. “I never thought I’d be so lucky as to hold your hand,” he said, softly.

Her hand jerked in his, eyes still averted for a moment, until finally Astrid looked back up to him.
The clarity that he knew was there, the steel in her bones, was back in her gaze. But she was still looking at him as if he were not quite real. “I’m just a Hofferson,” she said. “I shouldn’t even share your shieldwall.”

Let alone his heart, Hiccup almost said, but caught the impulsive words before they escaped him. “You’re everything a Viking is meant to be,” he said instead. “You’re strong, you’re brave, you’re smart… maybe a little smarter than Vikings are supposed to be, come to think of it…”

Astrid huffed.

“And I know… what got said, about your uncle.” It had been difficult to miss, after all, when they were growing up. “He’s not the only one.” He tried to smile, but couldn’t quite get it to work. “My father’s name doesn’t even begin with H, after all.”

True, Heavy had died to an Exterminator, and out of respect for Stoick was not discussed on Berk. Hiccup doubted it had been the shameful event that Finn’s death by the Flightmare had been made out to be.

“Astrid,” he said, and waited for her to meet his eyes. The words stuck in his chest for a moment, breath tight, until he forced himself to take a deep breath. “I never thought I was good enough for you.” Her eyes went wide, hand growing slack in his but not pulling away. A breathless laugh escaped him. “Gods above, I never thought I would be good enough for you.”

Astrid stared at him in amazement, for long enough that his gut twisted, until finally a smile started spreading across her face. She laughed, self-deprecating, still looking at him in disbelief as the sound pulsed forth from her. Before he knew it, he was laughing as well, at the absurdity of it all, at both of them looking at the other like some untouchable being and flinching at each other’s touch.

“Gods,” said Astrid, between the laughter. She brought her free hand up, across her mouth, shoulders shaking, and Hiccup could see that she was still restraining most of her laughter. “We… oh, Gods.”

“Maybe we should have got Heather to tell us,” said Hiccup.

Astrid bent her head, hiding her face in her hand as her shoulders jerked. From the choking sound that she tried to suppress, it would have been all too easy to think she was crying if he did not know better, and instead Hiccup focused on putting aside his own laughter.

The easiest way was to lose himself in the fall of Astrid’s hair over her shoulders, how it shone in the firelight. It was nowhere near as curled as it had been after Thawfest, turning fluffy in the sunlight, but it still shone on her shoulders. He wondered if it looked as soft as it felt.

Finally, Astrid ran her fingers across her eyes and looked up. The shine was not tears, at least he could be sure of that much. “I can’t even call you a muttonhead when I made the same mistake,” she said.

He squeezed her hand, just gently. “Then… we can keep this here?”

It still came out a question, almost strangled, his hand still feeling terribly exposed just by being in hers. With his left hand he reached down, and without needing a word Toothless rubbed his nose against Hiccup’s fingers.

“I guess so,” said Astrid.
For a moment, they remained there, an aching distance apart, until Hiccup swallowed and glanced down at the space between them. “Uh… can I join you on the bench? This chair is feeling a little oversized.”

And still too much at the head of the table. He considered moving them away from the dais altogether, to the edge of the hall or the back of it, but there was something daring about being seated where others could see, where people were sitting at the tables around them or walking past.

Astrid smiled and scooted back by way of reply, and Hiccup extracted himself from the chair without even moving it. He kept their hands together as he sat down beside her, knees brushing, hope and fear in his chest crushing together into something he wasn’t sure what to do with.

“After you were so reluctant to talk to Heather…” Astrid said, but let her words trail away. He hoped it was some sort of delicacy as to the stupidity of his actions.

“I don’t know how to,” he said. It was about the first thing that had come out cleanly, pointing out his own flaws easier than having to listen to someone point out his strengths. “I didn’t know – I still don’t, let’s be fair.” He waved his left hand around vaguely, more behind them than anything else as he turned his body to face her. “I just know that there’s you, and…”

He had no idea what he was doing, what he was saying. Just knew that Astrid’s hand felt right in his, and that when she kissed him the world faded away, and that he wanted to learn how to do this, how to talk with her properly, how to not remake the mistakes they had already made. The thought wrapped around his chest almost like fear, but not so cold; there was so much that he wanted to learn. To do.

“One of the girls on the Quiet Isles was flirting with me,” he blurted out. Astrid looked startled. “I didn’t realise. I thought she just wanted to meet Toothless. Until she asked me to dance. But I didn’t even realise she was doing it.”

Luckily, she gave a twitch of a smile, and turned her body more towards him in return. “Maybe I’ll just have to teach you what flirting looks like, then.”

He was pretty sure that in the general warmth of the Great Hall, he had to be imagining that he was feeling heat coming from Astrid’s body. But the faint scent of some sort of perfume might have been real. Her hand in his was definitely real, as well, and her knee brushing his thigh, and the way that her eyes trailed down to linger on his lips.

That would have been an invitation to a kiss, when they were alone. And gods, he wanted to kiss her, as much and more as he always did, but they were at the top of the Great Hall even if they were only surrounded by mostly-empty tables as people gave in to the drinking and dancing.

Toothless chirruped, but Hiccup really doubted it was as important as the look that Astrid was giving him. At least, until there was a thud on the table and they both startled, not quite jumping apart this time but both whirling around at once. Hiccup felt his face light up like a furnace.

He wasn’t even sure whether it was fortunate or unfortunate that it was Heather smirking down at him. She pushed something across the table, and Astrid released Hiccup’s hand to grab it with the speed of a Nadder’s tail.

“Wait until tomorrow to pass it to Gobber, all right?” said Heather, still smirking. Elsa was not with her, though Hiccup doubted Heather had simply abandoned her to the roughhousing of a Viking Snoggletog. She winked. “Don’t want to outshine you.”
Before Hiccup could even gather his thoughts to reply, Heather turned fluidly away, stole two mugs from a passing tray, and was trotting lightly back down the stairs again. Beside him, Astrid undid the knot of leather holding the parchment still, and unrolled it.

“Unbelievable,” Hiccup managed, finally. In no small part, he would like to know how Heather had made herself so comfortable in a Snoggletog so quickly after coming to Berk, but he suspected that was more of a scald’s skill.

Astrid tilted the parchment to show him. “Is this what I think it is?”

The notes at the top were in the Arendellen numbers, but in the centre of the page, in a square of firm, final lines, were three simple lines with the numbers written in runes. A weight of sandstone, a weight of iron ore, and a weight of whatever in Brokkr’s name nightstone was.

He was just about to ask aloud when Astrid tilted her head and turned the paper over to look at the back. “She says that nightstone is the glittery rock that you brought back from your – and I quote – ‘rock-hounding bonding session with Fishlegs’.”

“Funnily enough, that was the afternoon with the strange numbers,” said Hiccup, for lack of a better reply. Astrid rolled the parchment back up and handed it to him, and all that he could do for a moment was weigh it in his hand. “Gods, I don’t think I’m sober enough for this. Gronckle iron. This,” he gestured with the parchment, “is Gronckle iron. After two years.”

“Well, if you’re not sober enough, then I suggest you leave it for tomorrow,” Astrid said. It was a reasonable suggestion, he had to admit, although he suspected that it was not so much the mead as the barrage of the evening which had left him feeling dazed. Astrid wrapped her hand over his and guided it back to the table, as if both of them were holding the parchment in place, and he let it fall from his mind as he tried to think what they had been talking about before Heather interrupted them.

He met her eyes again. Oh, that was it; there hadn’t been much talking going on at all.

Hiccup swallowed, throat suddenly going dry in a way that had nothing to do with the drinks or lack thereof. “That offer to kiss you,” he said. “Does it still stand?”

“Here as well,” said Astrid.

He raised his right hand to brush her jaw, sweeping away a few stray strands of her hair where they stuck to her skin. Astrid’s cheeks were pink, from the heat or the drink or gods forbid from him, it didn’t even matter, it made her eyes seem all the more blue and the line of her lower lip seem all the more soft. Before he could lose his nerve, he leaned in to kiss her.

Both of them seemed to catch their breath as their lips made contact, and Hiccup felt as if his chest was aching, as if he were swimming and had been underwater just a little too long. Astrid’s hand tightened on his, and she tilted her head to change the angle of their lips together. He didn’t think it was his imagination that she was smiling as she twined their fingers together.

It was long dark, getting ever deeper into the night; the children that had come into the Great Hall would have long since been ushered home to sleep so that those adults who wanted to celebrate more bawdily could do so. A simple kiss was not going to be the most salacious event of the evening, even with Hiccup, of all people, being involved in it.

The tip of Astrid’s tongue brushed his lower lip, and Hiccup drew back for a second, uncertain. But there was a clarity in Astrid’s expression that ran like fire in his bones, and from letting his fingers
drift vaguely along her jaw he slipped his hand down to her shoulder. He leaned back in and kissed her again; Astrid made a wordless sound and parted her lips pointedly, tongue brushing against his.

It made him feel half-vulnerable, half-thrilled, especially with the wide room around them. Astrid’s hand crept around his waist and Hiccup twisted further in his seat to face her, letting his tongue slip between her lips. Her breath shuddered against his cheek, and her fingers felt only teasing until she grabbed the centre of the back of his belt and used it to tug him closer.

Hiccup yelped, breaking the kiss and almost falling over Astrid’s lap before he managed to catch himself. He still almost went face-first into her chest, however, and knew that he entirely deserved it when Astrid threw her head back in a laugh.

“I mean, usually I get hauled around by the scruff of the neck,” he said, pushing upright again. “This is probably an improvement…”

Astrid released his belt and twisted to sit astride the bench, tucking one leg up between them on the way through. Hiccup leaned out the way of her knee, hoping that he was done with injuries both serious and absurd for the year, then glanced down at the lack of space between them with no small concern as she tucked herself in closer against his side.

“Oh, are you sure—”

“I thought,” said Astrid, reaching up to the nape of his neck. Hiccup felt a tug on the messy locks of his hair, and wondered again whether he ought to have gotten it cut before Snoggletog. “That it was about time I got a hold of this.”

He fumbled for something smart to say, failed, and frowned at her in what he vaguely hoped was an endearing manner instead. “Huh?”

Astrid’s fingers brushed the side of his neck, almost ticklish. “I think this is long enough to squeeze in a braid or two. Just…” she ran a fingertip down the angle of the muscle from his neck to his shoulder. “Here.”

Hiccup’s hair had never grown long enough for any sort of braid. It turned into a scraggly wild mess, instead, and gods only knew where that had come from when his father’s hair and beard were both braid-worthy and he had seen the small bust of his mother with a long, long braid trailing down her back. It stuck at an awkward length, long enough to get in his eyes and get full of sweat, but never quite long enough to pull back in any real way.

He turned his head to give Astrid better access to the hair with which she was toying, as she brought her second hand up as well. “You’re sure? My hair’s never felt like being helpful about that before.”

“I’m sure I’ll manage.”

The feel of her fingers stroking through his hair was soothing on his shoulders, the tension in his arms, even as it seemed to tighten something in the pit of his stomach. He could feel a blush building in his cheeks, even before the thought returned to him that Astrid was sitting with one knee behind him, one knee beside, her thigh brushing against his.

“Then… feel free,” he said softly. He managed to keep the giddiness from his tone, though, even if he was wearing a foolish smile. “It’s all yours.”
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