This Is Berk

by 10Blue10

Summary

After their victory at the Ice Nest, Hiccup and Toothless are the Alphas of Berk. Now they have to figure out how to lead a pack of dragons spread out across three islands, deal with the usual insanity that comes with living on Berk, and take care of their family even as it grows. Hiccup and Astrid marry, have a daughter, and all seems to be well...until an unknown enemy moves against them, plunging Hiccup and the riders into a war with some of the remnants of Drago’s Army. With his home, pack, tribe and family threatened by a man out for revenge, Hiccup is forced to confront his values and ask himself how far he’s willing to go to protect those he loves, and for peace between dragon and human kind.

Notes

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A/N: Hola, amigos! And welcome to the third instalment in 'The Heart Bind Saga'.
The structure of this instalment is...piecemeal, let's say. Rather than an ongoing storyline, the chapters are grouped into a series of unrelated arcs. The chapters in the arcs are related and in chronological order, but the arcs themselves are unrelated and may have time gaps between them.
Hiccup and Toothless were up early as usual in the morning, racing up into the sky in the predawn light. They performed a few tricks just for the fun of it, and an appreciative audience of other early rising dragons. The natural instincts of a dragon compelled them to regularly and routinely patrol their territory, and in any large pack the members would take it in turns to check for threats and trespassers. The Berk Pack territory included Berk itself, the sea stacks, Dragon Island and even Outcast Island.

The most pressing issue was still the matter of where everyone could nest. Almost all of the original Berk dragons were nesting in the stables beneath the village, which only left the mountainside. They could carve out more caves, but with the dragons being all different sizes, there wouldn’t be enough room for all of the dragons from the army. By Hiccup’s calculations, if they tried to carve out nests in the mountainside for all of the new dragons, they’d end up with a load of boulders.

Dragons didn’t build nests, like a bird would; they simply claimed a piece of the entire territory, marked it with scent and made it their own. Caves were convenient because there was a usually clear divide between them, but now hundreds of dragons were trying to claim ground that all blended into one, and had a lot of trees in the way. Toothless and Hiccup had to break up at least five arguments and stop even more dragons from inadvertently burning down the whole island trying to make room for their nests, before breakfast.

“Can’t some of them just go and live on another island?” Stoick questioned over breakfast, when Hiccup mentioned the dilemma they were in and how it would take a while to get everything sorted out.

“It’s not that simple, dad.”

“Why not?” the chief demanded.

“The whole point of an alpha is to keep their pack together, a cohesive whole. Okay, mostly cohesive…the closest places still within the territory are the sea stacks and Dragon Island. I’m gonna relocate some of them to the sea stacks, Toothless and I can patrol there, but Dragon Island and Outcast Island are both too far for us to fly back and forth so regularly” Hiccup explained.

“All the dragons can fly; and surely they can take care of themselves? You can talk to them! Just tell ‘em to go live on Dragon Island and only bother you if it’s an emergency.”

Hiccup opened his mouth to protest that if they expanded the territory that much it would be too hard to patrol…but then Toothless, still gulping down cod as if he’d been starved, declared *That’s a good idea, let’s do that.* He didn’t know why Hiccup was making such a big deal of it. Then again, he sometimes got the feeling that humans made a big deal out of everything.

*How do you think we’re gonna lead a pack that’s in two different places at once?* Hiccup demanded. Toothless pulled his head out of the bucket of fish again – he was nearly finished anyway – and stared pointedly at Hiccup, narrowing one eye. He was copying an expression that he’d often seen on his humans face, whenever his even-crazier pack-mates said or did something ridiculous. Hiccup made the same face, pursing his lips a bit, and said *Don’t look at me like that.*
Oblivious to the mental conversation, Stoick frowned in bewilderment as he looked between the pair. “Hiccup? Hiccup, what's the matter with you?” he demanded, scowling when his son didn't reply, or even look at him. It was as if he and Toothless were having a staring contest.

“You're the one who usually thinks of clever ways to fix problems. Those islands are bigger, they have more caves, and there will be more room there. We should send some of our subjects there.”

“Are you doing that...thought-speak thing?” Stoick asked, “Hiccup, say something!”

*Away from the Nest? We can't do that, Toothless. How are we supposed to keep everyone united and safe if some of them are miles away?* Hiccup questioned, gesturing and frowning. Stoick could hear nothing, and he was feeling more disturbed by the minute.

Toothless rolled his eyes in annoyance and retorted *There’s more room on the other island, and it's still in our territory! If we can have more than one Alpha, why can't we have more than one Nest?*

*So, what, I stay here to lead the dragons on Berk and you go to Dragon Island with-*

*No!* Toothless bared his teeth, head-fins flicking back in irritation. *Of course I'm not going to leave you! Hiccup, why are you being so stubborn?!!*

*I'm trying to do my job!* Hiccup snapped, scowling so much he was all but snarling himself. He'd stood up and strode over to where Toothless was eating, the last of the fish now forgotten as the two of them glared at each other. In the back of his mind, Hiccup realised that he was getting too agitated, for no real reason, but before the rest of his consciousness could catch up –

“Stop it!” Stoick shouted, thumping his tankard on the table. They both jumped at least half a foot and whirled to face him with identical shocked expressions. Stoick quickly raised his hands in a placating gesture, apologising, but all the fight drained out of Hiccup, his shoulders slumping. It had happened again. He'd sensed Toothless’ irritation, not registered it as different to his own feelings, and let it overcome him. Toothless whined and crept close to nuzzle him in apology; he had been caught up in the loop too.

The door opened, and their mother crept inside, her eyes wide and uncertain. “Stoick?” she asked, looking from him to her sons, keeping her voice low. She'd been around enough arguing dragons to know instinctively not to make loud noises or sudden movements. “I heard you shout, did something happen…?”

“No...sorry, Val” Stoick sighed, gesturing to Hiccup and Toothless, who were comforting one another. “They were glaring at each other, and then they both started... snarling... so I…” he cleared his throat, “Well, no harm done.”

Concerned, Valka looked over and asked gently, “Are you two okay?”

Hiccup nodded, and explained what they'd been arguing about. “I know we need more room; I just don't see how we can lead the pack if most of them are so far away” he said helplessly, sliding into a chair and pressing his forehead against his palms. His mother sighed sympathetically, and placed a hand on his shoulder. He looked up at her, and she smiled warmly at him. He returned it hesitantly, and Toothless purred softly, nudging closer in hopes of getting petted.

Valka happily obliged, scratching Toothless in just the right places as she spoke to her human son. “Our pack-mates don't all have to live on Berk for you to lead them. If there's a problem, they can come find you. That's how it worked in my old Nest...after all, you've seen the King. He is far too large to move through all those tunnels keeping an eye on everything, isn't he?”
“Aye, son, your mother’s right” Stoick nodded, “Let the dragons take care of themselves. You’re their chief, or alpha or whatever - not their mother.” Perhaps he was not one to talk, given that he had his hands in everything when it came to running the village; then again, he liked to be busy. A thought occurred to him, and he remarked, “Even if you did have to keep going back and forth between Berk and the other islands, I’d have thought you two would love doing so much flying. Thor knows Toothless has the stamina for it.”

That was a good point, and his mother made a good point also. Hiccup felt extremely foolish – it seemed obvious now. “I. Am. Stu-Pid” he announced, accentuating each syllable with a thump of his head on the wooden table. I’m supposed to be the smart one he thought; now I’m missing the obvious. It’s official…I’ve spent too much time around the twins.

“No, you’re just thinking too much. You’re making the problem worse, see? You just need to use this a little less” Stoick decided, gesturing vaguely at Hiccup’s head.

Hiccup gave him a disbelieving look. “You’re telling me to not try to figure out how to solve everything?”

“I think what your father means is that you might’ve been…overthinking things” Valka explained helpfully, “You just need to have a breather.”

I suppose it couldn’t hurt to clear my head… “Yeah…you’re probably right. C’mon, Toothless, let’s go to the cove for a bit” he suggested, picking up his plate. Valka took it from him, saying she’d clear up, they should go enjoy themselves. However, the two of them were barely out of the house when a reddish Deadly Nadder landed on the grass nearby.

She ducked her large head in a bow, and then raised it, tipping her head to the side to look at them more clearly. *What’s wrong?* Toothless asked her, trying not to sound impatient.

*I need your help, Alphas* she revealed with a distressed croak of concern, *A bullying Fire-Scale called Ferocious kicked me out of my nest!* Agitated, she flicked her wings and scraped at the ground with her fearsome claws.

“Hiccup! Hiccup!!” A large chested woman put her lungs to good use, yelling his name as she trudged up the hill towards him, clutching something in her hands. Hiccup left Toothless to sort out the drakaina who’d come to them for help, and hurried to meet his fellow villager. “Uh, good morning, Mrs Bjornson…”

“Never mind that” she shook her head, “You need to tell Ratmuncher here to behave himself!” She thrust towards his face a squirming Terrible Terror; though to judge by the excitable squawking, the little guy seemed to think trying to escape Greta’s grasp was a terrific game. “I’m at my wits end, Hiccup! I told Bushy she could have a pet Terror, but I didn't think he'd be so troublesome!”

Hiccup held his hands out; Greta was more than happy to dump the wriggling miniature dragon into his palms. Ratmuncher’s tongue flicked over his fingers and he tried to scamper up Hiccup’s arm. Hiccup pinched the back of his neck, and the Terror blinked those huge eyes at him, confused.

*Alpha angry?*

“I’m not angry – but Greta isn't happy. She says you're misbehaving and being troublesome” Hiccup told him, still pinching his fingers on the back of Ratmuncher’s neck. It was a dominant gesture amongst dragons, to pin the neck with a paw or jaws. The Terror stayed very still, but he still made an indignant sounding croak as he protested, *Not trouble! Funny! Bushy laugh!*

“He says he's being funny, and making Bushy laugh” Hiccup explained, before asking, “Is she
“I suppose, but she’s only five. I don’t know, maybe she isn’t old enough to have a dragon yet… maybe I should get her to let Ratmuncher go…”

*No! Want Bushy! Bushy friend!* the terror protested with cross screeches, squirming -he wanted to fly off and find his human friend and hide behind her hair.

“Stop that” Hiccup said sternly, pinching a bit harder. Ratmuncher obediently froze and hunkered down on his arm, whimpering.

*Sor</_**2**ry, Alpha-Hiccup!*  
Hiccup relaxed his grip and looked up at Greta. “He doesn’t want to leave Bushy; and I somehow doubt that she’d want to give him up either. The dragons are more than just pets; they’re friends.”

Greta gave a long suffering sigh and demanded, “Well, what am I going to do? He doesn’t listen to me!”

“Does he listen to Bushy?” asked Hiccup, “He hasn’t hurt her, has he? Even by accident?”

“Well, of course there’ve been a few incidents – but no, he’s usually very gentle with her. I’d never have let her keep him if he wasn’t. I just told you, it’s me he ignores – and why are you petting him like that?”

Hiccup blinked, realising that he’d started scratching Ratmuncher out of pure habit; and to go by the loud purring, now he was actually paying attention, the Terror was thoroughly enjoying it. He gave Greta an apologetic look, and schooled his features into something a bit sterner as he looked down at the dragon on his arm. “Ratmuncher, you need to listen to Bushy and to her mother. You’ll have to find a way to entertain your human that doesn’t involve driving Greta crazy” he insisted.

He wasn’t sure if Ratmuncher was listening, but then the little drake purred and blinked slowly. *Okay, Alpha-Hiccup* he said obediently, nuzzling against Hiccup’s arm. “Good news, he’s agreed to listen to you” he told Greta, giving the now much more docile Terror back to her, “Although… maybe you should have a word with Bushy as well, if she’s laughing when Ratmuncher is misbehaving.”

Greta frowned slightly, but then she realised what he was getting at. “Oh, that sneaky little…” she shook her head in good natured exasperation and wandered off, but remembered to turn and call, “Thanks, Hiccup!” before she left.

“You’re welcome!” he called after her, before turning back to the two dragons behind him. “Sorry about that.”

*It's okay, Alpha-Hiccup* the Spike-Tail said patiently, *Shall I show you my nest, so you can help me reclaim it?*

*Yes, let's do that...sorry, I didn't get your name?*

*My name's Spirika, Alpha-Hiccup.*

*You know, you don't have to call me that* Hiccup told her, but she just tilted her head at him, confused. Why wouldn't she call him by his title?

Hiccup didn't know how he'd be able to memorise all of his new subjects names. He'd already
memorised the names of many dragons, but recalling hundreds of them? It was a pretty tall order...he still wanted to try, though; with the respect they were showing him, it seemed the least he could do.

*After we've helped Spirika, I think we should fly to the other islands in our territory. There are already dragons nesting on Dragon Island, and probably on that island with all the angry Vikings as well. Not all of the dragons we freed from the Red Death came to live on Berk. Selena could only persuade the dragons on Berk to follow her and the other Night Furies...there might be dragons in our territory who don't consider themselves part of our pack* Toothless explained.

“Hiccup? Are you okay?” a familiar voice broke into his worried reverie.

“Huh? Oh, well, good morning, milady” he smiled happily, briefly patting Toothless and walking over to where Astrid was standing near Stormfly. *Good morning, Alphas* the nadder chirped.

“Morning, babe” Astrid smiled, striding forwards tugging him closer for a kiss. “You okay? You looked worried” she remarked in concern when she pulled away.

“Nah, I'm fine. It just turns out there might be more dragons in our pack than I thought...well, dragons in our territory. Whether they join our pack or not remains to be seen.” Hiccup explained what Toothless had told him, and what they were going to do about the...overcrowding problem.

“Right, so, do you want me to give Eret his first lesson?”

Hiccup had completely forgotten that he'd agreed to give the former trapper flying lessons that day. “Could you? I'd really appreciate it” he said gratefully, “You can give Sky Fire a beginners saddle, if there isn't one there just get Gobber to build one – try to stop him from adding spikes or”-

“I know. Hiccup, I've taught people to fly before” Astrid reminded him, before asking, “D’you have any idea where Sky Fire is? I know Eret’s at my place, hiding from Ruffnut.”

“Uh, I think he made a nest on the northeastern side of the island. We could go and find him for y”-

*Hiccup!* Toothless croaked urgently and poked Hiccup with his snout, before jerking it towards the northwest, where a plume of smoke could clearly be seen spiralling up into the air. Hiccup bit back a groan, briefly pecked Astrid on the lips in apology, and vaulted into the saddle. Toothless ran forwards a few paces and launched himself upwards with powerful wingbeats. Behind them, they heard Stormfly taking off, but she didn't follow them – Astrid was probably on her way to get some emergency water.

They swiftly reached the disturbance; a Monstrous Nightmare and a Snifflehunch had apparently been squabbling and the Fire-Scale had set himself alight, brushing against some tinder-dry trees. Yet another reason they needed to get the overcrowding under control as fast as possible; with all the dragons on Berk now, and with how many of them were more aggressive than not, there was more chance of a fire getting out of control and razing half the island to ashes.

Fortunately, some of the originals had been flying nearby, and rushed to the rescue. They drove the bickering dragons apart, beating their wings hard to try and blow the fire out, just like Hiccup had shown them not long after he first came back from Myrkr. *Don’t just sit there, you two! We have to stop the fire!* they screamed impatiently and agitatedly at the bewildered Snifflehunch and stubborn Nightmare.

Toothless’ tell-tale shriek sent them scattering; a well-aimed plasma blast turned the conflagrating
trees to ashes in moments. Only a few flames were left behind, which the other dragons quickly stamped or crushed or blew out. Toothless bounded to a landing in the middle of the patch of devastation, glaring waringly at the dark purple and orange Nightmare. Unlike the others, he hadn't lowered his head submissively as soon as Toothless and Hiccup landed.

*Good job, you guys* Hiccup praised the originals, smiling as they purred at him. He dismounted and slowly approached the cowering Snifflehunch, who was hunched down in the cinders and whimpering.

*Sorry, sorry, sorry!* he cried, all but whining in fear, *Sorry, Alpha-Hiccup, sorry for fighting!*

“Whoa, hey” – Hiccup held his empty hands up in a placating, non-threatening gesture, but the poor dragon still flinched away as if he expected to be struck. Behind him, the Fire-Scale snorted dismissively and retorted *You should’ve just left me alone, stupid!* Toothless growled and snapped his jaws. *You've done enough! Leave him alone* he ordered sternly. The Fire-Scale looked reluctant. Toothless kept growling and glaring at him through narrowed eyes and pupils. *He trespassed on my nest!* the bigger dragon protested, *He wouldn't leave me alone!*

Spirika gave an outraged shriek and protested *You stole my nest, you wretched bully!* *Quiet! Hiccup and I are working on it. We're going to find room for more nests, just be patient!* Hiccup looked between the two dragons, feeling dismayed. He turned to the terrified Snifflehunch first. *I'm not going to hurt you* he promised, *I'm not angry, there’s no harm done…* At least, it could have been worse he thought, glancing around at the newly formed burnt clearing. The trees would grow back eventually, right? *What’s your name?*

*Crun...* the snifferhunch replied nervously. *Our old human master-that-was, was always angry…but not you?* he asked uncertainly, shuddering. He must have been talking about Drago, and Hiccup felt disturbed at the thought of any of the dragons fearing him the way they'd feared that madman.

*No, of course not...* He decided to play the best card he had; so he closed his eyes, and held his hand out, silently saying trust you-befriend me. The originals nearby purred and stretched their heads forward encouragingly, indicating what Crunch should do.

The striking man from before was nothing like this…the poor Snifflehunch didn’t understand this peculiar human who was an Alpha but didn’t act like it, who didn't punish even though they'd been told *No fighting, no burning.* He thought maybe he could trust Hiccup, though…

He pressed the tip of his snout against Hiccup’s bare hand and dared to lick it a little, smelling and tasting the charcoal/metal/old-prey-skin/swift-wing scent of him. Hiccup scratched his scales a bit, and said *There you go…see? I'm not gonna hurt you. I'm not him* he insisted.

The Snifflehunch had just begun to relax when the Nightmare squawked indignantly, hissing as he twisted to glare past Toothless at Hiccup and Crunch. *You’re not punishing him! You're not punishing me... You're not punishing us!* he realised, eyes wide. Toothless snarled and tensed- Just you wait!* - but before he could leap, Ferocious burst into flame again. The originals shrieked at him - *You’re crazy!* - and Toothless roared *SUBMIT!* The Nightmare spluttered as water poured down out of nowhere, dousing his fire. Seven pairs of eyes looked up to see Stormfly hovering above them, a water-holder dangling from her claws. It was
one of Hiccup’s simplest but most useful inventions — a watertight leather sling on a swinging bar, with which a dragon could scoop up water and then, with a good strong kick of the hind legs, flip it upside down to let the water pour out.

Distantly, Hiccup heard Astrid shouting down to him, asking if he was okay. He gave her a thumbs up, and when he squinted he saw her return it. Then Ferocious got over his shock and snarled angrily, spreading his wings to fly up and attack the Spike-Tail who had just dropped cold water on him. “*No!*” Hiccup shouted, and Toothless lunged at him, pinning his muzzle to the ground with one paw and biting his neck.

Hiccup strode up to him and crouched down to meet his eyes. *That Spike-Tail is a close friend of mine, and her human is my desired* he told Ferocious, *I won’t punish you for the fire and the bickering, but if you attack the humans I love… I’ll have no choice but to exile you. Spirika says you stole her nest from her; you’re going to give it back, and find somewhere else to sleep, without bullying anyone out of their nests. Is that clear?*

Ferocious stared at this human who was now angry and stern, and felt the strong teeth of the Swift-Wing pressing against his scales, and could smell the originals nearby ready to defend their Alphas. He sighed and reluctantly apologised, *Yes, Alphas.* Toothless let him stand up, and he briefly bared his throat to them before taking off, the downdraft blowing ash everywhere.

Hiccup thanked the three originals, reaching up to pet scaled noses; they nuzzled and licked him, renewing the scents of obeisance on his skin and clothes. Chuckling, he dismissed them and they ushered Crunch along with them. *Come with us! We will show you good fishing places!*

Then he mounted up, and Toothless leapt into the air. They flew up to glide alongside Stormfly and Astrid. “Are you two okay?” his fiancé asked, “What did that Nightmare do to get Toothless riled up?”

“It's fine now” Hiccup waved her off; Astrid eyed him suspiciously, but she let it slide for the time being.

Stormfly and Astrid flew off to put the water-holder away. *That Fire-Scale is going to be trouble* Toothless grumbled, *I can tell.*

*He might go to one of the other islands once we’ve made sure they’re safe* Hiccup pointed out, affectionately rubbing Toothless’ head. *I’m more worried about Crunch…I don't like to think that some of the dragons are afraid of me.*

Toothless snorted dismissively and purred *amusement. *Why would dragons be afraid of you?*

*Crunch was. He thought I'd be angry with him like Drago used to be.*

*You're not Drago* Toothless said firmly, his ear fins folding back and eyes narrowing in distaste. Hiccup stroked his head again and said *I know, but think of it from their point of view. It's as if they’ve just gone from one Alpha dragon and human being in charge, to a different Alpha dragon and human being in charge. They might feel like nothing’s really changed.*

*But you’re not Drago!* Toothless protested, *and I'm not Usurper!*

Hiccup was not making sense. Toothless knew there were like-things – Hiccup said they were called ‘similes’ because humans gave things silly names – that weren’t the same thing but were *like* each
other. Sand and ash were like-things, they were both crumbly and made you sneeze. Seawater and tears were like-things, they both tasted of salt.

Hiccup and Drago were not like-things, and neither were he and Usurper! Toothless refused to even entertain the notion that they might have anything in common. *Let’s go to Dragon Island!* he declared, flapping his wings to fly faster, and they surged forwards. Hiccup pulled back on the saddle to slow him.

*Hold on, bud* he said apologetically, as Toothless went into a reluctant hover, *Let’s get some of our pack-mates to come with us; they can help us convince any wild dragons out there that we really are Alphas* he reasoned. Toothless was sure that the scent-marks all over Hiccup and himself would be enough, but he supposed that what Hiccup said made sense…more or less.

*Okay…should I send out my will?*

*No, the willpower thing is more for getting the attention of the whole pack; we’ll just confuse them if we tell some of them to come and some to stay. Let’s just ask them directly.*

So they flew all over the island, telling their subjects about the much larger island where there would be plenty of room for nests. *Not every dragon in our territory saw Toothless and I defeat Usurper and become the Alphas* Hiccup explained, *So we need your help to convince them that we really are the Alphas of this territory.* There were plenty of volunteers, and they actually had to persuade a few of the dragons to remain behind.

Some of the newer breeds, such as the Shovelhelms, had an instinct to dig up rocks to eat, and could even smash the rocks with their reinforced hammer like skulls. Hiccup could see straightaway how they could be really helpful to the village and the Nest as a whole.

Naturally, the villagers noticed when Hiccup and Toothless started flying around with an increasing number of dragons trailing after them. His mother flew up on Cloud-Jumper and asked if she could tag along – Stoick, who didn't seem to want to let his wife out of his sight, insisted on accompanying them.

“Isn't this great?” he asked with uncharacteristic cheerfulness, “The three of us together, flying out on our dragons…it's a family outing!”

Hiccup groaned a bit. *Oh, great. What a legacy I'll have – how many Alphas have to deal with embarrassing parents?* he complained to Toothless, who chuckled. Deep down, though, he was pleased that his dad was so happy; pleased that his mother was back in his life, after so long.

They arrived at Dragon Island, and searched it from the sky. With the help of the pack-mates who had followed them out there, Hiccup and Toothless found every dragon on the island. Naturally, these dragons weren’t entirely happy at having a crowd of strangers and even humans swarming onto what they considered ‘their’ island. There were a few minor altercations before they all gathered in one place.

Fortunately, as Hiccup had suspected, the dragons there had once been in the Red Death’s flock, before the pack scattered after her defeat. Not every dragon knew that Toothless-Hiccup was responsible for that, but the ones who did remember believed the newcomers who insisted that the heart bound pair were their Alphas now, and had taken on a sea-giant to earn that status.

The others took a bit more convincing, but when they discovered that Hiccup could think-speak, make fire out of thin air (or so it seemed) and even had hidden not-wings, they warmed up to him quickly enough. Soon, almost every dragon there had pledged obeisance to both Toothless and
Hiccup, and since Dragon Island was twice the size of Berk, there was plenty of room even for all
the new dragons.

Hiccup doubted that every problem they'd face would be so easily solved…but he had confidence
that they could solve those problems, with a bit of ingenuity and common sense.

Valka was thrilled that the dragons would be able to live more comfortably and naturally, instead of
being confined to Berk.

Stoick was proud of his son, stepping up to lead people who were depending on him, even if it
wasn't the way the chief had always expected.

They returned to Berk with light hearts, satisfied that for once, for now, things were going just fine.
Strange New World

That morning, after Astrid had left to go for a flight and fetch Hiccup, Eret had hidden in her house. When he quickly realised that he couldn’t stay there forever, he thanked her parents for their hospitality and made his nervous way through the village of Berk.

He couldn’t make heads or tails of the place. The villagers were a little standoffish, as he’d expected from a tribe in the back of beyond who probably didn’t get a lot of new visitors; at most, they seemed to see him as a somewhat interesting distraction. Yet the dragons everywhere, perching on their roofs or using spiky rollers to scratch themselves in the town square, barely seemed to warrant a second glance!

Eret watched in alarm as a giggling little girl sitting on the back of a Gronckle on a roof tickled its snout and made it sneeze fire onto the house – her mother, who was hanging laundry, simply flicked the falling embers off the clothes and yanked on a rope. A trough suspended above the roof tipped over and doused the flames as the mother scolded the child and the dragon alike.

Everywhere he looked, there were contraptions designed for dragons. Places for them to feed and bathe and groom themselves…There was some kind of aqueduct system rigged up amongst the roofs of the houses, presumably for fire emergencies. When he asked the blacksmith with the missing appendages about it, the man replied “Oh, aye, that was Hiccup’s idea. Actually, if ya see anything in this village that looks finicky and clever, it’ll be one o’ Hiccup’s inventions. It all goes back to the rainwater reservoirs that used to be defence towers during th’ war”.

Surely, he told himself firmly, he was just imagining the accusing stares of the dragons...There was no way they could tell he used to be a dragon trapper, right? They were just curious…he flinched when a Gronckle trotted right up to him, sniffing, its tongue lolling out of its mouth. Everyone watching just chuckled at his discomfort, as he tried to get past the stocky dragon without actually touching it. “Little help here?”

“Aw, he’s just saying hello!” one woman called. “’Ere, Granite, gerroffim!” Her husband added, shooing the Gronckle away. It whined like a dog, looking from the Viking to Eret hopefully. The bushy bearded man scooped up a largish rock from the ground and waved it tantalisingly in front of the Gronckle, saying “Here, boy! You want a snack? Leave the poor man alone!”

Much to Eret’s relief, the over-inquisitive dragon went for the bribe of the rock, licking it out of the man’s hand and then flying off, but only as far as one of the grooming stations. He quickly moved on. He saw two men fixing up part of a house, both dangling from harnesses held in the jaws of Monstrous Nightmares, with a Zippleback lifting up the planks of wood.

He heard someone call out “There’s a fire in the forest!” - But moments later someone else shouted “It’s alright, Astrid’s on it!” Eret looked up just in time to see Astrid and her Nadder flying overhead, the dragon carrying a large and dripping bag in its talons.

“Uh…do fires happen a lot round here?” he asked the nearest person, a broad chested woman whose curly haired daughter seemed to be playing tag with a Terrible Terror. He felt foolish the moment the words left his mouth – there were dragons living here, of course they were going to have fires.

The woman shrugged and replied “Time to time. It's better than it was before.” At his uncomprehending stare, she sighed and elucidated, “Back when we were at war with ‘em, when that monster queen of theirs was making them raid and raze the village every few weeks. Did nobody tell you about that?”
“I’ve heard bits and pieces...so, wait, when this ‘monster queen’ was gone, the dragons stuck around and you just...let them?”

“Well, they weren't attacking us no more, and they weren't eating nearly as much as we thought they'd be...I mean sure, they're still a bit troublesome at times, but they're dragons. What else d’you expect? They're more or less good creatures, at heart” she mused, before eyeing him a bit critically, “O’course, you've probably already figured that out, given that you're not trapping ‘em anymore.” Typical – in such a small, tight knit village as this, news travelled fast and gossip travelled faster.

“Shh!” Eret shushed her, and she looked indignant, but he was too busy glancing around to see if any dragons were listening. *Wait, why do I care? It's not like they can...*but Eret couldn't finish the thought. It made absolutely no sense for them to be able to understand humans, and yet...Sky Fire did seem to understand him, at least somewhat, and he was sure that Hiccup hadn't been around that dragon long enough to train him to act as if he could comprehend spoken words.

“Uh – could you tell me which way the, uh, training ring is?”

She pointed him in the right direction, and then asked “Have you got a dragon partner yet?”

“Uh...I think so. There's this Nadder that seems to have taken a liking to me for some reason.”

“Nadder, huh? Wait here” she told him, before disappearing inside her house. She emerged moments later and held a leg of chicken out to him. “Nadders love chicken” she explained.

The trouble with having a chicken leg, Eret quickly discovered, was that every Nadder in the village seemed to want to try and take it from him. He hid it under his clothes, but they could still smell it, and started following him. A couple of them began to squabble before a nearby Zippleback screeched and snapped at the pair, chasing them off. The Vikings weren't being too helpful, in his opinion- they seemed more amused at his predicament than anything else.

When he got out of the village onto the path towards the training ring, Eret made the mistake of glancing behind him. There were at least seven dragons stalking behind him, all making eager chattering noises and seeming to lick their jaws at the thought of eating the delicious chicken, and probably him as well. He panicked and made a run for it, sprinting down the path...

Of course, trying to outrun flying creatures was futile. The dragons leapt overhead and surrounded him. Instinctively, Eret snatched the dagger hanging from his belt from its sheath and held it up to defend himself. The dragons growled at him, and he gulped, but he couldn't just stand there and let them attack him!

From above there came a familiar shriek, and a shadow fell over Eret as a dragon dived...the Night Fury snapped to a halt mere feet above the bowed heads of the dragons, his long tail flicking down to balance him. “Drop the knife please, Eret” Hiccup requested calmly. Dragons were hovering or circling high above, but he paid them no mind.

“B-but...”

“Eret” he said sternly. Eret swallowed hard and tossed the knife onto the ground, feeling extremely exposed. “I...I wasn't gonna *use* it...”

“I know that, but they might not have” Hiccup pointed out, before addressing the dragons surrounding them, “And you should all know better - just because Eret is new doesn't mean you can
tease him. Come on, guys, you're better than this - I'm looking at you, Fanghook” he said pointedly. The purplish scaled Monstrous Nightmare actually looked sheepish, as did the rest of them.

They were teasing me?!! “Err, I think they were following me cos I have this” he admitted, holding up the chicken leg.

Hiccup sighed. “If you want something to eat, go fishing” he told the dragons, before adding to Eret, “I know I said Astrid and I'd teach you how to ride, but something's come up. I told Sky Fire to meet you in the training ring. I'll see you later, okay?”

“Oh, yeah…no problem” Eret agreed. Hiccup nodded; he and Toothless flew away. The circling dragons peeled away and followed him, and the dragons who had been harassing Eret flew off in different directions. Eret checked the coast was clear, and retrieved his dagger. He made it to the training ring unimpeded, and discovered Sky Fire already waiting for him in the middle of it.

The Nadder seemed to perk up when Eret stepped cautiously into the ring, whistling curiously and tipping his head to keep the man out of his blind spot. Gulping, Eret said “Hey…uh, you hungry?”

He held out the chicken. Sky Fire’s nostrils flared…he’d never eaten cooked chicken before, but it smelled delicious. He padded towards Eret, who was rooted to the spot, but then froze and gave a worried croak. Metal, he could smell metal, and that meant there might be a…

Weapon! A metal claw, a blade. Sky Fire hissed and spread his wings, ready to take off. He didn't want to have to hurt this human…but then he saw that Eret was taking the blade and the old skin it was wrapped in and putting them down on the ground, and kicking them away. Then he held out the tasty food again…and Sky Fire was feeling rather hungry…

Eret managed to not flinch as Sky Fire deftly snatched the chicken from his fingers with a razor sharp beak. To his relief, all his digits were left intact. The dragon ate the leg in two bites, and sniffed curiously at Eret, hoping he had some more. He stumbled backwards a few steps and hurriedly explained, “Uh, sorry, pal. No more chicken here.”

The Nadder drooped and sighed…he actually looked disappointed. Then, to Eret’s mild alarm, he began to gag and retch, throwing his head back. Moments later, the chicken bone clattered onto the ground at Eret’s feet, glistening with saliva. He grimaced.

Sky Fire blinked and cocked his head, as if to say, ‘now what?’ For all Eret knew, that was what he was saying. The former trapper-turned-rider cleared his throat awkwardly, trying to remember what Astrid had told him about Nadders.

“They’re kind of vain” she’d said, “But don't tell him I said that; and they get spooked easily, so don’t startle him.” Well, yes, he already knew that. “Just…y’know, compliment him. Get to know him. If you're gonna be riding on his back, you need to bond with one another first.”

Compliment him, she says. That's all well and good, but what sort of compliments do you give a dragon, anyway? “You, err…you're looking well. Very, uh, very shiny scales…” he smiled a bit, taking care to keep his lips pressed together. At first, Sky Fire didn't react and he felt foolish, but then the Nadder actually purred as if he were pleased.

“Oh – oh, yeah, I mean it. Your scales are…huh… I never really noticed how colourful Nadders are” he admitted. There was no-one around to hear him, after all. “Your scales, they're the colour of the aurora…that's why you're called Sky Fire, isn't it?”

Sky Fire purred louder, which Eret took as a yes. “Astrid said to get to know you…I'm not sure how
to do that since I can't understand a word you're saying” he shrugged, strolling around the ring just for something to do. “Although apparently you can understand me. I don't know if I believe that...I mean, it doesn't make much sense, does it? Dragons understanding humans.”

If the Nadder had an opinion on the matter, he didn't share it. If anything, he seemed to be getting bored, preening his wing and otherwise ignoring the human close by. Under normal circumstances, Eret would've been pleased to have a dragon this close ignore him, so he could either capture the creature or get away from it. Now, though, he felt a little snubbed.

To take his mind off it, he looked around at what else was in the training ring. The middle of it was cleared, but there were targets hanging up on the walls, some with burn or puncture marks on them. There were metal poles and rings, made of Gronckle Iron if he wasn't mistaken, scattered about the edge of the ring. What they were for, he couldn't guess. There were also troughs full of water, which made more sense.

Eret looked back at Sky Fire, and found the dragon leaning down to sniff at his knife in its sheath. I wonder… “Hey, Sky Fire?” he called, prompting the Nadder to look over at him. Eret pointed to the dagger, then at the dragon, then at himself. “Can you give that to me…please?”

Sky Fire regarded him silently for a minute, and then crouched down to pick up the knife. Even if he doesn't really understand me, he's clever enough Eret supposed. “Great, thanks, just bring it over here” he beckoned, walking towards the Nadder. Sky Fire backed away a few steps as he approached, and Eret stopped in his tracks. “No, no, it's alright. I'm not going to use it on you.”

He dared to walk a bit nearer, and Sky Fire didn't move, but when he got close, the Nadder moved away from him. Eret frowned suspiciously. “What's gotten into you?” he demanded, approaching once more. Sky Fire waited until he was only a couple of feet away before leaping aside. “Cut it out!” Eret protested, striding towards Sky Fire in earnest.

The dragon ran for it. “Oi! Come back here!” Eret shouted, racing after him. Sky Fire ran around the perimeter of the training ring, making a chattering trilling noise that sounded sort of like laughter. “Oh, great! Now you're teasing me. Am I just a big joke to you dragons? Is this some big conspiracy – get revenge on the former trapper by driving him crazy?!”

Frustrated, he lunged at the Nadder as if to wrestle the weapon right out of those sharp jaws. Taken aback, Sky Fire leapt aside with a shriek, dropping the knife. Eret tumbled to the ground, landing flat on his back. His hand scrabbled for and seized his dagger, raising it to defend himself from the dragon looming over him, fangs bared and claws ready to scythe.

“Stop!” somebody cried, and a dragon roared. Sky Fire looked up, and Eret looked as well. The chubby rider with the Gronckle – what was his name, Fishlegs? – had just landed at the edge of the ring, looking worried and angry. “What do you think you're doing?”

Meatlug growled warningly at Sky Fire, eyes narrowed in disapproval. *You can't attack your human, Sky Fire!* she protested, jerking her head to indicate he should move.

“*He started it*” Eret and Sky Fire protested in unintentional unison, though Sky Fire did back away enough to let Eret get to his feet.

“I was just trying to get this back” Eret tried to explain, holding up his dagger. It only registered then that he'd been attempting to defend himself with a weapon still in its sheath, “He wouldn't give it to
me, he was making fun of me”-

*I was bored. I was just having a bit of fun and he tried to attack me!* 

“So? Sky Fire was probably just playing!” Fishlegs frowned, “I saw you lunge at him. Didn't Astrid tell you not to startle a Nadder? You're lucky he didn't turn you into a pincushion.”

*We all know what happens when you annoy a dragon too much* Meatlug pointed out, *Humans aren't really that different. They're silly.*

“Okay, I get it, that was stupid. I'm sorry, okay? But if he'd just given it back in the first place…look, Finlegs” –

“Fishlegs.”

“Yeah, that. Look, you...you Berkians might be okay with having huge fire-breathers wandering through your village, or following you around like dogs after scraps...but I've spent most of my life fighting and...you-know-what-ing dragons. I'm not going to attack them, but I need something to defend myself” Eret explained, “Just for my own peace of mind.”

Fishlegs considered this for a moment, and then sighed. “Alright...I understand” he conceded, dismounting, “but you really ought to apologise to Sky Fire.”

Sighing, Eret fastened his knife back onto his belt and turned to face Sky Fire. “Hey...I'm sorry. For scaring you, I mean” he apologised, hesitantly holding his hand out. Sky Fire crept closer, whining apologetically, and pressed his snout against Eret’s palm in acceptance of his apology. The man couldn't help but smile as he scratched the dragons’ scales.

Fishlegs smiled in satisfaction, and tugged something out of Meatlugs’ saddlebag. “You know, if you want a dragon to give something back to you, there's an easier way than chasing after them” he remarked.

“Do tell.”

“You just coax them closer with a tasty snack, and then scratch them under the chin” Fishlegs explained, holding up a leather bound book embossed with a coiled dragon. “You can read all about it in the Book of Dragons. That's why I'm here; Astrid's out on patrol, so she asked me to come and get you started with your dragon training” he explained.

Wingbeats and the scrape of claws heralded the arrival of not one, but three more dragon riders. “Hey, Fishface” Snotlout greeted mockingly, “Come to watch the show?”

“I'm here to teach Eret about dragons, Snotlout” Fishlegs corrected, “What are you guys doing here?”

“To watch the new guy get barbecued” Tuffnut declared cheerfully.

“What?!”

Snotlout climbed out of the saddle, as did the twins. “We’re here to perform the initiation ceremony of one Eret, son of Eret” he explained, walking over to one of the metal poles and picking it up, slinging it over his shoulders. He walked back to the twins, who grasped either end and held it horizontally about five feet off the ground.

Eret didn't like where this was going.
“We don’t have an initiation ceremony – and what are you doing with that Monstrous Nightmare gel?”

Sure enough, Snotlout had wiped his hands over Hookfang’s scales, and was now smearing the sticky green mucus over the bar.

Eret really didn't like where this was going.

“What does it look like I'm doing?” he scoffed. He looked at Hookfang and pointed commandingly at the bar. “Light it!” Hookfang ignored him. Snotlout scowled. “Come on, work with me!”

Hookfang rolled his eyes and spat a bit of fire at the gel, setting it ablaze. “Behold, Eret, your initiation ceremony!” Snotlout declared, “To become a dragon rider, you must first prove yourself – by walking beneath the bar of fire!”

“And you have to walk under it bending backwards” Tuffnut added, “It's a new move I came up with – I call it the limbo.”

“Come on, Eret, what are you waiting for? I wanna see how low you can go” Ruffnut prompted, with a smile that she probably thought was flirtatious.

Eret definitely didn't like where this was going.

*Does he actually have to do this?* Sky Fire asked Meatlug. He was unfamiliar with the bizarre eccentricities of humans, and he wasn't sure what an ‘initiation ceremony’ was.

*No, this is new* she admitted. She didn’t know what an ‘initiation ceremony’ was either.

“Ugh” Fishlegs rolled his eyes, “Just ignore them, Eret. We don't have an initiation ceremony – and even if we did, it wouldn't be this.”

“Why not?” Snotlout demanded.

“Well, for starters, what does walking”-“Limbo-ing!”

“Limbo-ing beneath a bar that's been set on fire have to do with riding dragons?”

“Uh, duh! It's symbolic. I'd have thought you of all people would appreciate that.”

“Come on, Eret, what are you waiting for?” Ruff demanded, “Time to get down and dirty – with ash!”

“And please hurry – this bar is getting really hot!” Tuff added.

No way in Niflheim Eret thought with a grimace. Aloud he merely said, “I think I'll pass.”

"Aww – hey! Snotlout, if you do this, I'll let you…hold my hand!”

“Really?! Okay, let me show you guys how it's done!”

“Err, Snotlout, I don't think that's such a good idea”-

“Argh! My back!”
“Argh! My hands!”

“Argh! My legs! Hookfang, help!”

The Monstrous Nightmare grabbed his rider in his jaws and dumped the man into one of the water troughs. Tuffnut frantically blew on his red hands until his sister, whose hands had been jarred when he dropped the fiery bar onto Snotlout (as hilarious as that was), leapt at him in revenge. Meatlug galloped over to the still flaming bar and belly-flopped onto it to put it out – a few moments later she yelped and scrambled off.

Eret stared, open-mouthed. Forcing his jaw shut, he looked up at Sky Fire and remarked, “I need to learn to ride you fast – cos the sooner I do, the sooner we can both get off this crazy island.” Sky Fire clicked his tongue and chirped in what Eret assumed was agreement.

Fishlegs chuckled nervously and held the Book of Dragons out to Eret with a hopeful expression. “So, uh, heh…about the Book?”

Well, until Astrid or Hiccup turn up I guess I have nothing better to do. Eret took the book and went to sit down on a bench, far away from the bickering twins. The book didn't really tell him anything new about dragons – he liked to think he was already pretty knowledgeable about them – but he was more interested in the tone. The focus of the book was on how to best approach, befriend and care for each breed.

He hadn't gotten very far when Astrid appeared. “Snotlout, Gobber wants you at the forge” she told the man sitting in a water trough, before adding to the twins “and you two muttonheads are supposed to be helping the fishing fleet. Get moving.”

“Err, why should we listen to you?”

“Because if you don't, when I'm chief I'll banish you” Astrid threatened, glaring at them. The twins and Snotlout decided not to stick around to find out if she was kidding or not. Once they'd gone, Eret turned to Astrid and informed her, “Don't take this the wrong way, but I think I love you for that.”

“Sorry, Eret. Only man for me is Hiccup” she replied airily, but with a small smirk playing on her lips. She took something draped over the back of Stormfly’s saddle, which turned out to be…another saddle. “It’s Stormfly’s first one. I figure since she and Sky Fire are about the same size it should fit him as well” she explained, before looking at Fishlegs and asking, “What are you doing here, anyway?”

“Well, as a matter of fact, I’m trying to give Eret his first lesson in the correct care and handling of dragons” Fishlegs explained, “I gave him the Book and I have all my knowledge cards right here.”

“Good idea; he can keep reading whilst we’re getting Sky Fire used to his saddle” Astrid decided. She looked at Eret and instructed “Eret, call your dragon.”

“Okay…” Eret looked over to where Sky Fire was chewing on a pole, tilting it and eyeing the spots of light dancing back and forth as the light reflected off it. “Sky Fire! Come here!” he called, beckoning.

The Nadder dropped the pole and padded over to him. Eret patted his snout, standing to the side to keep out of his blind spot. “Now what?” he asked Astrid.
“First, you explain what you're going to do, and reassure him” she instructed, “Scratch his shoulders and back to get rid of any itches and make him comfortable. Dragons hides are dry, so a bit of saliva really soothes them. That's why they're always grooming each other.”

So Eret moved to scratch at Sky Fire’s shoulders, and the dragon rolled an eye back to watch him. “Err…we’re gonna put a saddle on you. Don't worry, it doesn't hurt or anything...if anything, it should make both of us more comfortable” he explained, hesitating, before spitting on his hands and rubbing them over Sky Fire’s scales. The dragon purred in contentment, eyes closing.

Astrid handed him the saddle and told him to let Sky Fire sniff it before he put it on. Once the leather pad was strapped into place, Astrid gave Eret a fish to reward his dragon with. Of course then Stormfly and Meatlug wanted fish as well… “So, Fishlegs, your dragon is female, right?” Eret inquired, as he watched Astrid play fetch with the Nadders to keep them occupied.

“Yeah, why?”

“Oh, nothing. It's just…well, no offence, but ‘Meatlug’ sounds like kind of an odd name for a female dragon…”

Fishlegs blushed. “Oh, yeah…thing is, at first I kinda thought she was a boy…” he admitted sheepishly, “but she’s okay with it! The dragons don't really mind what we call them.”

“Really? Not even…not even the Zippleback?” Eret asked doubtfully. Maybe it was just him, but he’d have thought a name like ‘Barf&Belch’ would be cause for protest.

Astrid shrugged and said “Apparently they think it's funny. The dragons were brainwashed by their Queen; they didn’t even remember their own names, so they just went with whatever we called them, even when they started to get their memories back.”

“And you know this…how, exactly?”

“Toothless told Hiccup, and then Hiccup told us” Astrid explained casually, before deciding, “I think Sky Fire should be used to his saddle by now.”

*Are you used to it?* Stormfly asked him on behalf of her rider.

*I can still feel it, but it's not uncomfortable. Are we going to fly now?* he asked hopefully.

*Yes, finally!* Both dragons shook themselves eagerly, and Stormfly chirruped, nudging at Astrid. Eret would have flinched to have a Nadder pushing its sharp beak against him, but Astrid just chuckled and adjusted her balance, patting Stormfly's muzzle. “Alright, girl, we’ll get going. Mount up, Eret” she instructed.

“Okay…Sky Fire?” Eret called his dragon over, and heaved himself up into the saddle. ‘Basic’ was the only way to describe it; the saddle was just a leather pad with a raised part at the front to grip, and a pair of simple stirrups. “Isn't there a…a belt to strap myself in, or something?”

“Hey, if you can hang on with no saddle, you can hang on with that saddle. Now hold on tight!” Astrid grinned. Stormfly spread her wings and leapt; Sky Fire followed suit, and Eret was certain he’d left his stomach and possibly his kidneys behind. They soared high above Berk, the training ring a grey smudge far below them.
“Lesson one – balance. It's pretty simple. Brace your feet against the stirrups and your arms against the saddle. When he dives, push back. When he climbs, pull forward. If he leans left, you lean a little bit right. If he leans right, you lean a little bit left. You got all that?”

“Sure!” Eret called back, more confidently than he really felt, “I practically live on my ship, Astrid. This can't be much different from keeping my footing on deck when the waves are tossing her about.”

Astrid gave him a thumbs up. “Sky Fire, follow Stormfly’s lead!” she instructed.

Stormfly flew to the nearest practice course through the trees, swooping down in a shallow dive and swerving amongst them. At first Eret leaned too much, unbalancing Sky Fire a bit and making him clip his wings against the trunks of the trees. The Nadder squawked in annoyance, but was pacified when Eret patted his neck and apologised, “Sorry, mate. Err, pal.”

Sky Fire chirruped in confusion. *He isn't calling me his mate, is he?* he asked Stormfly, who explained, *No, I think it's a human word for 'friend'.*

The two Nadders swerved through the trees, going increasingly faster and tilting at more acute angles. “Don't worry about trying to steer” Astrid advised, “Your dragon knows what he's doing. Just concentrate on keeping yourself balanced. If he's leaning too far one way, pull the other way so he knows to level out.”

They emerged from the trees and flew to the sun coated cliffs, riding a thermal spiralling up towards the clouds. Eret began to relax, daring to look around and take in the view. He’d seen the horizon plenty of times from the deck or the uppermost spar of the sail on his ship. It had never looked wider, or more endless, than it did from Sky Fire’s back. *I think I could get used to this.*

From the air, both Astrid and Eret spotted three silhouettes approaching in the sky from the north-west. The smallest of the trio peeled off and swept around to catch up with them. “Hey, Eret, how’s it going?” Hiccup asked as Toothless glided between Sky Fire and Stormfly.

“It’s…going well” Eret replied after a moment, “I never thought I’d say this, but this dragon riding thing is easier than I thought it’d be.”

“Aret’s a natural” Astrid complimented.

“You think so?” he asked, surprised.

“It seems like it” Hiccup agreed, “It happens. Some people just take naturally to riding dragons – and some don’t, admittedly, but anyone can be a skilled rider with practice.”

“Some people take to it so naturally they can do half the flying for the dragon – now, who does that remind me of?” Astrid remarked teasingly, and her fiancé chuckled.

They made a lap of the island, and landed back in the training ring to let the dragons have a drink and something to eat. “You can keep Stormfly’s saddle” Astrid told Eret, “We won’t need it anymore.”

“Oh if you like, I could build a custom saddle for Sky Fire” Hiccup offered. Before Eret could reply, he was interrupted by the dragons vocalising. Stormfly waved the tip of her tail at Toothless, flicking it away when the Night Fury pounced, the two of them running in circles and chasing each other’s tails.

*Come and play with us, Sky Fire!* Stormfly trilled.
*With Alpha-Toothless?*

*We’re friends now – and just because I’m an Alpha doesn’t mean I can’t have fun!*

*He’s right, Sky Fire* Hiccup added, as he and the other riders watched their dragons play. *You should enjoy yourselves.*

*Alright, Alpha-Hiccup* Sky Fire conceded, before snatching up a bar in his jaws and prancing away, wings fluttering. *Hey, Stormfly, come and get this!*

Hiccup and Astrid both laughed at the sight of their dragons having a three way tug of war with the pole. Eret watched them and frowned slightly…

“Hiccup, Astrid?” he asked suddenly, prompting the two of them to look over at him inquisitively. “Err…can we talk? There are some things I’d like to ask you about.”

“Oh, yeah, no problem” Hiccup nodded, gesturing to the bench that the Book of Dragons was still lying on. Hiccup sat down next to Eret, and Astrid sat down next to Hiccup, flicking her studded over-skirt out of the way. “So, Eret, what’s on your mind?” Hiccup asked as he put an arm around Astrid’s shoulders.

Eret sucked in a breath and blew it out, running a hand over his face. “I have no idea…I don’t know what I’m thinking” he declared. “This is all insane…I’m not supposed to like dragons, or…or ride them…look, I know you two must think I’m a monster, for trapping dragons…but I had a good reason. At least, I always believed it was a good reason…but now I’m not so sure, I’m just getting swept up in all this change, and that bothers me.”

“We know, you were scared of Drago” Hiccup nodded, “We don’t agree with what you were doing, but I don’t think we can really blame you for trying to keep your head.”

“No, it’s not that. I mean yeah, I was scared of Drago, but I was already trapping dragons when he ‘hired’ me” Eret admitted, making air-quotes. “Before I knew what sort of man Drago really was, I agreed to work with him because I thought he was doing it all for the same reason I was. To help people, to defend them from dragons that could raid their villages and burn their homes…it was simple, okay? Dragons were dangerous, vicious, they couldn’t be trusted…but they could be outsmarted.

“But now, I keep wondering if the dragons I encountered attacking people were just being…mind-controlled, or something. I keep thinking of how Sky Fire risked his life to defend me…and how those dragons trapped on Drago’s ship distracted him when he almost found us out, Astrid. They didn't even know us, but they helped us just because you told them we were against Drago…”

“Suncrest, Beressa and Silver Sheen were very clever” Astrid remarked, “They didn't know that I knew they could understand me, but they still figured out I was smarter than most humans they’d encountered and decided to help us.”

“How do you…? No, never mind, Hiccup must have told you. That’s the other thing – you say that dragons can understand us, and I wouldn't believe that but it almost seems like they do. And you say that they're centuries old, which I really can't believe, because…well, how would you even know?”

“There are ways to tell a dragons age; you just have to count their”-

“Yeah, but how do you know that that is how to tell a dragons age? Just because your dragon told you it was?”
Hiccup frowned. “Toothless wouldn’t lie to me, Eret” he said firmly, with a look that said he wasn’t about to argue the point.

“…Okay, fair enough…but can you blame me for being a bit sceptical? I mean, if dragons are so ancient, and intelligent, then why don’t they show it? Why do they keep getting captured? Why are our dragons chasing each other in circles and acting like…like…”

“Animals?” finished Hiccup with a knowing smile, “Eret, they are animals. Look, dragons know that humans can’t hear thought-speak, and they’re not going to waste time trying to prove they’re clever if we don’t pay attention.”

“Once you know what to look for, you can see how smart they really are…although, actually, not all of them are that smart, just like not all humans are that smart” Astrid admitted, “Age isn’t really a guarantee of wisdom.”

“Dragons who are captured are usually younger ones, only a few decades old. Ones who haven’t encountered humans enough to realise that they can sometimes be a threat…but even the oldest, wisest of dragons could be fooled by a well-hidden trap. They are hidden, after all. Dragons don’t really understand machines, even basic ones; and they aren’t going to make an instant connection between ‘if I snatch up this prey that’s just lying out in the open’ and ‘nets I can’t burn through will grab me’.

“If they manage to escape, or get rescued, then that dragon is going to be warier in the future; but it’s so difficult for them to escape. Fire-proof cages, chains they can’t bite or burn through, ships that will sink and drown them if they try to flame their way out…they conserve their strength and focus on surviving for as long as they can, even if it means obeying their captors. Toothless told me that dragons in fighting pits are faking it. They pretend to fight and take turns to ‘lose’ to give each other a chance to be fed.”

Eret’s eyes widened. Hiccup looked at him and revealed, “Sometimes, dragons let themselves be captured so that their pack-mates or their offspring can be spared…or to be with someone they love. They might not always think like we do, but they feel what we do – sometimes they feel it even more strongly than we do.”

_I am going to have a lot to think about tonight_ Eret mused. There was a brief silence; and they realised that the dragons had finished their game. Hiccup kissed Astrid on the cheek - she promptly tugged him back for a kiss on the lips – and stood up. “Toothless and I should get back on patrol” he said, walking over to his dragon and mounting up. “Eret, do you want to come with us, and practice at the same time?”

Eret hesitated. Sky Fire padded closer and chittered at him. “What’s he saying?”

“He’s saying you should come flying, you’re not as scared of it anymore” Hiccup translated for the dragon. After a pause, Eret smiled, and walked over to his dragon. “Okay, pal. Let’s go flying” he agreed, swinging himself into the saddle. The three of them took off into the sky, and this time, Eret was ready.

Once he’d thought trapping dragons was the most important, exciting job he could do…but riding them might just have topped that, in every way imaginable.
After some deliberation, Hiccup and Astrid agreed that it would be best if she took the lead in teaching Eret to fly, considering they both rode Spike-Tails. Hiccup on the other hand, would teach Eret to calm and tame wild dragons.

His idea – and he thought it was actually quite a good one – was that Eret and his crew could put their hands to a new form of ‘dragon wrangling’, and either humanely discourage dragons from going near human settlements, or encourage humans and dragons to live, if not side by side, at least peacefully. Without killing each other. That would be great.

Before he could really get down to working with Eret, Hiccup wanted to ensure their pack was stable. They needed to establish a proper hierarchy and assign roles, a matter that was further complicated by the fact that many of the originals had human companions, who wouldn’t always be able to accompany them.

Their territory encompassed Outcast Island, and that meant there were even more dragons who might not consider themselves part of the Berk pack but living and hunting in their territory. Toothless and Hiccup would have to fly out to the island and bring the dragons there into their pack, since if they weren’t the dragons of Berk would consider them trespassers and drive them away from their nesting grounds. It was a few days before he managed to get around to it.

Once he felt confident that there were no major issues to deal with, and that the dragons would come find him and Toothless if they were needed, Hiccup settled down at his desk in his room. At the top of a piece of parchment he wrote Pack of Berk Hierarchy and then stopped, stumped.

There were a lot of ways dragons formed a pecking order. For dragons, especially aggressive ones, who lived in single kind packs like Changewings or Speed Stingers, it was a rather straightforward matter. Whoever they could beat in a fight were on the ledges below them, so to speak, and whoever could beat them were on the ledges above.

When it came to mixed kind packs, things got a little more complicated. Each kind of dragon tended to have their own pecking order amongst themselves, hierarchies within hierarchies. The dragons who had been under Drago and Usurpers control had been set against each other over and over until a pecking order emerged, and a lot of them were now trying to bully the originals onto the ledges beneath them, with little success.

In an effort to stave off the worst of the fighting, on the way home Hiccup had promised that he'd figure out the hierarchy at the first opportunity. Maybe if I base it on relationships? He wondered to himself, who knows who, and who's closest to me and Toothless...oh, but that would leave out the newcomers...not for long though...maybe if I make two hierarchies and combine them...?

Wracking his brains, Hiccup suddenly recalled something Misty-Onyx had told him about dragon hierarchies. They could also be based, as the Myrkr Pack was, on who did the most for the pack as a whole. Defence parties, hunting parties, and so on. That meant he’d first have to assign roles, but that would be easier to do if the dragons were in a hierarchy, so he was back to square one.

“Hiccup? Would you like some lunch?” he heard his mother ask at some point, but Hiccup wasn't really listening. Still concentrating on his list, he gave a vague grunt of agreement. Toothless warbled happily at the thought of food – he was starving – so Valka went to fetch him some fresh fish. She brought a plate up for Hiccup as well, placing it on his bed since his desk sloped.
At first he paid no attention to the food, staring at whatever he was working on with his brow furrowed and the tip of his tongue poking out of the corner of his mouth. Curious, and somewhat concerned, his mother peered over his shoulder, placing a hand on it. Hiccup started, and blinked up at her as if he hadn't even realised she was there.

His mother gestured at the as yet untouched plate of food and said gently, “I, uh, thought you might be hungry.” Only then did Hiccup realise how ravenous he actually was. Getting to his feet and wincing at the pins and needles that shot up his limbs, he replied “Oh, thanks!”

“You're welcome, son” Valka smiled at him as he hurried over to his bed and sat down, picking up the plate to balance it on his lap. A moment later he looked up and around, asking “Did you bring some for Toothless, too?”

*I ate mine straightaway* his dragon replied, at the same time as Valka confirmed, “Yes, but he gulped it down pretty quickly. You'll get a stomach ache if you eat too fast, you know” she told Toothless, who snorted disbelievingly. Valka wasn't able to hear thought-speak, but twenty years of life amongst dragons had made her fluent in their emotional cues. She folded her arms and raised an eyebrow of motherly stern-ness. “I mean it. That goes for both of you.”

Toothless ducked his head apologetically, and Hiccup chewed a little slower. Valka smiled; then her curiosity got the better of her and she peered at the papers Hiccup had been writing on. “A hierarchy? Doesn't this pack already have a hierarchy?” she wondered, puzzled.

Hiccup swallowed a mouthful of bread and explained, “Well, I need to combine the hierarchy of the dragons we rescued from Drago, with the…vaguer hierarchy our original dragons had. Thing is, after their first queen was, y’know”- Hiccup swiped a finger over his throat – “the dragons of her pack scattered all over. It's just that most of them came to live on Berk, Dragon Island, or Outcast Island. Really, Toothless should have been the alpha from the beginning, but it's like they didn't want to have another leader after what the last one did” he explained.

“That's…very strange” Valka frowned. From what she had gathered, dragon packs always had a male alpha or female queen (which were really one and the same) to lead them. The idea of a pack without an alpha was like a village without a chief; how would they function without everything falling into anarchy? “Are you sure they didn't have a leader before you and Toothless?”

“I guess we sort of were the leaders; at least, the dragons seemed to listen to him and I more than anyone else. I don't know…even the dragons aren't sure why they didn't just acknowledge Toothless as their new alpha right away. I guess it doesn't really matter now” Hiccup shrugged, “but I still need to figure out the new hierarchy, and sooner the better.”

“Is there really such a rush?”

Hiccup sighed and shrugged again. “I guess not…but the longer I take to figure it out, the more likely they are to try and figure out their own hierarchy, and that means fights, and lots of them. I know I can't stop them fighting entirely, but I'd rather avoid the worst of it” he explained.

*It won't matter for a few more days* Toothless remarked from his bed.

“Excuse me for trying to be efficient” Hiccup retorted. It might confuse people when he held seemingly one-way conversations with dragons, but if the incident that morning was anything to go by, it would probably make them even more bewildered if he stopped talking aloud altogether.

*Efficient? Boring long human word* Toothless sneezed at him, *Were you going to let me help, or were you just going to do it all yourself?*
“Of course I was going to let you help; and just for the record, ‘efficient’ means doing something well, without wasting any time or effort. As in, I’m trying to be a good alpha, and you’re napping after stuffing your greedy”*

*That’s it!* Toothless leapt to his feet, bounded over to Hiccup’s bed in one leap and went on the attack to defend his honour. Of course the ‘attack’ consisted of energetically coating his human in a good thick layer of saliva; he would never actually harm Hiccup. “Gah! Gerroff!” Hiccup laughed, holding his plate out with one hand and trying helplessly to fend Toothless off with the other.

Toothless warbled happily, enjoying himself and made a fake lunge at the plate of half eaten food. Hiccup quickly put it down and pushed back against him with both hands. “C’mon, cut it out! I’m sorry, okay!? I was joking!”

*Submit!* Toothless demanded imperiously, making himself big and important looking. Hiccup stood up and then stood on the bed so he was taller, but he was chuckling and Toothless’ jaw was lolling in a dragon’s grin. Both of them seemed to have forgotten that their mother was right there, watching the argument and the play fight with a mixture of amusement and bewilderment.

“I can’t!” Hiccup declared, suddenly getting an idea, “I mean, think about it! We’re both alphas, we’re on the same level of the hierarchy. If we start fighting for dominance, it’d just go back and forth forever” he explained. Toothless blinked in confusion and ceased attempting to nudge Hiccup down so he could pin him until he gave up and bared his throat in surrender. Hiccup took advantage of his puzzlement to dart a hand out and scratch the sweet spot under his jaw.

Toothless slumped bonelessly to the floor, rolling onto his back, and Hiccup laughed triumphantly. “I win! I – uh, heh, heh...” he grinned sheepishly at his mom, realising she was still there. “Um…we’re just playing.” He smiled innocently, if a bit awkwardly, at her, and she tentatively smiled back.

The two of them held each other’s gazes for a moment longer, then looked away uncomfortably. Toothless looked between them both and wondered what the problem was, but before he could ask, another problem arose. Rather, a young man in a horned helmet and a dark purple and yellow blotched Fire-Scale stuck their heads through the sky-light and brought news of a problem.

“Hiccup, the new dragons broke into the fish stores!” Gustav exclaimed urgently; Fanghook relayed the same message simultaneous, but with the respectful ‘Alpha’ prefix attached to Hiccup’s name. “Some of ours jumped in to stop them but then they started fighting – oh, hi Mrs Haddock” the boy added, spotting Valka.

“We’ll be right there” Hiccup replied at once, swinging himself into the saddle. Fanghook pulled his head back out of the sky-light, and Hiccup ducked as Toothless leapt up to the gap and out.

It was chaos when Hiccup and Toothless arrived at the storehouse. It took him a moment to piece together what had happened; a couple of Thunderclaws had apparently decided that breaking in to get at the barrelled fish was far easier than waiting for a turn at the feeding station. Then four originals flying nearby dived down to scold them, barrels had broken, scattering fish everywhere, and now they were all screaming at each other.

Fortunately, Toothless screamed louder. *Stop that!* he commanded, and all five dragons immediately crouched low to the ground. The Night Fury landed facing the two guilty Thunderclaws, who looked like they were torn between apologetic submission and stubborn defiance. Their wings twitched and the fangs protruding from their jaws scraped together.

Toothless and Hiccup were having none of it. The black dragon held himself as if he were twice the
size of the Thunderclaws combined, and Hiccup sat straight-backed and sure atop his shoulders.

*What do you two think you're doing?* Toothless demanded, glaring a challenge to answer.

*They're tried to eat the humans fish!* a female Fire-Scale cried from somewhere on their left; Fanghook’s brownish yellow and purple blotched mate, Bestrin. She was as proud as her mother, and considered herself very bold, so it didn't surprise Hiccup in the slightest that she'd dived into the fray. He looked over his shoulder and announced, *We know, but they need to own up.*

He hoped they’d hurry up, because the debacle had rapidly gained an audience and it would only be a matter of time before his dad showed up. Gustav decided to play his part by herding away the dismayed oglers, human and dragon alike. “Come on, people, move along! Nothing to see here!” His efforts were somewhat hindered by the fact that Fanghook and Bestrin kept nuzzling and playfully nipping at each other, distracted from the doings of humans.

*We were just hungry, we weren't hurting anyone, Alpha-Toothless* the Thunderclaw on the left, the dark brown on green one, protested weakly. The more belligerent red one insisted *Nobody was guarding the fish, it was just sitting there, waiting to be eaten!*

Toothless had heard this excuse before; it was the same one the dragons had used when they first started living on Berk, when they believed that so long as they didn't outright attack the humans then they could do as they pleased. There was no excuse nowadays. *It was not just 'sitting there', the humans were keeping it for themselves! We all live on this island, dragons and humans, and we have to share. If you were hungry you should have gone fishing, or gone to the feeding stations.*

*Why does it matter if we ate the humans’ fish?* demanded the troublesome red Thunderclaw. *This is a dragon nest, why are humans even here in this nest anyway?*

That statement heralded a chorus of indignant and disbelieving squawks. *How stupid are you?* Bestrin demanded, looking as incredulous as a fire-scale could. Her friend and fellow Nightmare drakaina, Squash (named by her riders youngest daughter), rolled her eyes and scoffed, *The humans were here first, egg-for-brain. This is a human-and-dragon nest.*

The gathering increased by four when Stoick and Valka turned up on their own dragons, and Hiccup could already see his father’s bushy eyebrows curling down at the sight of the broken storehouse door – it was all but ripped off the hinges – and ruined catch. This had been the food they had been rationing in the event of Drago putting Berk under siege.

Hiccup had heard enough. He pointed at the two Thunderclaws and said aloud, for the benefit of the villagers, “The two of you are going to fly out to sea and catch enough fish to replace twice as much as you've eaten or knocked on the ground – and you're not going to eat any of it. Gustav, you and Fanghook go with them, show them what to do, and tell me if they try to eat the catch they're supposed to be replacing” he instructed firmly.

The A-team leader saluted with a “Yes, sir!” and Fanghook leapt into the air. Toothless snarled at the Thunderclaws, *Your alpha told you to do something, now get moving!* Their eyes widened in alarm, wings flaring and striking against each other’s. Fortunately they didn't stop to bicker, but scrambled away from each other and heaved their heavy bodies into the air, following Fanghook.

*Can we go with them?* Bestrin asked hopefully; but Hiccup knew that if she and Fanghook were in the same place for too long, they'd get more interested in each other than in what they were supposed to be doing. So instead he instructed, “Bestrin, you and Squash clear up the fish- and before you ask, yes you can eat it” he agreed. It wasn't like it was any good for the villagers to eat anymore. “And clear up the broken wood, just don't light anything else on fire, please.
“Tagger, Bumblebee” he continued, addressing their Spike-Tail and Rock-Tail friends, “You two start spreading the word to the new arrivals – the fish kept in barrels is not to eat, unless a human tells them they're allowed. Tell them if they eat food they're not supposed to, they have to replace all of it and they're not allowed a share themselves.”

By Viking standards – by human standards – it was a pretty weak punishment. Then again, stealing fish was a pretty weak crime. Nobody had been injured and the catch would be replaced - he'd make sure of it – so at most it was an inconvenience. Tagger and Bumblebee flew off, whilst Bestrin and Squash set about devouring the now ruined smoked fish and torching the unsalvageable broken barrels, competing with each other to see who could set alight the most pieces.

The audience swiftly thinned out when Toothless roared at the dragons and Stoick roared at the villagers, shooing them off to go and do something useful. Hiccup dismounted and came over to his parents. Valka, feeling a peculiar mixture of pride and worry, asked her sons, “Are you two okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine” Hiccup smiled at her, Toothless purring as she scratched him under the chin; then he awkwardly met his father's gaze. “I'm sorry about the fish, dad” he apologised.

“It's not your fault” Stoick sighed after a moment, before asking resignedly, “This is going to happen a lot, isn't it?”

“No” Hiccup said firmly, “Not if I can help it. The dragons are my”-

*Our* Toothless interjected with an insistent nudge. Without missing a beat Hiccup stroked his head and amended “Our responsibility, and we’ll make sure they behave. Hey, if you want, I'll even ask a couple of dragons to guard the storehouse until everyone's learned the rules.”

Stoick looked doubtful. “I think it would be better if humans were guarding our food, son.”

“The dragons I'm thinking of have human partners” Hiccup countered, “and there’d be three humans guarding the food, cos one of the dragons is a Twin-Head” he explained. He'd been encouraging his fellow villagers – with varying degrees of success – to use the dragons own names for their kind, as a gesture of goodwill. A lot of the dragons were now being referred to by their birth names – Bumblebee was far happier with his current moniker than the nickname his Viking partner had bestowed on him after a night of heavy drinking– Bum Boil.

Hiccup was tempted to ask Astrid to make ‘don't give dragons nicknames when you're drunk’ an official law of Berk, the way he'd persuaded his father to adapt ‘don't attack dragons or use anything made of dragon parts’ into Berk’s official laws.

“The same three people?”

“We can put people on shift – and it wouldn't even be permanent, dad. This is just like what happened when our – not our, all the dragons are ours – I mean the originals, the dragons from the Red Death’s flock. When they first came to live here they were stealing food and breaking things all over, remember? They learned, and the new ones will too” Hiccup insisted.

“We know, dear” Valka assured him, before suggesting “Why don't you come back to the house and finish your lunch?”

It was a tempting offer, and whilst they did still have to go to Outcast Island, Hiccup supposed it could wait for an hour or so. They returned home; Hiccup retrieved his plate from upstairs and sat
with his parents whilst Toothless curled up by the fire.

The chief’s abode was the largest in the village, but Hiccup now started to wonder if they needed to make it even bigger. After all, once he and Astrid were married then there’d be five people, and their dragons, all living in or around the dwelling. That didn’t even include any children they’d have. Still, he supposed, it would be a while before that was an issue anyway.

The family had just finished dinner when from outside there came a thump, and the sound of running boots. Ruff and Tuff burst into the house without even knocking and rushed up to Hiccup. “Hiccup! You've got to help, there's an emergency!” Tuffnut shouted, arms flailing.

Stoick fumed. “What have I told you two about-?”

“Oh, hey, chief” Tuff greeted, oblivious to the man’s ire, “Mrs Haddock. You're looking…nice.”

Valka blinked. “Um, thank you…”

“Forget the flattery, bro!” Ruff whacked her brother’s helmet askew, “This is urgent. We should have fixed this ages ago!”

“Fixed what ages ago?” Hiccup demanded, though even as he said it, Toothless remarked *You shouldn't have asked them that.*

Ignoring the dragon, Hiccup demanded “You guys, what's the big emergency? Is it the dragons? Has someone been hurt?”

“Worse” Tuffnut declared, his eyes wide and solemn, “It's the dragon rider initiation ceremony!”

Hiccup stared at him, as did Toothless, Valka and Stoick. After a pause, Hiccup said uncertainly, “Err, Tuff, we don't have a Dragon Rider initiation ceremony.”

“Exactly!” Ruffnut agreed, “There is no way to make someone an official dragon rider! Which means Eret son of Eret can't be one of us, which means he and I can't have a passionate love affair and marry, which means I can't have his babies!”

For a moment all Hiccup could think was Eww. Tuffnut gagged. “Okay, didn’t need that mental image, thanks” Hiccup grimaced, “And Eret isn't going to be staying on Berk anyway. He’s going to be travelling out to places beyond the archipelago and helping people deal with dragons humanely. That’s what I hired him for” he reminded the twins, not that they probably knew that.

Ruffnut stared at him in dismay, upset that the love of her life – if you asked her – wouldn’t be around for her to flirt with. She perked up seconds later, realising “Okay then, I can work with that! I'll just have to go with him.”

“Great! Hope you have fun out there, sis. You won't be missed.”

“You moron! You're coming too; I can't fly Barf&Belch on my own, now can I?”

“Uh, I'm pretty sure they can fly themselves” Tuffnut scoffed, “They're not Toothless – oh, err, no offence T” he added in the Night Fury’s direction. Toothless rolled his eyes and shifted so he was facing away from the weird humans, draping his tail fins over his head.

“And I wouldn't wanna come watch you making goo-goo eyes at his muscles and butt anyway.”

“Can you guys argue about this somewhere else?” Hiccup asked in exasperation.
“Sure – we’ll finish this later.” Tuffnut shot his sister a look that promised much havoc, and she reciprocated it.

They looked like they were ready to duke it out there and then, but Stoick had had enough. “I want you two out of my house, now” he growled, as fiercely as any dragon. Fortunately, Ruff decided they’d best not push their luck and dragged her brother out by his dreadlocks. Hiccup went with them, because he knew that if he didn’t solve this now, they’d never let up bugging him until he did. Toothless made as if to follow him, but Hiccup waved him off.

Once they were all outside, Tuffnut turned to Hiccup and questioned, “So, what are we going to do about the initiation ceremony? Or should I say, the lack thereof.”

“…I don’t really think that’s a high priority, Tuffnut.”

“Of course it is! I mean, what really makes you a Dragon Rider, young Hiccup? What makes me a Dragon Rider? What makes any of us Dragon Riders?”

“Err, the fact that we ride dragons might have something to do with it…”

“Oh, Hiccup, Hiccup, Hiccup” Tuffnut shook his head patronisingly, “You of all people should know that riding a dragon doesn't make you a Dragon Rider.”

“…It doesn't?”

“Duh! Just look at Gustav, and Spitelout, and Bucket and Mulch, and Heather, and Dagur, and your mom and dad!”

“I have no idea what you guys are talking about.”

“It's elementary, my dear Hiccup” Ruffnut declared in a peculiar accent, “Now, try your best to follow along. The six of us – you, me, Tuff, Astrid, Fishlegs and Snotlout – are all Dragon Riders, correct?”

“Uh, yeah…”

“And yet all the people Tuff just mentioned also ride dragons, and yet are not part of our elite team. They might ride dragons, but you see, they are not Dragon Riders. Not in an official sense. So I too ask you, what really makes someone a Dragon Rider? Did we really just call ourselves that because it's what all those hunters yelled out whenever they saw us?”

“Oh!” Tuffnut exclaimed suddenly, “That could be the initiation ceremony! You're not a proper Dragon Rider until you've had a dragon hunter shoot poison arrows at you. That'd be easier than our first idea, to fight a Red Death. I mean, hunters are everywhere these days, but Red Deaths are a bit …rare” he muttered to himself.

Hiccup, for his part, was still trying to wrap his head around what the twins were saying. “You think we need an initiation ceremony to make someone officially a dragon rider?”

“Precisely. Anyone could train and ride a dragon; you've said so yourself” Ruffnut insisted, “but it takes more than that to be a Dragon Rider. We’re capitalising that phrase, by the way.”

I'm going to regret asking this, but… “Was there anything you had in mind?”

“Well, somebody – I won’t say who, only that his name rhymes with Dishmegs – shot down our first idea, where the initiated has to limbo beneath a flaming bar of fire” Tuffnut said, disappointed, “But
now I'm really feeling a ritual involving dodging flaming arrows. I mean, there's gotta be fire involved somewhere, you know."

“We also considered the possibility of them performing a death defying free-fall” Ruffnut continued, “Like you and Toothless did when you took out the Red Death. Maybe some sort of re-enactment of your epic battle.”

“We’d compensate them for loss of limbs, of course.”

Hiccup looked between them and admitted, “I still don’t really see why this is such a big deal. We've managed perfectly well without an initiation ceremony for five years.”

“Yes, but Hiccup, don't you see? This is about way more than just riding dragons!”

“…It is?”

“Yes! C'mon, man, you're supposed to be smart” Ruffnut rolled her eyes. “Look, back during the war, the only way to become a man – or woman – of the tribe was to…K-I-L-L a dragon” she stage whispered, unsubtly glancing over at Barf&Belch, whose heads were lowered towards Hiccup. He suddenly realised that they’d bowed to him when he left the house, and never stopped.

*You two can stop bowing now* Hiccup told them hastily, as Ruff elbowed Tuff and hastily added, “Well, duh! Of course we are!”

“I'll see what I can come up with” Hiccup promised, “And I'll even discuss it with Astrid. Seeing as how she's going to be chief and all.”

“You'll take our suggestions into consideration, won't you?”

“Oh – yes, definitely. Absolutely” Hiccup nodded, “Well, I'd better get back to…really busy, you know, lots to do…” He escaped back into the house. The twins stared after him, and then grinned and head-butted each other victoriously.

When he stepped back inside the house, his parents were talking at the table. “Is everything okay?” his mother inquired. Part of her felt like she was asking that too much, but another part of her wanted to make up for lost time.

Hiccup shook his head and explained, “No, they just…they think we need a new coming-of-age ceremony. Y’know, since the old one is sort of…” he cleared his throat and added, “I think they're kind of onto something. We can't have anyone you-know-what a dragon as part of their coming of age, but maybe instead of that they could…tame or ride a dragon” he shrugged.

“Well then, I'll leave it to the future leaders of Berk to settle the matter of coming-of-age ceremonies” Stoick decided. “In the meantime, I need to send word to our allies and tell them that the threat of Drago has been dealt with. The Berserkers already know, of course; but I still need to inform the
Outcasts, Meatheads and Bog-Burglars.”

“I’ll tell Alvin” Hiccup offered, “Toothless and I need to go to Outcast Island anyway. C’mon, bud.”

Toothless reluctantly pulled himself from the warmth of the fire – he had fire inside, of course, but a little extra warmth was never unwelcome – and padded out of the house with Hiccup. Outside, they found Skull-Crusher and Cloud-Jumper sharing a meal of fish that Cloud had gone to catch whilst the humans fed and talked. Both dragons bowed submissively to their Alphas, despite each being bigger and older than Toothless-Hiccup combined.

*You guys don't have to bow to us all the time* Hiccup protested, but he knew it was futile. He just didn't really feel comfortable with it; it wasn't as if he felt he was better than any of the dragons. Then again, neither did Toothless, but the Night Fury didn't mind the constant obeisance. It was simply the way of things, to submit to an alpha, and they would be far better than Usurper or Her.

*I understand, Alpha-Toothless* Cloud agreed. Skull-Crusher didn't protest at being passed over; if anything, he was pleased to not have to worry about dealing with the rest of the pack in their Alpha’s absence.

*We won't be long* Hiccup promised, *Just, try to make sure the whole island doesn't burn down before we get back* he requested as he swung himself into the saddle. Toothless took to the air, and for a few glorious moments all of their worries were blown away in the rush of the wind.

Before they left for Outcast Island, Hiccup wanted to check up on Gustav and the resupply efforts. “It went great, Hiccup!” the young teen declared proudly, “These guys found a huge shoal of fish way offshore – I guess they’re Tracker Class, huh? And they didn’t eat any of the catch.”

“That's great. Listen, Toothless and I are heading out to Outcast Island to stake claim on our territory there, but we’ll be back soon.”

“Can Fanghook and I come?”

“Err…actually, Gustav, I have an even more important job for the two of you. I need you to do a circuit of Berk and let all the dragons – and villagers, too – know that we’ve gone, and where.”

Gustav didn't look entirely happy with the prospect of being a messenger boy, but Fanghook took his Alphas’ instructions to heart and obediently purred *We will, Alpha-Hiccup.* He carried his human partner away, ignoring the boy’s protests. Fanghook might have been a more considerate fire-scale compared to Hookfang, but the younger drake could still be just as stubborn in his own way.

With the A-teams leader sufficiently occupied, Toothless turned about and flew out to the barren, rocky island that the Outcasts called home. They hadn't gotten very far before Hiccup distantly heard a voice shouting his name, and Toothless heard a familiar roar. They slowed down a bit and Hiccup looked back to see Stormfly flying to catch up with them.

When she and Astrid came level with them, Hiccup asked “I thought you were training with Eret?”

“We took a break, and then Gustav told me you were heading out to Outcast Island, so we thought we’d tag along; didn't we, girl?” Astrid smiled, stroking her dragons neck. Stormfly chirruped happily, squinting at her rider from the corner of her eye. “Besides, I figured we need to let Alvin
and his lot know that Drago isn't going to be a problem after all.”

“I was kind of planning on doing that anyway” Hiccup admitted, “But I suppose if you explain the situation to him, whilst Toothless and I stake our claim on the territory… I mean, obviously, I don’t mind you coming along” he smiled tenderly at her, a smile which she eagerly reciprocated. “Oh! I just remembered, since you’re here…the twins turned up at my place earlier with a… bit of an interesting question…”

When they reached Outcast Island, it wasn’t long before they were spotted by the sentries. Fortunately all four of them were recognised, and Alvin himself came out to greet them, followed by his crimson and jet black dappled Thunderdrum, Bloodtide. “Hiccup! Astrid! Well, well, well, what a pleasant surprise! Is it me birthday?” he asked, before bursting into raucous laughter. “Aw, heck! As far as this lot is concerned, every day’s me birthday!”

Hiccup and Astrid politely laughed at the joke, if just to appease the mountain of a Viking who had always seemed capable of crushing their skulls in his bare hands. Alvin suddenly went from being unnervingly jovial to deadly serious, his eyes and mouth all but vanishing beneath his bushy eyebrows and beard. “Oh, I’m guessing you’re here to deliver bad news? Has that dratted madman Drago finally shown his face? Because my men and I are ready to sail or fly out and fight him and his army alongside Berk. It’s been far too long since we’ve heard the sweet music of battle!”

The watching Outcasts bellowed eagerly, shaking weapons in meaty fists. Hiccup felt almost reluctant to say, “Um, actually, Alvin…we came to tell you the exact opposite. Drago isn’t invading the archipelago anymore…and his dragons aren’t going to be a problem either.”

“What happened? Was he killed?” Alvin demanded, before immediately deciding “No, of course he was - there’s no way a man like that would’ve surrendered. O’course, if it were me I’d never surrender…” he trailed off, but then shook his head and demanded, “So, tell me, which brave warrior had the honour of delivering the killin’ blow?”

Hiccup swallowed. “Uh, actually, I did. I’m the one who…killed Drago” he admitted quietly. It wasn’t something he really wanted to boast about.

Alvin stared at him in disbelief. Every single Outcast stared at him in disbelief. They couldn't grasp the idea that this – by their standards – scrawny young man had fought and defeated a warrior who rivalled their chief in size, strength and cunning. “Oh, I get ya” Alvin said suddenly, “Ya mean ya helped that Night Fury o’ yours to kill him, with that fancy flying.”

Astrid quickly came to her fiancé’s defence. “Hiccup did kill Drago Bludvist” she insisted, “Ask anyone. Drago was about to attack Toothless, so Hiccup rushed to save him” she explained, though she knew they wouldn't grasp the full significance of that action.

The Outcasts had no real knowledge of the heart bind – in fact, all most people knew was that Hiccup could now communicate with dragons and was ageing differently, and not that he and Toothless would die together. It was felt safer for both of them, if enemies didn't know that to get rid of one they had only to target the other. Only a select few had been trusted with the true extent of the heart bind; their parents, Astrid, and Gobber.

However, even the Outcasts knew how close Hiccup was to his dragon, and to hear that he'd valiantly fought a dangerous madman in order to save a brother-in-arms impressed them considerably. “Well, well, well – I wouldn’t a’ thought you’d have had it in ya, lad!” Alvin boomed, clapping Hiccup on the back and nearly knocking the wind out of him. “You’re a real man now!”
Hiccup simply smiled politely and didn't comment. Oblivious, Alvin sighed and admitted, “Still, it's a bit disappointing…Bloodtide and me were looking forward to fighting off an invading army, weren't we?” he asked his dragon, thumping his hand down on the dragons scaled hide.

The red and black Thunderdrum rumbled in anticipation and huffed a sigh of disappointment. *I haven't had a chance to have a proper fight in ages* he complained.

“I wouldn't go hanging your axe up just yet” Hiccup warned him, “Drago might be gone, but his army is still out there somewhere. And something tells me they're not just going to take this lying down” he said gravely. Some naïve part of him hoped that if they did come, it would be to seek him out and learn from him, but he really doubted it.

“If they do show up, we'll be ready for them” Astrid said determinedly.

“Aye. I suppose I'd better discuss plans for how to deal with that bunch with Stoick, eh? Oh, and the future chief” Alvin added, winking at Hiccup.

Astrid smirked. “I look forward to it” she said simply.

Alvin blinked and frowned at her, confused. “Would Stoick want ya sitting in on the meetings, lass?”

She bristled a bit and replied curtly, “I would hope so, considering all my combat experience – and the fact that I am the future chief of Berk. Just so you know.”

Alvin’s eyes widened. He looked from Hiccup to Astrid, and back again, and once more. Finally he turned to Hiccup and burst out, rather tactlessly, “Your dad disowned you?”

“What?! No!” Hiccup exclaimed, shaking his head, “No, no, you've got it all wrong. My dad didn't disown me – making Astrid chief was my idea. See, um – you know how Stoick told you that Drago had enslaved dragons?”

“Aye?”

“Well, the reason they were fighting for him and not trying to escape or fight back or anything was…he'd also enslaved a Bewilderbeast. It's a leviathan sized Tidal Class dragon, it could breathe ice over this whole island in minutes…I have no idea how he did it, but Drago had enslaved one and was making it enslave all the other dragons. Err, Bewilderbeasts can sort of…mind control other dragons” Hiccup explained.

“After I killed his master, he tried to kill me, but Toothless saved me and challenged the bewilderbeast. Then I realised he was just lashing out because he was scared and hurt, and we managed to convince him to surrender and leave…and now Toothless is the Alpha of all the dragons on Berk, and Dragon Island…and, uh, Outcast Island, as well.

“See, that's the other reason I'm here. The main reason, actually. Outcast Island is within the territory of the Berk pack – I mean, it's still your island” he hastened to add, “but all the dragons here technically belong to the Berk pack, so Toothless and I came here so he could…claim his territory, basically” Hiccup explained.

When this was met only with blank stares, Hiccup cleared his throat and quickly said, “Yeah, well, uh, we’d better get going; but I’m sure Astrid will be happy to answer any questions you have, so nice to see you again…bye!” he rambled, getting back in the saddle and taking off in a hurry. Astrid huffed in annoyance and hurried to follow him, leaving behind a thoroughly confused Outcast chief.
Reconciling with Rivals

Alvin and the Outcasts watched the future chief of Berk…and her fiancé…fly off on their dragons. “Well, that were…what the- Bloodtide! Oi! Where the devil are yer going?!” Alvin demanded as his own Thunderdrum suddenly took off in pursuit of the pair. Bloodtide ignored his human and flew to catch up to the Swift-Wing and Spike-Tail, roaring to get their attention.

*Toothless!*

Toothless-Hiccup slowed to a hover and spun around to face the Thunderdrum; Stormfly noticed a moment later and turned as well. “Hiccup, what's going on?” Astrid asked in confusion.

“Not sure” he replied as Toothless demanded *What is it, Bloodtide? And it's Alpha-Toothless now.*

The Thunderdrum explained *I wanted to warn you - the dragons on the far side of the island, they have formed their own pack recently and the Queen will not take well to humans, or any dragons who live amongst them, in her territory.*

*This island is part of our territory* Toothless growled, determined, *Hiccup and I aren't about to let it go without a fight.*

Hiccup cut in at that point, saying *Let’s try to sort this out without having to fight. Thanks for the heads up, Bloodtide* he added to the thunderdrum. As an afterthought he added, *Spread the word amongst the riding dragons, that Toothless and I are the Alphas of this territory now. Believe me, we earned it.*

Without waiting for Bloodtide to reply, Toothless turned about and flew on, followed by Stormfly. Astrid stared pointedly and gestured for Hiccup to start explaining. “Well?”

“Bloodtide said the dragons on the far side of the island have formed their own pack, and apparently their Queen isn't a big fan of humans.”

“So she's hostile” Astrid assumed.

“He didn’t say, but I think we can assume the answer’s yes. Towards humans, at least.”

“Which includes us…great” Astrid said sarcastically. Clearly, he'd rubbed off on her somewhat. “What sort of dragon is this Queen, anyway?”

“Err…he didn't say that, either” Hiccup admitted sheepishly. The look that Astrid gave him was less than impressed. He winced and quickly added “But hey, don’t worry. I’m sure I can convince her to join her pack with ours, and if things get heated – no pun intended – then Toothless and I can handle what she throws at us.”

“Stormfly and I will cover you” Astrid promised him.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that” Hiccup murmured under his breath. Their dragons flew higher, bristling as they soared over the rocky spires and crevasses of Outcast Island. It wasn’t long before they spotted the sentries perched up on ledges and outcroppings. They hadn’t yet been spotted, and circled above the nesting ground, as Hiccup tried to pick out the queen. “She’ll be the one they’re all submissive to” he told Astrid, “The biggest, or the most dominant…”
Astrid’s eyes widened as she spotted what Hiccup had yet to. “Is a Titan-Wing Monstrous Nightmare big enough?”

Toothless circled around so Hiccup could see what Astrid was pointing to; a massive, dark purple and scarlet Fire-Scale drakaina who had just emerged from behind the cliffs, the carcass of a boar pierced on her razor sharp, dagger-like teeth.

Bork the Bold, and the Vikings that came after him, assumed that Titan-Wing was the last stage of a dragon’s life cycle – that the biggest dragons were also the oldest. During his time in Myrkr, Hiccup learned that this was not necessarily the case. Titan-Wing dragons were the most aggressive, the most dominant, the best hunters – they grew bigger because they got the most food and built their muscles to impress the most desired females. Eventually they reached some kind of tipping point and just…changed.

Hiccup had, of course, been very interested in what a Titan-Wing Night Fury looked like. Unlike other dragons theirs was a most subtle change; they grew a little bigger and stronger, and their scales took on an iridescent sheen. Other than that they remained as agile and camouflaged for the night as ever. With their new status, he guessed it would only be a matter of time before Toothless grew to the Titan-Wing stage, and he couldn’t wait to see it.

“Yeah, I’m thinking that’s a pretty good bet” he agreed, as they watched the queen lower her kill to the ground and begin to feast, growling at any dragon foolish enough to sneak closer in the hopes of grabbing a bite themselves.

A raw shriek broke the silence – Astrid didn’t need to hear thought-speak to know the cry meant *Intruders!*

“They’ve seen us!”

“Let’s meet the neighbours then!” Hiccup called back, and the two of them rushed forwards. Stormfly dodged, flicking her spines at the dragons surging to attack and then darting past them, Astrid crouched astride her shoulders. Toothless dove towards the nesting grounds and plasma-blasted the rock beneath one sentry just as they were about to take off. The dragon floundered, cursing with a snarl as the rock crumbled beneath their claws. Toothless-Hiccup darted past before they could recover.

They dodged a few more attacks, including a plume of fire from the jaws of the queen fire-scale. Toothless landed boldly right in front of her, his mouth filled with fire and a snarl in his throat. Stormfly and Astrid landed a little ways behind them. The queen burst into flames all over, tail lashing, wings spread wide, and breathed in to flame at them again. *No threat!* Hiccup cried out, holding a hand out – the shock of hearing a human thought-speak checked the queen’s ire, if only briefly.

*Who are you?!* she demanded, *Trespassers!*

*I think you’ll find you’re the trespassers* Toothless answered boldly, *Hiccup and I are the alphas of this territory; so give us obeisance, or leave* he made the ultimatum.

The drakaina hackled, pupils slitting as she glared at the upstart swift-wing and his human pet. *This is my territory! I found it and claimed it, and soon I'll drive off the pathetic little humans from my island! Leave!*

So she tried to command, but Toothless resisted her with ease. After dealing with Usurper, this Fire-Scale’s attempt to impose her will upon him was nearly laughable.
Hiccup knew they couldn't let her attack the Outcasts – that was exactly how so many dragon-human feuds began. Dragons would try to drive off humans or humans would try to capture dragons, the other would retaliate in kind, fighting fire with fire, and both sides would become locked in back-and-forth bloodshed.

"The humans who live here won't be easily scared off; they're Vikings. They won't attack the dragons on this island, I'll make sure of it – you have no reason to attack them* he insisted; from the corners of his eyes he glanced at the dragons gathering around, growling at him and Toothless. Many of them were now staring in shock, wondering who or even what he was, and how he could think-speak.

One or two of them began to recognise the heart bound pair. *That's the Swift-Wing who killed Her.*

*And that must be his human pet who helped him.*

*Hiccup is not my pet* Toothless snarled indignantly, *He is my other half! We’re heart bound, we defeated a Sea-Giant together and took his flock, and this island is part of our domain! I will tell you one more time; accept us as your Alphas or get out of our territory* he growled warningly at the fire-scale. She hissed at him, flames licking across her hide.

“Settle down, Toothless” Hiccup warned him, stroking the dragon’s head, before raising his head to meet the drakaina’s eyes. *You can trust us* he told her, *but Toothless is right. I don't want to drive you away from your nests, but this island is within our territory, and if you don't accept us as Alphas then the dragons of our pack will attack you as intruders. Your mates, your young, they'd all be in danger* he claimed, looking around at the dragons, at the mothers sheltering hatchlings beneath their wings.

He dismounted and slowly, carefully stepped towards her, feeling his fast beating heart rising up into his throat. Toothless tensed, eyeing the dragon suspiciously and warned *Hiccup, come back!*

“Hiccup!”

“It's okay” his rider called back, which did nothing to reassure him or Astrid. Then Hiccup ignited his Dragon Blade and the ‘queen’ pulled back in surprise. She hadn't been expecting him to have fire like hers. *See? We’re not so different* he said encouragingly, *Normally, I would never try to take over your pack, but it would be better for everyone if-*

Yet the drakaina focused on his outstretched hand, his fingers, and her jaws contorted into a snarl, flames licking amongst her fangs. *No! You are human, you are my enemy!* she screeched, and Hiccup staggered backwards as a torrent of fire blasted forth...

*NO!* Toothless screamed, leaping over him and knocking him to the ground. The fire breathed from her jaws stung his wing but it did not painfully scorch him as it would have Hiccup’s more vulnerable flesh. He screamed at her, spines split and glowing blue. *That was your last mistake!*

He blasted at her and she reeled back, shrieking in pain. The other dragons roared, a few even lunged forwards, but Toothless roared *I CHALLENGE YOU!* and leapt at the drakaina, biting and clawing, blinded by his instincts to protect his other half.

“ Toothless!” Hiccup cried out, alarmed at the sight of his brother wrestling with the Titan-Wing, biting at her long neck as she twisted her head around to snap and tear at him, her tail lashing at his wings. He could feel the sting of it across his sides like a whip and flinched.
Astrid had run over as fast as she could and heaved him to his feet. Now, seeing her fiancé and his dragon in danger, she rushed to mount up. “We’ll distract her!”

“No! Toothless challenged her, if you and Stormfly get involved then they’ll all be on the attack” Hiccup warned as she swung herself up into the saddle.

“That’s how dragons do things, but I’m not a dragon. Get ready, Stormfly!” Astrid ordered, eyes flashing. She cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted “Down here, you overgrown lizard!”

The drakaina heard, rage flashing in her eyes, and breathed out flame. Stormfly had been tensed to leap ever since Astrid told her to get ready, and Toothless leapt to the spot the nadder vacated. He blasted her again, a warning to not attack the humans he protected. Hiccup seized his chance and vaulted onto Toothless’ back, flicking open the tail-fin.

From habit Toothless took to the air, jinxing past a couple of dragons hovering above them. *You weren't gonna fight this battle without me, were you?* Hiccup asked him, and despite all the danger he purred.

*Wouldn’t dream of it.*

At that point they stopped talking, relying solely on the silent signals they’d taught each other over months and years. Hiccup knew that Titan-Wing Monstrous Nightmares were fast and powerful but not very manoeuvrable; he directed Toothless between the cliffs, weaving through the crevasses. They’d flown like this, darting speed and tight turns, so many times they could all but do it in their sleep.

The drakaina gave chase, flaming at them from above but they dodged every blast. It wasn't long before she reached her shot limit and she howled with frustration. In her zeal she flew lower and lower to try and corner them, but they were too fast! She didn't understand it, the Swift-Wing should be slower with a human weighing him down, even if the human was so thin and tiny, but it was as if the human made him faster, made him stronger!

Toothless swerved around a corner and into a ravine that grew narrower and narrower. Hiccup glanced behind them; the drakaina had followed them right into it, her wing claws scratching along the towering cliffs as she scrambled after them. At the last minute they shot upwards, using Toothless’ split spines and the currents of air that rushed up and out of the canyon to their advantage.

Their pursuer roared *Get back here, coward!* and attempted to leap after them. She was so close – her fangs snapped together a mere foot from their tail as she lunged – but she missed! And when she tried to spread her wings and give chase, they slapped uselessly against the rocks, hemmed in. *No! Get back here! I will kill you!* she ranted, screaming as she scrambled to climb the sheer cliffs.

Toothless darted overhead and fired plasma blasts, shattering the cliffs and causing a small landslide. He blocked the drakaina’s route out of the ravine, and landed on a ledge high above her. She spotted him and breathed flames – they didn't even come close, but he glared at her. She soon realised that he had the high ground, he was poised to be the one on the attack. She couldn’t accept it.

*Coward! Traitor!* she hissed at him, *That human is not your pet – you are his! You are no dragon, Toothless* she spat his name mockingly.

Toothless bristled, insulted. *I am not Hiccup’s pet. We are brothers. You wouldn't understand, Fire-Scale – or should I say, Spine-Twister* he snarled, throwing in an insult of his own.
“Stop!” Hiccup cried out, *Both of you, stop it!*  

His outburst surprised the dragons enough that they both did stop growling at each other to stare at him; Toothless with some difficulty since Hiccup was on his back. *Hiccup, what?*  

*You need to calm down* the man said, gently but firmly. *Come on, Toothless, I know you're better than this. Be the bigger dragon* he chided. Toothless grumbled. He wanted to leap at that Fire-Scale and wrestle her into submission, but if it pleased Hiccup he would reluctantly refrain from that.  

A small voice in the back of his mind demanded *Where’s your pride? Are you really just going to give in to please him like a dog?* A louder voice told the other to shut up. Hiccup was his other half, and more important than his shelved pride.  

*And as for you* Hiccup looked down at the drakaina, *I can tell you're obviously not a big fan of humans…but I'm not like other humans. I love dragons, I'm a dragon-soul. Toothless and I really are heart bound. How else could I be think-speaking?* he pointed out.  

The Titan-Wing eyed him suspiciously, but didn't try to attack them again. At a nudge from his rider, Toothless flew down to land on the rocks they’d blasted into a heap. *What’s your name?*  

After a few long and tense moments, the Fire-Scale reluctantly answered, *Liekki.*  

*That’s a nice name. Liekki, what happened to make you hate humans so much?*  

A longer pause, as she squirmed and tensed, but his concerned eyes bored into hers and eroded her will to fight. *They came* she said at last, *Humans. I was hunting and whilst I was gone my nest was attacked, my family slain, all my pack-mates taken! My sister told me everything before she succumbed to her wounds…she was only a hundred and fifty winters old* she whined despair at the memory.  

Liekki did not know why she was telling the little human she could easily bite in half these darkest secrets; nor why he and the Swift-Wing both looked upon her with sympathy. *I’m so sorry – we’re sorry. I promise, you will not be hunted here. I will make sure the humans who live on this island will not attack you, or bother you in any way. An alpha protects his own* Hiccup declared firmly.  

He reached out a hand to her, asking for her trust. Liekki snarled a bit and recoiled, prideful and reluctant. This was her island, her new pack…but this peculiar little pair claimed it as their own and they had tricked her, bested her…now they were showing her mercy. She did not understand it, but somehow, her fires within had banked under the Swift-Wing’s agile cunning, and the Dragon-Soul’s quiet determination.  

At last, she lowered her long snout, and pressed her muzzle against his cool, calloused palm. *You are very strange…but I see I am beaten. I couldn't command you, but you're commanding me without even trying. You are stronger…I accept you, Alphas* she relented.  

Hiccup sighed in relief and smiled, taking care not to show his teeth, lest she misinterpret the expression. *Thank you, Liekki. You should be able to climb out of the ravine from here* he told her, before flicking the tail-fin open. Toothless leapt into the air and spiralled up to join Stormfly, who was perched up on the cliff.  

Both Hiccup and Astrid dismounted and walked towards each other. “It’s alright now. Liekki - that's her name - accepted Toothless and I as the Alphas; she won't trouble us anymore” Hiccup explained. “Stormfly and I saw the whole thing” Astrid informed him, before lightly punching his arm –
although a light punch for her was still rather hard. “That was for doing something as stupid and crazy as trying to tame a Titan-Wing” she declared, before yanking him closer and cutting off his protests with a deep kiss.

“That was for pulling off something as stupid and crazy as taming a Titan-Wing” she said by way of explanation when she pulled away.

“Mm. Well, stupid and crazy is pretty much my MO, isn’t it?”

The first thing they did was fly back to the nesting ground and proclaim themselves the Alphas of the territory, now that Liekki had accepted them as the superior dragons. Secondly, they went back to Alvin and Hiccup made it very, very clear that the Outcasts were not to harm the dragons living on their island, and if they discovered that anyone was then they were to send word to Hiccup immediately.

On the way back to Berk, Toothless purred deeply. *You are amazing* he praised Hiccup, who blinked in surprise and had to ask. *How come? I mean, thank you, you're amazing too* he smiled.

Toothless glanced back and up at him with a gleam in his light chartreuse eyes. *Back there, with Liekki – she wanted to kill us, Hiccup, and you were just…you and you calmed her down. It was just the same with Usurper, he was furious and hurting just like she was, and I thought I was strong enough to defeat them and protect you, but you…you're even stronger than I am, you defeated them without fighting.*

Unable to keep the smile off his face, Hiccup felt butterflies flit joyfully inside at the praise. *It’s because of you, you know. I hate to see you hurt; I want to protect you…not just from them, but from yourself. I’m glad you trust me…it’s what makes us, us, isn’t it?*

Toothless purred *agreement* and *gratitude* to his beloved other half. Soaring beside them, Hiccup’s *other* other half watched the pair with a soft smile on her face. Astrid had no idea what they were saying to each other, and she couldn’t say she wasn’t curious, but something about her boyfriends’ expression made her not want to ask, and just be happy that he was happy.

The two of them stretched out on their dragon’s backs. *That’s the second dragon pack we’ve taken over in a week or so…we’d better not make a habit out of this, eh bud?*

*More names to remember.*

Hiccup groaned slightly. *Don’t remind me. I need to make a list or something - and finish working out the hierarchy. I just know some of them are going to complain…*

*They’ll get used to it. As for remembering everyone’s names, you know they won’t mind if you forget, don't you? You're only human.*

*Our pack might not mind, but I do. I mean, what sort of Alpha forgets his own subjects’ names?*

*I’ll remember them for you! Or maybe…*

*What?*

*There might be a way for you to remember everyone’s names…when the King helped you start to think-speak properly, he told me that we could do what he does, connect our minds with our subjects.*
*You mean like…reading their minds?*

*He didn't say it was like that. Well, actually, he didn't really say anything at all, but I knew what he meant. I can already do it, whenever I send out my will and command everyone at once. We’re heart bound, so maybe you can connect with them too.*

That made sense, and anything that would help him recall everyone’s names was definitely something to consider. *Alright. As soon as we have some time, we’ll try it out* he decided.

Berk came into view – Hiccup stopped lounging in the saddle and flicked Toothless’ tail fin out as far as it could go. The Swift-Wing surged forwards with powerful wing beats, climbing high and all but dancing in the air, roaring in triumph. Down below, the villagers cheered and applauded their manoeuvres, although most of them had no idea what all the fuss was about.

The dragons quickly realised that their Alphas had successfully staked their claim on yet more territory. They responded with triumphant roars of their own, startling the silly little humans with their delighted bellows. Stormfly excitedly told every dragon she saw that Toothless-Hiccup had outsmarted a massive Fire-Scale, and Alpha-Hiccup had won her trust and acceptance of them as the rightful leaders.

As soon as Toothless and Hiccup landed in the village square, every dragon perched nearby bowed to them, congratulated their victory, praised their bravery, cleverness and mercy. The Night Fury puffed his chest out and looked smug at all the attention. Hiccup just chuckled. *Don’t praise him too much, guys* he warned playfully, *My brother’s head is big enough as it is!*

Gobber came out of the forge to greet them. “What’s gotten the two of you in such a good mood?” he wondered, looking at the heroes of Berk. Hiccup grinned and told him about their trip out to Outcast Island, and the Titan-Wing Fire-Scale drakaina he and Toothless had dealt with, claiming their territory and joining her pack with their own.

“Oh, well, good on ya. I think. I mean, I know what a Titan-Wing is, but the rest…” he trailed off unsurely.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. “Fire-Scale is the Monstrous Nightmare’s name for their kind, and a drakaina is a female dragon. A drake is a male dragon” he explained.

“Do they all have their own names for their breeds?”

“Of course” Hiccup agreed, gesturing first to Stormfly and then Toothless. “Spike-Tail drakaina, Swift-Wing drake. See? Y’know, I'm pretty sure I've already told you all this.”

“Yeah, but these are Vikings we’re talking about” Astrid reminded him with a smirk, “Which means you're going to have to keep telling them, over and over, until it finally gets past their hard helmets.”

“And their thick skulls” Hiccup muttered so only Astrid could hear, wrapping his arms around her waist. She giggled and pecked him on the lips. He slid a hand into her hair and deepened the kiss, oblivious to everything and everyone around them.

Toothless had worried that he'd feel jealous whenever Hiccup showed affection towards Astrid…but his other half always felt so happy when Astrid kissed him, that the Night Fury couldn't help but feel happy too. He didn't quite understand what the big deal was with kissing…all he knew was that it was a part of human courtship and being mates.

*Alpha-Toothless?* one young Rock-Tail asked curiously, *Are your other half and his desired going to mate?*
No, and if they were, I don't think they'd do it out here. Humans are picky. Toothless explained with a roll of his eyes.

His ear-fins twitched at the sound of humans talking. Normally he wouldn't have really paid attention, unless it was a human he liked (he would always pay attention to Hiccup) but they were talking about Hiccup and Astrid.

“Oh, bless, look at ‘em.”

“They make such a sweet couple.”

“It's a shame about...you know...what happened.”

“...Oh! Yes, poor girl. Tsk. Can't be easy, being in love with someone who can't really love you back.”

Toothless bristled. These humans didn't know what they were talking about! Couldn't they see how much Hiccup cared for Astrid?

“Oh, I'm sure he does.” That's more like it. “But then...for how long?” Seriously?!

“Well, if he really is...you know...immortal...when she starts getting old, and he's still young and spry...who's to say? If you ask me, I don't think it's such a good idea for them to be wedded next year.”

“That's funny, Mrs Ack. I don't remember asking your opinion at all” Astrid said coolly. The two gossiping women jumped like startled Spike-Tails. Stormfly and Toothless both purred at her, satisfied.

“Uh, Astrid? It doesn't really matter...”

Astrid held a hand up to forestall Hiccup’s objections. “Let's get one thing straight. What happened to Hiccup wasn't his fault – and it wasn't Toothless’ fault, either” she declared firmly. “Hiccup and I can deal with it, and we are going to get married and live happily together for as long as we possibly can.”

“And, uh, whilst we’re on the subject...I'm not immortal, and I’m not going to end up divorcing Astrid for some younger woman” Hiccup insisted, “I'm going to be in love with her even when she's as old as Gothi – and I'll even kiss Gothi on the lips, to prove it.”

“Go on, then” Astrid prompted. Hiccup’s eyes widened – he hadn't really been entirely serious about that.

“Oh, um...I would, but...oh, gosh, would you look at the time? We’d err, better get up to the great hall, see my dad...I’ll, uh, I-I'll see you there?” he stammered awkwardly, scrambling into the saddle. Toothless could tell he wanted to get away from there quickly, and took off straightaway. Astrid burst out laughing.

*Thanks, bud.*

*You're welcome.*

*Don't even think about going to Gothi’s hut.*

*...Spoil-sport.*
Hiccup and Astrid sat down with Stoick and Valka to discuss the separation of duties between them. They held a lengthy discussion, that devolved into an argument as Hiccup and his father butted heads. On the bright side, it gave Astrid and Valka a chance to bond over shared exasperation at how stubborn the men in their lives were.

Stoick was of the opinion that Hiccup not taking the mantle of chief was a mistake. He had all the makings of a great leader, the older man insisted, and it would help him keep busy, having a proper job instead of just flying around all day. Annoyed, Hiccup retorted “If it weren't for me 'just flying around' we’d have never found out about Drago’s army, or have found mom again. So why don't you show a bit of gratitude?”

When he said that, Valka stiffened. Part of her felt like she ought to scold him for being rude…but she hadn't been a parent to him for twenty years, so what gave her the right to start now?

Fortunately, Hiccup quickly realised that he'd crossed a line. “I…'m sorry, dad. I didn't mean it” he apologised quickly, chastised. Stoick frowned, but then he saw the look on his son’s face – the same worried, guilty expression Hiccup wore whenever he knew he'd disappointed his father – and sighed.

“It's alright, son. Maybe I…ahem – was a bit hasty. I'm sure there's more to this ‘alpha’ business than I give it credit for.”

“There is…and besides, I'll still help Astrid with her duties, but I will have things to do myself. Not just with the dragons, but – well, I'm hoping that when I've taught Eret and his crew how to properly deal with wild dragons, they can go out and recruit more dragon riders – or, people who want to learn to ride dragons, and I can teach them” Hiccup explained.

Valka laid a hand on her husband’s arm and said gently, “Dear, you're absolutely right. Hiccup does have all the makings of a great leader…the gods have simply seen fit to give him a different kind of people to lead.”

“I might not know everything about being chief, but I'm willing to learn” Astrid said determinedly. “Besides, I've always wanted an excuse to be able to banish Snotlout. I'm kidding! Mostly.”

The chief groaned. “I can't win this, can I?”

“Nope” Valka smiled, “You'll just have to get used to Berk having two wonderful leaders – oh, sorry Toothless – three wonderful leaders instead of just one.”

“Heh. I s’pose when you put it like that…”

They came full circle at last, and ended up separating the duties based on what Hiccup and Astrid had already agreed upon. When everything was finally settled, and they were eating dinner, the other riders showed up with even more ideas on the 'dragon rider initiation ceremony'.

Eret tagged along as well – he was starving, and if he was gonna have to do this initiation, then he wanted to make sure it wouldn't kill him. “We've given it a lot of thought, Hiccup, and we're confident we've got something good” Tuffnut announced, “Ready? Okay. Picture this, my friend – a flaming pit of fire, a dragon and rider high above – the rider leaps, and falls, down, down, down, and at the last minute – whoosh!”

He gestured wildly, imitating a dragon rushing to the rescue. “Their dragon swoops down and snatches them, in the nick of time, from the jaws of a fiery death!” he shouted, getting right up in Hiccup’s face. Wrinkling his nose at Tuff’s bad breath, Hiccup tried to gently push the energetic man
away. Toothless, sensing his discomfort, had no qualms about shoving the weird male twin back with his blunt nose.

“Whoa! Sorry, T, didn't mean to step in your bubble” Tuff shrugged, holding his hands up. Toothless had figured out that the gesture meant I surrender in human signals, and he was pleased to have asserted his dominance even over a human flock-mate. Just to make things absolutely clear, he marked Hiccup to show my human, ignoring his protesting disgusted noise, and placed himself between them.

“So what do you think?” Tuff asked eagerly, not really noticing the Fury’s behaviour. In an attempt to be helpful, Ruffnut added, “It's supposed to represent your fight with that humongous monster dragon – err, not the cool ice-spitting one, the other one – and the way you fell into the flames to your death…well, almost.”

“Err, yeah, I get that…it just seems a little extreme for an initiation ceremony.”

“How come? What else says ‘I'm a super awesome dragon rider’ than free-falling towards a pit of fire?”

“…Err, Ruff, Tuff? I just want to check…do you two actually know what ‘initiation’ means?”

“Uh, duh!” Ruff scoffed at him, but her eyes betrayed her… “It’s where you prove you've got what it takes to do something. Or be something, I guess. A dragon rider, in this case.”

Hiccup blinked - he'd been half-expecting her to give the completely wrong answer, but she wasn't actually that far off the mark. “Uh, sort of…”

“Initiation is a rite of passage marking entrance or acceptance into a group or society” Fishlegs rattled off.

“Okay, but are we talking about a rite of passage to be a full-fledged dragon rider – like, a graduation – or a ceremony to welcome them into the Dragon Academy?” asked Astrid.

“I was thinking more along the lines of the latter” Hiccup admitted, “After all, the twins did say we needed a coming of age ceremony. Normally, kids on Berk come of age when they're fifteen, which is the age we were when we started riding our dragons. So…maybe when someone turns fifteen, to show that they're ready to join the Academy, they have to tame and befriend their own dragon.”

“Oh!” Fishlegs exclaimed, “I have an idea. What if each initiate has to sail to Dragon Island, tame a wild dragon, and then ride it back to Berk. And since you're the Alpha, you can tell them all – the dragons, I mean - what's going on and where to go.”

“That could work” Hiccup nodded, intrigued. Fishlegs beamed at him.

Snotlout scoffed, ever one to burst a bubble. “As if! Who’s gonna wait until they're fifteen to get their own dragon?”

Eret remarked “He’s got a point – what if they've already picked out a dragon to ride? Or the dragon’s picked them, like with me and Sky Fire? And what if they don't want to ride a dragon? And should you really be calling it an initiation ceremony? That makes it sound like you're in a cult.”

The others looked at him, and at each other, as if the thought hadn't even occurred to them. “Well, we’re not gonna force them” said Hiccup, “It's not like they can't be part of the tribe if they don't ride a dragon. I suppose if they've already found a dragon partner, then the initiation ceremony – I don’t know what else to call it - can be to…prove they’re partners, or something…” he shrugged.
“That's what we're saying!” Tuffnut exclaimed, “Nothing says ‘I trust this dragon with my life’ like a death-defying free-fall towards a pit of fire!”

“Oh, please, you two” Snotlout scoffed. “Anyone can fall off a dragon and get caught in time”-

“Except you.”

“Shut up, Tuffnut! What we need is something challenging, something to really prove their mettle.”

“What mettle?” Astrid asked in disbelief, “You guys, we’re talking about bringing someone into the Dragon Academy. The whole point of joining the Academy is so they can build up trust with their dragon and learn to act as partners, as a team. Just because someone has a favourite dragon, or they’re a dragon’s favourite human, doesn't mean they’ll be a perfect team straightaway.”

“Astrid’s right” Hiccup agreed, “You remember the battle with the Red Death? All of us fell off our dragons”-

“We didn’t.”

“...Most of us fell off our dragons, and if that happened now they’d catch us; but at the time, only Toothless tried to catch me, and that's because I spent weeks earning his trust and befriending him.”

“And because he needed you to fly, don't forget that.”

“Yes, thank you, Snotlout.”

Eret suddenly felt curious, and asked “What do the dragons think about all this?”

*We think you humans are being silly and worrying about nonsense* Hookfang replied with an exasperated eye-roll.

Amused, Hiccup relayed the message. “Since we're talking about it anyway – do you guys have any ideas?” he asked, looking around at the dragons. The others looked at their dragons, and then at Hiccup.

The dragons were just as at a loss as their riders. *Why do they need to be fifteen years old when they befriend one of us?* asked Barf.

*They don’t* said Stormfly, *They have to be fifteen years old to ride one of us. What do you think, Sky Fire?*

*Me?’* The Spike-Tail ruffled his wings uncertainly, *I don’t know…enough about humans. Alpha-Hiccup’s mother is the only human I met before I came here, because Cloud-Jumper brought her to us.*

That gave Hiccup an idea. “What if we let the dragons choose?” he suggested. When everyone stared at him in bewilderment, he explained, “Before the ceremony, Toothless and I will find all the dragons who are willing to be ridden by the new student and bring them to the training ring.

“I'll give a speech, introduce the initiate and the dragons, and all the initiate has to do is this old trick”- he stepped back and demonstrated the ‘trusting hand’ technique – “and whichever dragon comes forward will either be a dragon they’ve already befriended, or a dragon who wants to befriend them. I'll even narrow it down to dragons from the class or kind that the student would like to ride.”

There was a pause, and then Snotlout scoffed, “Pfft, that’s too easy.”
“It’s safe” Astrid glared at him, “And it’s fair, because even if they choose not to join the Academy, they can still do the ‘trusting hand’. It would prove they’re brave enough to approach a dragon and mature enough to do so properly, so it works as a coming of age ritual as well” she reasoned, before adding, “But, as a compromise, we’ll try to come up with a more…challenging set of tasks as a graduation test.”

“Yeah! Pit of fire, baby!”

“Obstacle course through flaming rings!”

Snotlout and Tuffnut started arguing loudly, and Eret hid behind Sky Fire when Ruffnut tried to persuade him to be on her ‘team’. Stoick and Valka had long since left, and one by one the others excused themselves, until only Hiccup and Astrid were left. “Letting the dragons pick their riders… pretty clever” she remarked, nudging him.

He smiled and admitted “Well, it didn’t even occur to me that it would double as a coming of age ceremony. We make quite a good team, don’t we?”

“I’d like to think so…Hiccup?”

“Yes, Astrid?”

She hesitated, and then said “I know that if a dragon challenges another, then it has to be a one on one fight or it could turn into a free-for-all….but I don’t like seeing you and Toothless having to fight alone. Just…promise me that if I’m there to help, you’ll let me help” she insisted.

Hiccup realised then that seeing him and Toothless confront Liekki, but being unable to interfere (or Stormfly being reluctant, rather) must have been so hard for her. He took her hands in his and kissed her, and murmured “I promise.”
Winter was fast approaching the Barbaric Archipelago, and yet the skies had mostly been crisp and clear…until now. It seemed that the gods, the powers that be, now decided that Berk had had enough of a reprieve from the terrible weather…it was high time to bring back the snow, sleet and hail the wild north was infamous for.

The first clue anyone received was when Bucket began wailing in pain, and clutching his tightening headgear. His and Mulch’s Zippleback, Lake&Weed (their preferred original name) brought their ailing human to their alphas, and consequently to the chief of Berk. Hiccup instructed Lake&Weed to take Bucket and Mulch to Gothi for a headache relieving potion, and then to take them to the great hall.

He and Toothless ordered eight dragons to fly out from every compass point and bring back word on which point of the compass the storm was coming in from. Word quickly returned that the storm, a very large snowstorm, was on its way and coming from the northwest. It would only be a matter of hours before it reached the island, so they had to prepare quickly.

The livestock was rounded up by dragons under the guidance of their riders, and shut in the barn or in pens. Doors and windows were secured; supplies of firewood, barrels of water and mead, smoked meat, bread and fish were carried in from the stores. Many villagers, some accompanied by their dragons, abandoned their homes in favour of the sturdier walls of the Great Hall.

The dragons had no wish to be caught out in the storm themselves. Hiccup and Toothless managed to get them all to shelter, though only just. The caves both in the mountain and under the village were crowded with scaly bodies curling up in piles, the dragons instinctively settling down to sleep and wait out the bad weather. The landing platforms were winched up and locked into place, sealing the terrible weather out.

As they settled down for the night in the Great Hall, perfectly positioned close to a fire but not too close, Hiccup took one last look around. Across the hall he spotted Eret talking to his crew, who had made it into Berk’s harbour the day before, and just in time. Now Tinni, Nòam, Uggi, Oskàr and Jorge were trying to get to grips with being stranded on an island of the same creatures they’d once trapped to make a living.

He made himself comfortable and closed his eyes, matching his breathing to his dragon’s, feeling the way their hearts beat in tandem with one another. Following advice from Toothless, which in turn came from the King, he focused on the heart bind, on following that ever present gentle tug into Toothless’ mind, even as his other half did the same and followed it into his mind…

It happened gradually, at first. The light of the fire flickering over his eyelids became blurred, shifting colours beneath them…the murmur of voices, overlaid with snores of sleeping Vikings and dragons, blended unintelligibly…on the brink between sleep and wakefulness, he lost all sense of himself – he couldn’t feel his body, couldn’t move it, could barely muster a thought yet he still felt so safe…

He was falling…or floating, he couldn’t tell…a fire that glowed and warmed him but did not burn wrapped him in gentle flames…the flames turned to stars, so bright they blinded, silver and green and scarlet and blue shades melting together into white and he thought no more…slowly, his awareness returned, yet he was detached, seeing and hearing through the eyes and ears of another…

I am…I…am…what? A dragon, of course. A dragon. A Swift-Wing. The only Swift-Wing in my…
Her Nest. I obey Her. I serve Her. She is hungry. So hungry. My pack-mates attack the humans, steal easy prey. I attack the human’s weapons. I must fish afterwards, or perhaps steal a catch – we do not share in this Nest. We only survive. That is what I am…for. To survive, and to obey.

Must obey. Must feed the Queen. Must obey. Must feed the Queen. Must...what's that noise? No, no - *NOOOooo!!!* I shriek as a rock-and-ropes trap snags my wings and I am falling...!

Where am I? Falling...I was falling. I crashed. It hurt. It hurts. My tail hurts. I'm trapped! I can't be trapped, I have to...have to...obey the Queen? Yes...no...no, She is cruel, She is evil, She eats dragons! She...she tricked me! She lured me in and crushed my mind...where am I from? That wasn't my pack...or was it? Are there other Swift-Wings? Did She eat them?

I don't remember...I don't remember anything! I don't...I don't know who I am!

Something is there, Close by, I can smell it. A predator? Maybe it hasn't seen me. Maybe if I keep my eyes closed and lie very still...no, no, it's coming closer! I can smell it more now, that salt-meat-deadwool scent that only one creature has – a human.

“Oh, wow...I did it. Oh, I did it! This fixes everything! Yes! I have brought down this mighty beast!”

It's male. He puts a foot on me. *Get off* I grunt. This human is crowing over his prey like an arrogant Fire-Scale. Only I'm the prey. I don't like this. I don't like him.

I open my eyes and look at him, and he looks at me.

He's a fledgling! Not even a full grown adult – humans grow so slowly, but their lives are so short, they've got it all the wrong way round. He's so skinny. He couldn't have thrown this rock-and-ropes trap so high, but somehow he did, and now he's holding a blade. It's small but it's sharp, and I can't defend myself. It's going to pierce my scales and I will die.

I don't want to die. I'm scared.

“I'm gonna kill you, dragon. Then I'm gonna...I'm gonna cut out your heart, and take it to my father.”

He's not just arrogant, he's cruel. He's as evil as Her.

“I'm a Viking. I am a Viking!”

And I'm a Swift-Wing! A dead Swift-Wing. I can't escape – these ropes are too strong – and I have no pack. I can't go back to that Nest, back to Her. Is this human fledgling’s father going to eat my heart too?

What is he waiting for?

“I did this…”

Why does he sound guilty? What is he doing? That sound...he's cutting the ropes! He's...letting me go?! The ropes fall away. I am free. I leap to my feet and leap at him, pin him with my claws at his throat.

*You little fool!* I snarl, glaring at him. His fear-scent assaults my nostrils. He is so afraid but he isn't struggling, or trying to defend himself. He looks like he feels helpless...like I just was.
Maybe he isn't evil. Maybe his father makes him capture dragons and cut out their hearts, or he will be punished. He could have killed me, but he let me go. He showed mercy, even though he is a human.

I will do the same, but I still don't like him. *STAY AWAY FROM ME!* I scream at him, extra loud so he gets the message. Humans can't think-speak but I don't think they're deaf, though he might be deaf now.

I must fly away. I can't fly, I keep hitting trees! Why can't I fly? Why can't I get higher? My tail still hurts. There is a cliff. If I launch from here then…no! I fell, why do I keep falling? Why can't I fly out?

I look at my tail. Something is wrong. There should be two fins, but now there is just one. I think I crashed into a tree last night. The sharp broken wood sliced my tail fin off!

A dragon without a full tail can't fly. I'm never going to fly again, I'll be stuck on the ground forever…and it's all the fault of that small, skinny, scared brat! I hate him!

No, I don't. He spared my life. Maybe he didn't know I cannot fly anymore. I still really don't like him.

He's back. He was there before, watching me. Is he hunting me? I saw him and he didn't attack me, or run away. He just stared. Then he went away. I call him Small Scared Thing. He is that, and I am…I still don't know. All I remember ever being called is Swift-Wing by the pack, or ‘Night Fury’ by the humans.

If he is hunting me, he isn't very good at it. He doesn't know where I am. He has a fish in his hand. I haven't eaten a lot for a long time, because most of my catches went to Her. I sneak up behind him. Maybe if I scare him, he will drop the fish and I can steal it. He's seen me now. He's scared. Good. *What do you want?* I ask him. He doesn't understand, but I want to talk. No other dragon has come here. I am…lonely.

He's holding the fish out to me. Is he offering it to me? I creep closer, cautiously…I see a glint and pull back, snarling. It's a trick! He's luring me closer, he has that blade…no, he just dropped it. It's still too close, he could lunge and grab it. I jerk my head to the side and say *Further*. He can't hear me think-speak, but he seems to get the idea. He kicks the blade into the water.

I relax now. Small Scared Thing is defenceless, but he's not lashing out. If he doesn't try to hurt me, I won't try to hurt him. He's holding the fish out again. It smells so good, and I am so hungry…I creep closer, and closer. I open my mouth. I have pulled my teeth in to show ‘no-threat’, but I need them out to grab the fish, why can't he just toss it isn't my mouth?

“Huh…toothless. I could've sworn you had…” He's talking, this is no time for talking, this is eating time! I snap up the fish and eat it in two bites. “…teeth.”

I lick my lips – it was tasty, but I'm still hungry. I sniff at him curiously, hopefully, but he scrambles away from me. “Uh, uh, no, no, no, I, I don't have anymore!”

It's true, he doesn't. He can't hunt right and he can't fish right either, if he only caught one fish. Maybe that's why he's so small, because he can't hunt. Don't his human pack-mates help him? It was a big fish, though. He gave it to me instead of eating it himself. I will give some back to him, to say thank you.

I gag until half the fish slides back up my throat and I spit it out into his paws. He’s looking at it. He
looks confused, and a bit disgusted, but why? It's fish, it's food! Humans eat fish, or they wouldn't get mad when dragons steal the fish they catch. *Eat it, then* I tell him, looking at the fish so he knows what I mean. Now he looks even more disgusted, but he takes a bite.

He's not swallowing. Why isn't he swallowing? I thought this human was a bit smarter than other humans, but maybe I was wrong. *Like this* I say, and I show him what to do. He swallows it and shudders. Did I get it wrong? Do humans not eat fish? Or does he just not like the taste?

Maybe he likes the taste of dragon heart. I hope not.

He still smells scared, but not as much. He bares his teeth at me, but he's not threatening me. He's not snarling or growling, and his lips are pulled back at the corners, not up. It looks weird. Maybe if I mimic him, I can figure out what this new signal means. It feels weird too.

No, no, I don't like this signal! It must mean ‘you can touch me’ because he's reaching his hand towards me, and I don't want him to touch me. *Stop that!* I snarl at him, and I pull away and go somewhere else. I make a nest and lie down for a nap. Small Scared Thing has followed me. He's not scared as much anymore…now he's just stupid, and annoying. *Leave me alone* I say, turning around and ignoring him.

He's not leaving, is he? I peek. Now he's leaving. Pretending he wasn't trying to touch me. I go to find somewhere else to nap and hope Annoyance goes away soon. Sometime later I wake up and he's still there. He's poking at the dirt with a stick. I look over his shoulder. The marks he's making remind me a tiny bit of my water-self. Just my head, though. Could this be my dirt-self?

I am bored, and if I cannot fly, then I will make marks that look like flying. Glides, loops, spirals, a dive … at last I drop the tree and purr, satisfied. I think my markings look quite good. Annoyance stands up and looks at my markings, and then he steps on them. I growl *Stop that* at him. I didn't step on his markings, he shouldn't step on mine!

No, he freezes, he's back to being scared; he looks at his foot on my mark and lifts it off. I purr. *That’s better.*

Then he steps on it again! *Get off* I growl at him. He does. I purr again. So long as he doesn't - he's doing it again! I growl and put my paw down, and this time he puts his foot over my mark, not on it. He was teasing me! The little brat. Now he's walking through my markings, balancing with his arms. Is he…dancing? Humans can't fly, so they can't dance properly, but maybe they dance on the ground?

He's come right in front of me without realising. He's looking at me, and he's nervous but he's curious too. Now he's trying to touch me again, and I bare my teeth to scare him off. He pulls back but he doesn't retreat…and then his signals say ‘I trust you’. He looks away, eyes closed, and reaches out again. ‘Trust you-befriend me’. Is he really so desperate to touch me?

He hasn't hurt me yet. I’m starting to think he doesn't want to. I don’t think he'll go away until I let him touch me, so…I press my snout against his hand. It's not that warm, but it's soft, and it smells of fish, metal and charcoal. I peek at him, and he's looking at me. I snort and move away. Happy now? A few moments later I hear him call out.

“I'll see you later, Toothless!”

What did he just call me? He must be talking to me, there's no one else here. He named me 'Toothless'. My name is not Toothless, my name is Night Fury!
He must know that, he must have heard the other humans shouting it whenever I attacked. "Night Fury, get down!" Same thing every time. Still, he's just a human, he wouldn't think to be polite and ask if I have a name. I don't even remember my real name, what I call myself. Until he tells me his real name, I'm just going to call him…Curious. After all, that is what he is, just like I am – sometimes toothless.

Curious comes back. He still doesn't say his real name – I can't tell if he's dumb or just rude – but he’s brought me lots more fish! And an eel, which is gross, but when I scream at him to get rid of it he does. He says he doesn't like eel either. At least he knows what not to eat. I start eating, and get distracted. My tail has felt unbalanced since the…incident… but suddenly there is something there, where the fin used to be.

It's grown back! I am shocked at first, but then I get ready to launch. I need to fly again, being grounded has been driving me crazy! With a great leap I fly up and up, and Curious cries out. "Whoa! No, no, no!"

Yes, yes, yes! I'm so close - I'm falling! No, I'm not, I am flying, I'm flying! Oh, it feels so good! Except I can't fly the way I want to.

"Oh my - it's working! Yes! Yes, I did it!"

What's working? Why is he clinging onto my tail? We skim over the lake in the cove and I throw him off, but then I start to fall as well. I shriek in alarm and surprise and look back at my tail. There's a brown, flapping thing stuck to it. I splash into the water and struggle to the surface.

"YEAH!"

Curious gets out of the water, and so do I. I shake myself dry and glare at him, but he gives me that 'you can touch me' human teeth signal again. Only his eyes look happy this time, and his body moves as if he is excited. I realise then that it is a happy signal; humans can't purr, so this must be how they smile, by baring their teeth. Humans really do have it all backwards.

After he's gone, I look at what he put on my tail. The brown flappy thing looks like my tail fin, but it smells of dead prey-skin. I think humans call it 'leather'. Humans can't fly or breathe fire like dragons can, but they can make things like we can't. Curious has made a new tail fin to make up for taking away mine. I can't move it on my own, though. I try, but nothing happens. I need his help to fly.

……Why am I not too upset about that?

Curious comes back again. The next time he comes, he has a brown leather thing I recognise as a saddle. He wants to ride me. I have to let him, because I need his help to fly, but I tease him and make him chase me first. I'm not just going to make it easy for him. I'm starting to like Curious. He plays with me and grooms me, and it's nice having company.

He talks a lot. He doesn't know I can understand him, and he can't understand me, but he still talks to me. Or perhaps he thinks he's talking to himself. I can tell from what he says that he doesn't fit in with his human pack-mates. There's no human like him in his Nest, just like there are no other Swift-Wings in my…in Her Nest. I can smell other dragon scents on him sometimes – Twin-Head gas, Spike-Tail and Rock-Tail scents.

I finally learn his name. He never thinks to tell me, the silly thing, but one night we have to sneak into his human nest and I overhear another human – it sounds like a female – calling out to him.
“Hiccup? Are you there?”

He responds and he doesn’t correct her, so that must be his name. He calls her Astrid. They’re talking, but I ignore them. I don't like it here, it's not safe and we should leave. There's a sheep. Chasing sheep is fun. I chase the sheep away and drag Hiccup with me, and then we fly back to the cove. He has a blade now, and he uses it to cut himself free where he was stuck, and then he says goodbye.

Now we’re gliding over the island, behind the mountain where the humans can't see us.

“Okay there, bud, we’re gonna take this nice and slow.”

Slow? Boring. I suppose I have to be careful so he doesn't fall off. We dive and swoop under a rock arch, and he’s pleased we did it, but that's a baby trick! He keeps making us hit the sea rocks. I slap his face with my ear fin and say *Concentrate!*

“Yeah, yeah, I'm on it. Position four – uh, three.” I start climbing, higher and higher. Hiccup is excited, he's never been this high before, and he's not frightened!

“Yeah! Go baby! Yes! Oh, this is amazing! The wind in my….cheat sheet! STOP!”

I stop, but that was a bad idea because he's falling, and I'm falling, and I can't fly! I scream and spin out of control, and he's shouting something but I can't hear him properly. Then Hiccup is on my back again; he pulls on the saddle and I spread my wings out to slow down, but it's not enough! We're heading right for the rocks and we're going to crash and we're flying too fast and we'll die!!

Then suddenly he's moving the fake-fin, moving with me, moving like he's been flying all his life. We dodge every single sea rock, and he cheers. “YEAH!”

I’m so thrilled! I fire a small blast to celebrate. “Oh, come on!”

I forgot humans aren't fireproof. Oops.

That human female, Astrid, finds us. I see her hurt Hiccup with her hands and her blade – just the wood part, but still – and I scare her off, but then he makes me follow her. He wants to show her that I'm not a bad dragon. I'm going to show her what happens when she hurts my friend.

I fly as wildly as I can, and ignore her screams and Hiccup’s protests. “Thank you for nothing, you useless reptile!”

*You're welcome, you stupid human.*

“Okay! I am sorry! I'm sorry! Just get me off this thing!!”

That's better. I finally slow down and fly more gently, soaring up and through and over the clouds. I bet these two humans have never seen their Nest like this before.

“Okay, I have to admit…this is pretty cool. It's…amazing. He's amazing.”

Yes, yes I am. We keep flying, and I enjoy myself so much I don't realise I'm flying right back to… the Nest, back to Her. It's too late, I have to play along or the other dragons will notice and see the humans on my back. *They aren't prey* I tell myself, *They're not an offering. I don't serve that
The other dragons give their offerings, and a dull minded Rock-Tail only offers one tiny fish. The Queen lunges up and eats her, and then she smells me and the humans, and lunges at us, but I’m too quick for her. They don’t call my kind Swift-Wings for nothing. Now I definitely can’t ever go back there.

Hiccup and Astrid argue when we get back to the cove. She works out that the Queen is the one making dragons steal their food and she wants to find his father.

“No, no! Not yet, they’ll…kill Toothless. Astrid, we have to think this through, carefully.”

“Hiccup, we just discovered the dragon’s nest. The thing we’ve been after since Vikings first sailed here! And you want to keep it a secret? To protect your pet dragon, are you serious?!”

“Yes.”

Does he see me as a pet? I don’t think so. I like to think I’m his friend. He wouldn’t be so insistent on protecting me if I were ‘just a pet’…right?

I hear Hiccup screaming, I finally climb out of that cove and rush to rescue him. Of course I would go and get myself captured, and I’m forced to lead the humans to the Nest. Do they all have a death wish, or something?

I don’t think Hiccup can come for me, but I hope he will…he does! His father saves him when he nearly drowns trying to save me, and then his father comes back and frees me from the trap. Hiccup and I rescue Astrid and then we challenge the Queen and I’m flying faster than ever before.

Somehow, I know his plan as we plummet down, down, down. She is right behind us, I can smell the gas in her throat building up ready to burn us alive.

“Hold, Toothless…NOW!”

I twist around onto my back and fire a blast, my last one, into Her mouth. Her fires burn her from the inside out; Hiccup and I twist out of the way and fly up. If we can just get past the body, we could try to glide back to the ground…but that clubbed tail looms up, and I can’t turn, I can’t swerve past it!

It strikes me, it strikes Hiccup from my shoulders. I see him falling towards the flames, knocked out. I flap my wings hard and fly down to catch him. He’s too far away to grab in my paws. I grab one of his legs in my mouth, and my teeth are tucked in but he starts to slide loose. My reflexes kick in and I bite down. I taste blood. I flip him up into my grasp and wrap my wings around him and brace myself for the crash.

…This feels familiar. I crashed, and it hurts, and there’s a human near me. Hiccup’s father. I know this is his father, because they smell similar and he called Hiccup ‘my son’. He’s not attacking me – none of the humans are attacking - he’s just kneeling in front of me, looking and smelling so, so sad.

“Oh, Hiccup…I did this.” He thinks Hiccup is dead. He isn’t dead, but I’m having trouble moving my wings. They’re stiff. Hiccup’s father looks at me and says “I’m so…I’m so sorry.”

I croon comfortingly, and manage to unfurl my wings. He sees I am holding Hiccup and he is relieved, he pulls Hiccup into his large arms and listens to his son’s heartbeat.

“Hiccup! Oh, he's alive! You brought him back alive!”
Hiccup’s father lays a hand on my head, as gently as Hiccup does. He looks me in the eye and says “Thank you, for saving my son.”

*You’re welcome.*

It's been too long and Hiccup still hasn't woken up. That human with two fake-paws named ‘Gobber’ called it a coma. The human’s Elder of Healing told him so with her markings, so it must be true. It's my fault. My bite hurt his foot so badly they had to take it away and give him a fake-foot.

I've heard of dragons sleeping for months on end – She used to sleep most of the winter after we had fed her all the food we could get before the cold came. I didn't know humans could do the same, but from what I can tell, they're not supposed to.

*Hiccup, please wake up. You can't do this. You can't leave me…I don't want to be alone again* I whimper, watching him. *You saved me, and I saved you, you can't die now! It's not fair…you showed me mercy, and you helped me and you flew with me like you were part of me and…and you matter to me. I…I love you. You're like a little brother to me. Please, please wake up* I beg, nudging at him and ruffling his hair.

Finally, finally, he listens! His eyes blink open. “Oh, hey, Toothless. I'm happy to see you too, buddy – OW!”

I stepped on him by accident. I'm just so excited, he's awake and okay and we can finally fly again! As I bounce around his wood cave I see Hiccup looking around and realising where he is.

“Uh, I'm in my house. You're in my house! Uh...does my dad know you're here?”

He tries to get up, and he realises something isn't right. I jump down from the wooden ledge I climbed onto. I sniff at the fake-foot and croon at Hiccup apologetically. It's his left foot he lost, just like I lost my left tail fin. We match even more now. He takes a deep breath and stands up. He tries to walk, and he stumbles, but I catch him. I'll always catch him.

“Thanks, bud” he says gratefully, leaning on me.

*You're welcome, little brother* I reply, if only to myself, as I help him walk.
Hiccup gasped, eyes flicking open as he sat bolt upright. He was gasping, his mind racing as he tried to wrap his head around what he’d seen, heard and felt. Beside him he felt Toothless jerk awake too, ear-fins erect and pupils briefly slitted, trembling. He scrambled to his feet and looked down at his body to check that it was his body, and his mouth gaped in surprise. He was barefoot and not wearing armour, but strangest of all...

His prosthetic was missing, but in its place there was a ghostly facsimile of his flesh and blood limb. He could feel it from within and move it, but when he tried to touch it, his hand passed right through. It finally registered that they were no longer in the Great Hall, but the cove. Everything looked surreal; the sky above was clear and bright, not a trace of the violent snowstorm that surely raged around the Hall as they slept…

“What was – did I – what?” Hiccup’s eyes widened in alarm as he heard his own thoughts echoing around him. “What's happening? Why can I – did it work? This can't be the real cove – “Toothless!”

The word echoed as he spun around to face his dragon, who gazed at him in concern. Hiccup’s eyes fell on Toothless’ tail – sure enough, his scarlet prosthetic had been replaced with a faded, yet moveable reflection of his real one. Hiccup’s mind raced. “Phantom limbs, our minds are filling in the gaps, so it did work, oh my Thor this is so”-

*Hiccup, calm down.*

Rather than take his other half’s advice, Hiccup did exactly the opposite. “I- I saw your memories. I lived them, as if...as if I was you. I was falling, and there was this fire but it didn't burn me, and I- I couldn't feel my body and then I was in your body but it felt like my body cos I thought I was you; and I guess I kind of was, I was inside your head and thinking like you and feeling what you felt and, and” –

“I had wings and a tail and you thought I was evil and I was gonna eat your heart – I would never do that – “I'm so sorry – pfft, eugh!” Hiccup spluttered, his mental word vomit coming to an abrupt end when Toothless marched up to him and pointedly licked his face. The black dragon nuzzled him. *Hiccup, breathe. Stop thinking.*

Hiccup closed his eyes and tried to take deep breaths. “Okay, breathe, stop thinking - I'm still thinking, I can't – wait, how come I can't hear his – your – thoughts?” he wondered, opening his eyes again.

*You can't hear my thoughts because I'm think-speaking. You're only hearing what I want you to hear.*
“Oh, of course, it's obvious – agh, I'm still doing it!” *I, I, I don't.*

*Hiccup, breathe. You need to calm down* Toothless insisted. He advanced until Hiccup stumbled back, and fell over, and then he lay down beside his other half and pinned him there. His purring and rumbling croons ran in waves from his throat and jaw to Hiccup’s chest, and since Hiccup couldn’t get away, all he could do was close his eyes and try to actually clear his mind and calm down.

*I know how you feel. I saw your memories too* Toothless admitted. *I don't know how you humans balance with only two legs and no wings or tail...but I am me now, and you are you, and we’re okay, aren't we?* he asked, nuzzling Hiccup. *Are you okay?*

Hiccup considered it, hoping his thoughts would not echo, and to his relief they did not. *I think so. Yeah. I'm okay now* he said at last. Finally Toothless let him up, and they looked at one another, smiles slowly growing on their faces as what they had done finally began to sink in...

*We did it...we did it! Ha, ha! YES!!* Hiccup whooped and punched the air in excitement, jumping up and down like a madman. Toothless was just as giddy, scampering in circles around him, rearing up with wings spread wide, shaking his head playfully with a gummy smile and vocalising sounds of pure joy. He snuggled up to Hiccup, winding around him and rubbing against him like a giant, purring cat.

They ended up sprawled in the grass – far softer than in reality – catching their breath after all the giggling and excited cheering. *I can't believe we did it. Oh, this is amazing! We really did it, we melded our minds together!* Hiccup grinned, interlocking his own fingers by way of demonstration. *I can't believe I never thought to tell you my name* he said sheepishly.

*I understand* Toothless assured him. He'd experienced their interactions from Hiccup’s point of view (he hadn't realised just how badly he'd scared the boy when they first met), so he knew that at first it simply hadn't occurred to Hiccup to mention his name to a creature he wasn't aware could understand him, and then he'd assumed that no-one else would ever say his name for Toothless to respond to.

In a way it said a lot about how Hiccup treated him. He'd seen the dragon as a friend and confidante, telling him (or in one sense, talking at him) all the things he could never talk about to his fellow Vikings. Despite putting a saddle on him, feeding and stroking him, Hiccup hadn't really treated him as a pet, trying to teach him silly commands or patronisingly calling “Here boy, come to Hiccup!” to get his attention.

Toothless was glad he could keep his thoughts from Hiccup. He didn't need his little brother getting any ideas about possible avenues of teasing.

*Hey...you said before you learned my name, you just called me ‘Small Scared Thing’ and ‘Curious’...you didn't say anything about calling me ‘Annoyance’. Or ‘the little brat’* Hiccup remarked, eyeing him half in amusement and half indignantly. Toothless at least had the grace to look apologetic...for a while.

*I don't think you're a brat now...unless you're being especially annoying.*

Hiccup rolled his eyes. *Thank you for summing that up* he deadpanned. Then he got to his feet and stretched. *So, what d’you say we explore this place? I mean, we’re in the mind, the possibilities are endless* he said eagerly.

Toothless’ head tipped to one side as he considered, *Whose mind are we in? Mine, or yours?*
*I think this is where our minds merge...* Hiccup said unsurely, *That was the whole point of this, right? To form a telepathic bond? If we explore, we'll get a better idea of what's going on* he reasoned.

“I wonder if I can fly here? It's like a lucid dream.”

*Okay, that's going to get annoying* Hiccup groaned, *I didn't know how hard it was to keep my thoughts under control.*

“Stupid mind.”

“Argh!”

Toothless chuckled, rather unhelpfully in Hiccup’s opinion. *Didn’t you say something about being able to fly here?* he prompted.

*Right, yeah...this is like a lucid dream – where you know that you're dreaming – so if I concentrate, maybe I can...* Experimentally, he closed his eyes and thought of flying, of free-falling...of what it had felt like to be Toothless and have his own wings...he could feel the muscles in his shoulders and back flexing to beat them back and forth, keeping them aloft...

Hiccup opened his eyes, and he was in the air. No transition, no journey; one moment he was standing in the cove, the next he was hovering miles above in bright sunshine – but hadn’t it just been night? His body felt different, yet familiar...for it wasn’t exactly his body as he remembered it, but a dragon body, a Night Fury body. If he hadn’t experienced Toothless’ memories, he would have been far more disturbed.

As it was, Hiccup found himself looking over his new form with interest rather than horror. His scales were not black, but dark brown, the same colour as his hair, with lighter brown for his mottling. His eyes were pine green, but shinier than those of his human form. His body was smaller than Toothless’, a Hiccup sized Night Fury instead of a full sized one. He couldn’t see it, but the scales on the top of his head were layered such that they resembled the bangs of his hair.

Toothless flew up to join him. Hiccup gave his other half a gummy smile – it really did feel a bit odd in this form – and asked *Hey, bud, what d’you think?*

*You’re it!* Toothless gave him a gummy smile and then darted away, laughing.

*You’re it!* Toothless gave him a gummy smile and then darted away, laughing.

*Oh, you are so gonna get it!* Hiccup gave chase – or tried to, at least. When he’d been living through Toothless’ memories, all the movements of flight had come naturally – after all, he hadn’t really been in control. Now he had to move three unfamiliar body parts by himself, and it proved to be trickier than he’d anticipated. “*I can do this. I have the ‘soul of a dragon’, don’t I? I have, like, an instinct for flying. Now, what happens when I do this...!*”

Once he realised that Hiccup wasn’t chasing him, but still trying to figure out how to fly, Toothless went back to help him. Fortunately, Hiccup was so familiar with the way Toothless moved in flight,
just from riding and controlling his tail fin, that he quickly got the hang of it. He and Toothless had a lot of fun chasing each other through an ever shifting landscape; one moment they were flying above Berk, then Outcast Island, then Dragon’s Edge, then the Ice Nest…anywhere that existed in their memories.

In fact, Hiccup was having such a great time that he’d almost forgotten why they had tried this in the first place, until Toothless stopped in mid-air in front of him, and Hiccup nearly crashed into him. *Whoa!* he yelped, surprised, *Toothless? What’s wrong?*

Toothless whined, unsettled. Hiccup looked at what was bothering him, but there was nothing there…just darkness. A shiver ran down his spine. *What’s…in there?*

*Nothing!* Toothless exclaimed, far too quickly, *Nothing’s there, you can see that. Let’s go back. We still have to figure out how you’re supposed to send your will out to our subjects*. With that, he turned tail and fled from the darkness…Hiccup eyed it a moment longer, before he followed.

They found that whichever place they thought of, would be the place that appeared, but the cove remained in the same place. They returned there; Toothless landed gracefully and Hiccup…almost did. *Are you okay?* Toothless asked him.

He groaned and picked himself up. *Yes…how do I change back?*

Toothless stared at him. *You just did.*

Surprised, Hiccup looked down at himself, and realised that he was indeed back in his regular human form. A small part of him felt kind of disappointed. *Oh. I guess my subconscious knows what I want before I do* he commented, getting to his feet. When he tried to walk forward, his legs apparently decided they weren’t sure how to work properly anymore, and he stumbled on his phantom limb. Even in his subconscious, dreaming lucidly, the damn leg gave him trouble.

Of course Toothless caught him. *Thanks, bud* he said gratefully, regaining his balance.

*You’re welcome. So…does your subconscious know how to send your will out to our subjects?*

*I was hoping you would. Didn’t you say the King had told you what to do?*

*Well he did, but the Sea-Giants don’t think-speak like any dragon I know. It’s a bit hard to interpret what he meant when all I have to go on are images and feelings all jumbled up together* Toothless grumbled. Hiccup nudged him and smiled eagerly, encouragingly. The dragon sighed and tried to recall what the King had told him, and how best to explain it all. *To send your will out…first we have to find your will, find the part of your mind where your will comes from. Then you have to open your mind and reach your will out to all our dragons in the pack* he said finally.

Hiccup was suddenly struck by a bizarre mental image of himself with lots of translucent tendrils snaking out of his skull and wiggling through the air like the snake-hairs of Medusa. Only he was in his own mind, without full control of his thoughts, so seeing a bizarre image like this happened…not literally, exactly, but right in front of them. He yelped, and Toothless recoiled instinctively from this Hiccup who wasn’t Hiccup, until the real one panicked and waved his arms at it, dissipating it.

Face red, Hiccup looked at him pointedly and said *You saw nothing.*

Toothless was tempted for a moment to tease him, but thought better of it. *I saw nothing* he agreed, *So…do you know what to do now?*
Honestly, I have no idea* Hiccup shrugged, but honestly he was a bit annoyed. The sky above darkened a little with clouds, but neither of them noticed or made the connection just then. *I mean, for one thing, what is ‘will’? You mean like, willpower? Do I just have to really, really want to connect to our subjects? Because I do want to connect to our subjects, but either I’m doing something wrong or my subconscious hasn’t gotten the memo, seeing as how nothing’s happened* he rambled, pacing back and forth.

At first, the black dragon was at a loss. Will was just…will, it meant exactly what it said, it was final and persistent and…and…how could Hiccup not understand something so obvious! He tried to calm down…if they both started getting agitated, they wouldn’t get anywhere. Toothless struggled to think of a way to tell Hiccup about will so that his other half would understand.

*Will is…when an alpha commands their flock, or a drakaina wants to have a hatchling…they want something to happen, so they make it happen…they will do it…that's what will is* he said at last. He really didn't know how to explain something so instinctive.

Fortunately, Hiccup seemed to understand anyway. *It’s like thought-speak* he said after a moment’s thought. *Will is…intention, purpose. The feeling that you will do something. Hmm* his brow furrowed in thought. *If will is intention, and intention is linked to thought-speak...and the heart bind is what allows me to think-speak, even though I’m human...maybe, if we follow the heart bind, we’ll get to the source of how I can think-speak, and that's how we’ll find my will.*

Toothless didn't know why he’d doubted Hiccup even for a moment. Though that still begged the question...*How can we follow the heart bind? It binds...well, us. It leads us to each other, how can it lead us to anywhere else?*

*I’m not sure, but we’re in the mind, and we’re lucid dreaming. Anything is possible...* He closed his eyes and focused on the heart bind, on how it felt. Warm, like flames in a hearth on a cold winter’s night. Comforting, like a hug when he needed one most. Binding, like a promise he would never break. Supportive, like the knowledge that even if he stumbled, he would be caught before he fell.

His brother guessed what he was doing, and followed suit. The heart bind was...warm, like his inner fire, and he could barely tell them apart. Comforting, like Hiccup’s gentle hands running over his scales to soothe him. Binding, like the way he and Hiccup become one when they fly. Supportive, like the knowledge that if they fell, his other half would find a way to help them fly once more.

At the same moment, they both opened their eyes, and gasped. Loops of shining light, of unscorching fire, were wrapped around their torsos, trailing in spirals around their limbs and appendages. The light coloured emerald, scarlet, violet and azure ran in cords between them, entangled, shining brightest at their chests and over their hearts.

Hiccup stared, transfixed. He slowly reached up to rest a hand lightly against his heart, almost afraid to touch the light in case it disappeared. *It's beautiful* he said reverently. Toothless purred in contentment, equally as fascinated by this visualisation of the heart bind.

*I wonder what the colours mean* Hiccup wondered, but to Toothless that didn't seem important. What mattered was where the light led; trails of it flowed towards and into the lake. It made sense, really; how better to find one’s will than to delve deeper into the subconscious? They walked up to the edge of the water…but then Hiccup hesitated.

*What’s wrong?* Toothless asked, sensing his nervousness.

He swallowed and explained *I just realised...there’re some things in my mind I don’t like to think
about…and I have a horrible feeling they're all down there.* Everything…all his doubts and insecurities, every nightmare he’d ever had, where else would they hide but deep inside his psyche? It didn’t matter when they were buried and out of sight, out of mind…but the idea of hearing or seeing thoughts he didn’t like to have made him balk at taking another step into the lake.

It was irrational, he knew; he had nothing to be afraid or ashamed of…but that didn’t make his reluctance any weaker. Perhaps he didn’t have to do this, he could live without being able to project his will, “*Toothless can do all that.*” He realised he was losing control over his thoughts again, but it was too late to take it back. Toothless knew that he needed to face this, and now was better than never, in his opinion.

With his head, he pushed Hiccup forward into the lake; the young man cried out in alarm as his bare feet splashed into the water, and twisted to face Toothless. *Don’t!* he cried, eyes wide. *I can’t – I can’t do this. Not now, not yet* he pleaded. He just needed some time to prepare himself.

*Yes, you can. You will* his best friend declared, persistently edging forwards so that Hiccup had to either wade backwards or fall over. The water resisted him; it felt thick around his calves, like wading through mud. He lost his balance and toppled backwards, crying out, but Toothless caught his flailing hand in harmless gums and tugged him upright again. Hiccup shivered; he really didn’t want to do this, but he had to - and where was all this fog coming from?

He didn't even know why he was so worked up…actually, he did, but he couldn't bring himself to admit it. That didn't mean his other half wouldn't. *You’re not just scared of what's down there. You're scared of me seeing it, you're ashamed of what I'll think* Toothless said calmly. Hiccup stared at him in surprise; that was quite the leap of reasoning for a dragon.

*How do you…?*

Toothless crooned sympathetically and admitted *I know because…I felt the same way, earlier. That darkness we saw? I'm sure that's where my memories, from before I met you, from the war, that's where they hide. I was afraid to face them…but you didn't push me* he realised, hanging his head, *And I shouldn't push you either. I'm sorry, Hiccup. You don't have to do this.*

*I – I do* Hiccup said hesitantly. He took a deep breath and continued, *If I don't do this now, then…when? I could put it off, but it would just get harder each time. If I'd known what that darkness was, I would have encouraged you to face your fears...after all, sometimes we need a little push in the right direction.*

*You’re right* he admitted, *I am scared, and ashamed and – I know I shouldn't be. I trust you, you are half of me…but there must be thoughts down there that I've never told anyone about. I know I'm not the typical tough, hardheaded, 'emotions are for sissies’ macho Viking, but it's still not…it's not easy, letting someone in like this, even someone I love and trust completely.*

Toothless understood; he knew what it was to feel vulnerable and exposed. The only person he felt safe enough to be helpless around was his other half, just like any heart bound pair. A small irrational twinge of regret twanged through him, that Hiccup didn't feel the same…but of course, the heart bind went both ways, and Hiccup picked up on it almost immediately.

*I do feel safe around you. It's not your fault I can't get over this totally irrational fear of delving into the deepest, darkest part of my subconscious* he remarked, with a hint of his typical sarcasm. He eyed the innocuously clear and shimmering lake as if a Submaripper might be lurking in its depths, ready to pull them both down into its vicious maw.

He closed his eyes, took a deep breath and let it out slowly. *Here we go.* The two of them bravely
waded forwards into the lake. When they were far enough from the edge, they swam out a little further and dived underwater. Down they went, following the trails of light, until Hiccup’s hands broke through a barrier and gravity took over. He plunged downwards, as did Toothless—fortunately, they kept their heads and the dragon caught his human on his back.

The fiery cords of the heart bind were still visible, wrapping around them, and now the glowing lines trailed off into the shadowy realms beyond. He settled himself properly on Toothless’ shoulders, bracing his heels against the black dragons ribs and gripping his shoulders for balance. “Follow that light!” he cried; Toothless beat his wings hard and surged forwards.

The light kept the darkness at bay; Hiccup kept his eyes on the trail and closed his ears to disturbing whispers, ignoring glimpses of terrible haunts. Sometimes their way became blocked, only for the path to shift and a new route to emerge, or the barrier opened before them. Toothless flew as fast as he could without dislodging his rider, but it still felt a long time before they reached the end.

The light of the heart bind flowed into a multicoloured fire so bright, it shone like a supernova and all but blinded them in its intensity. As their eyes adjusted, they could see that the fire had the shape of a hovering dragon, a Night Fury, with eyes that shone white as moonstones. “Soul of a dragon…” Hiccup whispered, hardly daring to break the stillness and silence.

The Soul-Fury turned those glowing eyes upon them and dived to bar their path, snarling at them. Toothless snarled in return, defensive. Hiccup held a hand out, habitually trying to calm the Soul-Fury as he would any other dragon. The Soul-Fury paused, and looked them over. It seemed to recognise them, retreating a few steps and lowering its head, suddenly docile.

As if hypnotised, Hiccup dismounted and slowly walked towards…his soul, his will, the core of his being. He would never have imagined it would look so beautiful…the Soul-Fury raised its head, and Hiccup believed that if he placed his hand upon its snout and willed himself to connect to all of their subjects, this would give him the power to do so. Why else would the heart bind lead them here?

Toothless hung back, equally in awe of Hiccup’s soul…yet something didn’t feel right. There was something else, a warning the King had given him, but he’d been so caught up with everything he had forgotten it until now. He lunged forwards, roaring a warning, crying *Hiccup, stop!* It was too late – Hiccup had already placed his hand on the Soul-Fury.

Neither of them fully understood how easily they had traversed the depths of Hiccup’s psyche; mental barriers he didn't even know he possessed had opened for him and the being with which he shared half of his heart. To bring his other half to his soul was one thing; to open his mind and soul to every draconic mind within range was entirely another.

The majority of their subjects were young, by dragon standards; only decades, and not centuries old. Yet their collective awareness added up to several centuries worth of memories – all of which were suddenly crammed into a small human mind. Hiccup screamed and the Soul-Fury roared in pain. To make matters worse, seconds later the minds he accidentally invaded rejected him violently.

“AAAAAH!!!”

“Hiccup! HICCUP!!”

His eyes snapped open onto darkness; he sat bolt upright, and grasped desperately for Toothless, who had also jerked awake with a shriek of fear. His head was pounding, he was shaking and sweating; he felt like he'd been crushed in a rockslide, and then the rocks had exploded.
A dragon lit the nearest hearth and light flamed up which seared his eyes, and someone was rubbing his back and Astrid was talking to him. Actually, they might have been the same person. “You're okay, Hiccup, I've got you. What happened? You started twitching and then you were screaming and you wouldn't wake up, was it a nightmare?”

“Must’ve been one heck of a nightmare” he heard someone say, but he didn’t have the energy to try and place the voice. Toothless whined guiltily and pressed against his side; Hiccup grounded himself against his dragon and managed to meet Astrid’s wide, worried eyes. He tried to say “I'm fine”, but his mouth wouldn’t work right, and it came out as an unintelligible “Uh. Guh.”

*Alpha-Hiccup, are you alright?* Stormfly chittered at him in concern. Hiccup’s gaze slid from Astrid to her dragon, and then to all the other Vikings staring at him with worried and pitying expressions. It dawned on him that he’d just started screaming out of nowhere, woken everyone up and generally made a complete fool of himself. A blush spread over his cheeks, and he barely resisted the urge to duck under Toothless’ wing and hide.

“Hiccup, dear, are you alright?” his mother asked sympathetically. She didn't quite meet his eyes, compromising between showing motherly concern and showing respect the way a dragon would. She'd had twenty years to figure out their customs, after all. She also resisted the maternal urge to hold him like a child, which would surely only embarrass him further.

“I…” Hiccup tried to speak, but his head was killing him, and he clutched at it with a groan. By Odin’s tangled beard, he’d never had such a terrible migraine, and it felt like it was getting worse. He felt like Thor was repeatedly slamming Mjolnir onto his skull, and his throat was dry. “Water” he croaked. Stoick immediately bustled off to fetch some, elbowing his way past the dragons.

“Is that why you were screaming? You had a migraine come on suddenly?” Astrid asked quietly. Hiccup didn't answer her; he pressed his hands to his head in a futile attempt to stop his skull from splitting open. Toothless placed his jaw on top of Hiccup’s head, trying to alleviate the pain with his weight. He spotted a Terrible Terror peeking at him and stared at it. *You.*

The tiny purple dragon jumped. *Yes, Alpha-Toothless?*

*Go straight to the Elder of Healing and fetch some cloud-flower root* Toothless ordered. The little dragon twitched his wings as if to take off, but hesitated.

*Cold, storm, get blown away! Sorry, Alpha-Toothless, so sorry, scared!* he confessed. Toothless resisted the urge to snarl irritably at the tiny thing and dismissed him with a mere flick of ear fins. Hiccup needed cloud-flower root, and a drink of water, and to be somewhere dark. Getting the root that would help his headache didn't seem to be an option, but as soon as he’d had his fill of water, Toothless was going to wrap a wing over him and bring the darkness back.
At last Stoick returned, and pressed a tankard of water into his son’s hands. Feeling nauseous, Hiccup sternly told himself not to gulp the water down like he was dying of thirst. He really, really didn't want him and Toothless to experience death by migraine, although it certainly felt like that was happening. *I guess I deserve this for treading in realms only meant for the Gods.*

Between swallows, Hiccup managed to explain the gist of what had happened to his worried fiancé and parents. How he'd meditated and managed to fall into a lucid dream with Toothless - how they'd tried to tap into his ability to think-speak and his willpower, and use it to connect with the other dragons the way an Alpha could, so they could summon and warn and command their entire flock at once. He explained that his human mind seemingly couldn't handle it, hence the migraine.

Now his father was blustering, just about managing to not raise his voice lest an avalanche of snow from the roof block the doors. “This is just ridiculous-!”

“Stoick, love, calm down” Valka tried to soothe him, with little success.

“I put up with that bloody heart bind thing cos it saved his life, but all this…*mind talking* is hurting him! I don't want him connecting with the dragons if it makes him ill, and I don't care if he is”-

“Shh! Keep your voice down!” Astrid hissed, jerking a thumb at Hiccup. In the firelight she could see he looked terrible, his skin wan and his brow shimmering with sweat. She tugged the empty mug from his unresisting fingers and leaned in to brush her lips against his. A chaste kiss, just for comfort, and she pulled back. He smiled weakly at her, and Toothless gazed at her with gratitude in his eyes.

He lifted his head from Hiccup’s and shifted position, raising one wing invitingly. Hiccup took the hint. He clumsily gave Astrid another kiss, mumbled “G’night”, and curled up against his dragon, between his wings. Being held by his other half relaxed him like nothing else could, save for the freedom of flying, and once encased in warmth and darkness he felt like he might be able to go back to sleep, even with the headache that still plagued him.

Before he could, though, he needed to know that all their efforts hadn't been entirely for naught. Trusting his instincts, Hiccup focused on the heart bind and sent a thought along it, taking care not to project it as thought-speak. *Thank you.*

He didn't hear the reply, but he felt it in his mind. *You’re welcome. Rest.* The last word had a ring of finality, and Hiccup knew there was no point in arguing with his other half even if he had wanted to. So he closed his eyes and rested, and eventually fell back into sleep.

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A/N: Long chapter is long! I just can't help myself, can I?

Cloud-flower root is valerian root, which is actually a natural remedy for migraines.

The green flames represent Toothless-Hiccup’s mercy, personal growth, and their bond (as they both have green eyes, and saw themselves in each other’s eyes). The red flames represent Toothless-Hiccup’s determination, sense of justice, and their pride. The purple flames represent Toothless-Hiccup’s strength and power as a dragon-rider team and as the Alphas of Berk. The blue flames represent their shared love of and need for flight and freedom.
If anyone wants to take a stab at drawing Fury!Hiccup, or Toothless-Hiccup wreathed in coloured flames, or the Soul-Fury, that would be awesome!
Hiccup’s headache, though dulled, persisted for several days. His father and fiancé weren’t too concerned when the pain stopped being near-excruciating, and Valka fussed over him a bit, but tried not to baby him too much. Toothless, on the other hand, refused to go flying until Hiccup felt completely better, lest he *lose concentration and do something stupid.*

Despite the unpleasant consequences of his first attempt, Hiccup was determined to try the whole thing again. He told Toothless about this, and the dragon’s response was *Let me get this straight. You tried to do something that humans shouldn't be able to do, and it hurt you…and now you want to try it again?*

“Yeah, well, if at first you don't succeed, try, try again, right? Don't dragons have any sayings like that?”

*We have one or two…but we also have another saying, which is ‘when something causes you pain, it's a really dumb idea to do it again’ - the rhyme was accidental* he said quickly.

“I didn't know you were a poet” Hiccup teased him, “And don't dragons hurt each other when you bicker like five year olds?”

*Settling disputes through force is an ancient dragon tradition…and we don’t hurt each other that much.*

“Uh-huh. Look, I know you're just trying to protect me, but I'm not as fragile as everyone thinks. I'm a Viking! I can handle a measly little headache.”

*That ‘measly headache’ had you screaming in agony* Toothless grumbled.

“So…what are these wise dragon sayings you mentioned?” Hiccup asked, apparently changing the subject.

*Well, I've told you the one about facing your fears, and there's one about trying to fly no matter how many times you fall…wait. Are you just looking for an excuse to give yourself another migraine?* Toothless asked, eyeing him suspiciously.

“I don't need an excuse” Hiccup retorted…then he realised how that sounded. “Err, to keep trying, I mean, not give myself a headache. If I get it right, I won't get a migraine, but I won't get it right unless I keep trying, now will I?”

*This is the flight-suit debacle all over again* Toothless groaned; but he knew Hiccup. Telling Hiccup he shouldn't, or worse *couldn’t* do something, was the most sure-fire way of ensuring he wouldn't stop until he succeeded. Toothless wasn't sure if stubbornness was a human thing or just a Viking thing, but his human had it in spades.

He gave a very exaggerated sigh, complete with eye roll, and decided *If you really want to try again, I'll help you. I have no idea how, but I'll do… something.*

Hiccup grinned. “Aw, thanks, buddy. Ugh… I really need to clean up in here” he muttered, trying to sort through the clutter on his desk. Then there was that cobweb in the corner… he eyed it, an odd look on his face, his mind whirring. He grabbed a piece of parchment and started writing. He put ‘Toothless-Hiccup’ in the middle, then three lines leading to the names ‘Cloud Jumper’, ‘Skull Crusher’ and ‘Stormfly’.
Behind him, curled up on the floor, Toothless wriggled a bit, trying to scratch an itch on his stomach. Sometimes he envied humans and their fingers…if he was being honest, he was feeling a bit cramped. He'd followed Hiccup into the man’s small workshop at the back of the forge; Hiccup had long since had the door enlarged so his dragon could actually fit.

Even so, being stuck in a small room wasn’t much fun for a creature of the skies. The door was ajar, he could leave at any time…Hiccup sensed the dragon’s agitation and looked over his shoulder.

“Go on outside; we’ll go flying as soon as I'm finished with this” he promised, holding up a page covered with what, to Toothless, looked like meaningless scribbles and lines. Except for in the middle, which he could just about recognise as the marks that meant ‘Toothless-Hiccup’.

*Alright* he agreed. Toothless slunk out of the door, casting one last look over his shoulder…then he turned back and started in surprise. A semicircle of dragons were crouching around the forge or perched on the reinforced roofs of nearby buildings; much to the consternation of the Vikings trying to get past.

*What are you all doing here?* Toothless questioned, stretching his wings out to make himself seem larger and more imposing. That and they were stiff.

The nearest Fire-Scale, Lekaame, replied *we just wanted to see if Alpha-Hiccup was alright.*

Meatlug was there too. *Fishlegs is worried. He told me to come and see if Hiccup – oh, I mean, Alpha-Hiccup – is okay. He's busy right now. With the human children. Fishlegs, I mean* she rambled.

Toothless resisted the urge to sigh, and instead blinked patiently at the Rock-Tail. *I understand; but none of you need to worry. Hiccup is fine now* he assured the dragons, and many of them sighed in relief. Meatlug decided her work was done; she buzzed off to find Fishlegs and answer his questions about Hiccup’s welfare…provided he asked them in a nice, simple, ‘yes or no’ sort of way.

*Alpha-Toothless, there's one other thing…* Lekaame, who appeared to be the spokes-dragon for the group, said hesitantly.

*Which is?*

*The night that Alpha-Hiccup was hurt…we all felt something invade our minds just moments before. Is that why he felt pain, because something invaded his mind?* she inquired on the pack’s behalf.

Toothless stiffened, staring at her. It had never occurred to him that the other dragons didn’t know that Hiccup had tried to reach out to them all. What could he say? He could hear humans complaining that they couldn’t get past; the dragons ignored them. *What do I tell them? I need to say something, but I don't want them thinking badly of Hiccup – what do I do?*

The dragons were staring at him expectantly, and part of him wanted to spin around and go right back inside. He tried to think of what Hiccup would do, and realised that Hiccup would be honest because he was terrible at lying. *It wasn’t an invasion* he declared, *I mean, it wasn’t meant to be. Hiccup just wanted to connect with you as an Alpha the way I can, and your minds rejected him. That’s why he was hurt* he explained.

The dragons gave assorted sounds of surprise and dismay. *We hurt Alpha-Hiccup?* one young Spike-Tail asked nervously. Toothless had to fight back the urge to say yes, and you’d better be sorry!
*You didn't mean to. It was an accident* he said fairly. *Hiccup just didn't know how to connect properly.*

*Then perhaps he shouldn't have been trying at all* suggested one dragon, a Thunderclaw who was one of the few dragons from the army who had refused to have his armour removed.

*I don't remember asking your opinion* Toothless retorted coolly…then he stared at the Thunderclaw in earnest, sniffing the air for his scent. *I know you. You're one of the dragons that attacked my other half and I in the battle for the Ice Nest and nearly killed us* he realised, bristling. He knew he couldn’t really hold the dragon responsible for that, but he was still put on edge nonetheless.

The Thunderclaw glared defiantly at the night fury from beneath his tarnished headgear. *I was under the command of a more powerful alpha at the time, not in my right mind* he argued.

*I didn't ask for an excuse, either* Toothless shot back. A few of the Thunderclaw’s fellow ex-soldiers moved closer to him in a show of support. The originals, loyal to Toothless-Hiccup, grouped around the Night Fury, all the dragons facing off and baring teeth.

*I am powerful – or have you forgotten why I am the Alpha in the first place? Or should I say ‘we’ – Hiccup has as much right to be Alpha, to command the respect and obedience of our subjects – which includes you – as I do. So don't you dare suggest otherwise* Toothless snarled.

The Thunderclaw tensed, taking on an aggressive pose that Toothless mirrored instinctively. *Does he really have that right?* he challenged, *He's not a dragon. He's human. Humans cannot be trusted! The dark human who commanded the sea-giant Alpha, he could not think-speak but he still controlled us – how do we know your human won't do the same, or worse?*

Toothless saw red. *How dare he?* He was trembling with the strain of holding himself back from leaping at the Thunderclaw. *My human is nothing like Drago!* he shrieked, furious. *You don't even know him! He doesn't want to command you, he just wants to be able to remember all your damn names!!*

“Toothless, hold!”

“What in the name of Thor’s skivvies is going on?!”

“Oh, cool! Dragon fight!”

Hiccup, Gobber and Snotlout had all emerged from the forge when Toothless began shrieking. “No! No fight, fighting bad, fighting in the village is forbidden anyway!” Hiccup declared hastily, hurrying over to Toothless’ side. The Night Fury, who had started charging a plasma blast without fully realising until Hiccup’s shout cut it off, lowered his ear-fins and whined apologetically.

“What’s the matter with ‘em, Hiccup? I ignored ‘em when they were just loitering outside, but then Toothless here started making a racket and doing that glowing thing” –

“Oh, sorry, Gobber. I think Toothless was having a disagreement with…” *Sorry, what was your name?* he asked the Thunderclaw, who started and eyed him warily.

*…Bosaal* he replied after a moment.

“Yes, uh, Bosaal here…may have compared me to Drago, and Toothless…got a little upset.”

Gobber looked sceptical; Snotlout was far less subtle. “A little? He was firing up the plasma blast of
doom! Not to mention doing his best flightmare impression - I mean, wow. If that's how he reacts when someone insults you, I'd love to see how berserk he goes when someone actually hurts you” the young man laughed obnoxiously. He'd even invite the twins along to watch!

Hiccup rolled his eyes, and climbed into the saddle. “Okay, everyone just calm down, please. All of you, break it up. Go on, go…fishing, or something” he said, shooing the other dragons off. He and Toothless took to the air; he could sense his dragon’s lingering resentment, and it worried him. “Toothless, you need to be more careful; someone could've been hurt” he protested.

When he’d first felt Toothless’ emotions shift and become darker, he’d ignored it in the hope that Toothless would calm down by himself, but then he had felt such anger…the intensity of it, brief as it had been, alarmed him.

*You didn't hear what he said!* Toothless retorted, flicking an ear-fin irritably.

“No, but I heard what you said. I think all of Berk heard you” he teased, before turning serious once more. “I get it; Drago’s a sore point for you; but you can't just fly off the handle like that. You can't attack the dragons he enslaved just for mentioning him.”

*I didn't mean* to charge a plasma blast. You know when dragons get too angry, we have to release that pressure somehow and…I wasn't mad because he mentioned Drago. I was mad because he insulted you! He compared you to that monster and said you couldn't be trusted because you're human. As if that matters. He's nothing but an ungrateful*- Toothless snarled, frustrated.

Hiccup’s brow furrowed in concern. “You’re really stressed, aren't you? Toothless, is something bothering you?”

*You mean apart from the ungrateful jerk who doubted you?*

“You can’t expect everyone to like me, or trust me straightaway. Having a human be the Alpha of a dragon pack, it's new, and strange, and the…ex-army dragons aren't keen on humans anyway.”

*But you are the Alpha, as much as I am! I just want them to respect you* Toothless complained.

“Toothless, respect has to be earned. It can’t be forced…if I were that sort of leader, or you were, we really would be like Drago and Usurper.” He felt Toothless tense, and reached out to stroke his dragon’s crown. “Do you remember the first year after the war, that summer when my friends and I were competing in the Thawfest games? There were a lot of logs, and sheep…”

*I remember...you humans do that every year. We could never figure out what the big deal was* Toothless admitted. The first year, Hiccup should have won, but he threw the final race. Astrid called him out on it the second time, so the third time, he and Toothless won and it was great. The years after that, they'd been too busy with the Edge to compete. *What is the big deal?*

“Nothing, really” Hiccup shrugged dismissively. “But anyway. That first year, the first year I was winning, it felt really good. And I acted like such a jerk. I was gloating and saying insults and, and ‘rattling cages’…I got so caught up in how good it felt to beat Snotlout, I starting turning into…well, Snotlout.”

*The horror* Toothless snorted. *You’re talking as if winning is a bad thing* he added.

*It’s not a bad thing, so long as you don’t let it go to your head. And I did, terribly. When I think about how I acted…I don't like that side of myself. I don't want our subjects to respect and obey me just because I'm one of the Alphas. I don't want that to go to my head and make me act…differently. I want them to respect me and trust me because I earned it, not because you or I told them to* Hiccup
There was a long pause as Toothless considered this, and then he sighed and told Hiccup *You still at least deserve respect. Besides, I'd say you've already earned our pack’s respect. You did save them all from the Red Death, and who knows what else, after all.*

“I couldn’t have done it without you, buddy; but the newcomers don't have that history with me. It's their trust we have to earn, and we can't do that if we’re figuratively biting their heads off, right?”

*You're right* Toothless admitted at last.

Hiccup smiled, and rubbed the top of his head soothingly, and asked *you’re calm now?*

*Yes* Toothless managed to reply, before they were too tired to continue. They would improve, with practice and time. Their efforts now reminded Hiccup of his breakthrough at the forge.

“I think I've figured out what I was doing wrong, before” he revealed; Toothless’ ear fins twitched, and he ducked his head to glance back at Hiccup from the corner of his eye, interested.

“My mistake was trying to connect to everyone at once” Hiccup began, *So instead, I'm going to try connecting to them one at a time, and sort of...following their minds, to other dragons they know, and other dragons they know...so we’d all be connected, but instead of being like a pyramid with you and I at the top, it would be more like a spider’s web, with me and you in the middle* he explained.

*That makes it sound like we’re the spiders* Toothless complained. He was not a fan of spiders; they had too many legs and eyes and were just…eugh. *All of us, connected? Won't that be worse, if we can all read each other’s minds?*

“But Toothless, don’t you see? The pack is already connected. All dragons are; you guys are telepathic. You project your thoughts, like we’re doing right now, but to hear them you need to be...to have the right kind of mind, or brain, or whatever. That's what I’m gonna do. I'm gonna reach out for the part of their minds that lets them hear thought-speak, and through each dragon I connect with, I can connect with others.

“I can't connect to everyone on my own; my mind just isn't strong enough. And we're stronger together, but I don't think even the two of us would be enough; but if we all support each other, we can do this.”

It was a good plan, and Toothless purred so with pride in his clever other half that it trembled through him to the tip of his tail fin. Their circling flight around Berk came to an end and they headed back, eager to explain their plan to the other dragons. This time would be better, this time they would be prepared.

Upon their return, Toothless-Hiccup flew to the first knot of dragons they came across. When they landed, the dragons bowed hastily; not in calm submission, but with definite signals of anxiety, even fear in their bodies. Toothless crooned concern and Hiccup asked gently, *Is everything okay?*

*Yes, Alpha-Hiccup!* one of the dragons, a Twin-Head, replied hastily. The right head spoke first, and the left added, *everything is fine!*

Hiccup and Toothless looked at each other, and then at the dragons. *Okay, now I know something’s up. What's wrong? You can tell us* Hiccup insisted, dismounting.

At first the dragons were reluctant, avoiding his eyes and rustling their wings, fidgeting. Then the
Zippleback’s right head suddenly exclaimed, *We do respect you, Alpha-Hiccup!* 

*Please don’t be angry, Alpha-Toothless* the left head added hurriedly. Hiccup stared at them, and realised they were small for a Zippleback; a juvenile, really. He put their words together with what Toothless had said of the earlier argument, and quickly figured out what was going on.

Beside him, Toothless tilted his head confused, and asked *Why would I be angry?*

None of the dragons answered, but Hiccup did. “…This is about what happened at the forge earlier, isn’t it? Let me guess; word got around that Toothless was angry at Bosaal and nearly fired at him, and now you’re all worried that Toothless is going to be angry with you, maybe even attack you, if you say the wrong thing or say anything bad about me.”

The dragons twitched uneasily, but Toothless flinched, ear-fins going back in dismay. *I'm not – I wouldn’t - I'm sorry* he said contritely, whining apologetically and shifting on his paws in embarrassment and shame. Hiccup put an arm around his neck and hugged him, looking around at the dragons and assuring them *‘There's no need to look like you've just been caught trespassing - you're not in trouble. Look, if we do something that bothers you, please just tell us. You guys are gonna have to be patient with us; we’re new to this whole being Alphas thing’* he pointed out.

The dragons relaxed, and promised to do as they were asked. Hiccup explained his idea about connecting the pack in a mental web, where everyone would support a little bit of the connection instead of himself and Toothless trying to support the whole thing. The dragons might not have quite understood what he was getting at, but they were willing to try it regardless.

When they left, Toothless asked if they could go find Bosaal. Hiccup figured he’d probably be away from the village, and sure enough, they eventually found him with some other Thunderclaws on the further side of the island. The dragons lowered their heads when they landed, but only briefly. Hiccup dismounted, gave Toothless an encouraging pat and stepped aside. Toothless swallowed and stepped towards the knot of dragons. *Bosaal?*

*The grey and blue splotched dragon stepped forward reluctantly and asked *Yes, Alpha-Toothless?* 

*I’m… sorry, that I overreacted earlier* Toothless apologised, pawing at the grass sheepishly. *I shouldn't have expected you to respect Hiccup and I simply because we are the Alphas. That was… what the dark human would have done. Respect should be earned, and I should have known that, and I should never have tried to attack you…I’m sorry* he repeated, feeling awkward.

Bosaal blinked, surprised. The other Thunderclaws shifted their weight uncertainly and glanced at one another, before looking back at their pack mate and their Alphas. Bosaal looked at Hiccup, who smiled softly and walked calmly towards him and Toothless.

*He’s right* Hiccup told the dragons, *I know you haven't had the best experience with humans in the past; that's why you don't want to take your armour off, isn't it? But the humans here on Berk, believe me, they don't want to hurt dragons. At worst they're just annoying, and you can avoid them. I mean, we can't fly. Not by ourselves, at least* he said wryly, before stepping cautiously towards Bosaal.

*Bosaal, I understand why you'd be afraid of a human commanding you the way Drago and Usurper once did…but I promise, we will never treat you like they did. You don't have to respect me, or even like me, but I promise…you can trust me* he told both the Thunderclaw and Toothless, holding his hand out to one dragon even as he smiled reassuringly at the other.

There was a long pause…and then he felt cool metal on his palm as Bosaal pressed his armoured
snout to Hiccup’s hand. Toothless-Hiccup relaxed, both breathing sighs of relief. *Apology accepted... I misjudged you both, and I'm sorry* admitted Bosaal. Both young Alphas assured him that all was forgiven, and then explained Hiccup’s plan to unite the pack.

The dragons struggled a bit to picture a “spider web, but with minds instead of silk”, as Hiccup tried to describe it; but they decided to trust that their Alphas knew what to do. In a show of good faith, Bosaal and his friends even agreed to spread the word to other dragons on the far side of the island.

All of the dragons took wing together, and as they rose, Hiccup privately told Toothless, *I'm so proud of you*. His pride and love resonated through their bond, and his dragon brother purred happily, feeling his heart soar with his wings.

Finally, they were ready. As they fell asleep that night, they meditated until their subconscious joined once more, and found themselves in the air together over the cove. Without hesitation, Toothless-Hiccup dived towards the lake, only to realise at the last second that it was frozen over.

They pulled up and landed on the edge. Toothless sniffed at the smooth ice and rumbled in confusion. *I don't understand* he complained, *It wasn't frozen before.*

*I know...I think, maybe my mind is trying to protect itself* Hiccup guessed, dismounting and crouching to brush his fingertips over the ice. It was smooth and solid, but unlike true ice, not cold to the touch.

*But your mind isn't in danger* Toothless protested; they were prepared for what would happen now, they had a plan!

*Well, yeah, I know that, but my subconscious – the rest of my mind, it...oh, I don't know* Hiccup declared, *But I don't think we can just blast through...no, we need to be smart about this.*

*I can breathe fire without shooting a plasma blast* Toothless reminded him, *and it's ice. Sort of... shouldn't we be trying to, you know, melt it?*

*It's not ice, though; it just looks like ice. Nothing here is real, it's just...representations, of how I'm feeling or what I'm thinking. So...so it's my mind, which means I should be able to...* he trailed off, closed his eyes and placed his hands on the ice. He concentrated, imagining the ice melting away. At first, nothing happened...and then a pulse of energy rippled out from his palms over the ice, and it cracked! Startled, both Hiccup and Toothless jumped backwards, staring wide eyed at the fractured ice.

“Ha!” Hiccup exclaimed, grinning. *It worked! Toothless, come help. Put your paws on the ice and imagine it melting* he encouraged, doing the same himself. Trusting him, the dragon followed suit, and the ice cracked more and more until finally it shattered into tiny pieces.

The pieces dissolved before their eyes and they cheered. Hiccup scrambled to his feet and got back into the saddle; Toothless flew up and hovered over the lake, ready to dive down. The ice was already reforming, creeping in from the edges. *Hurry!* cried Hiccup.

They dived into the lake, and the shadowy world beyond. Following instincts and gut feelings, the pair made their way deeper, but not as quickly as before. There were other barriers; many were puzzles they had to stop and solve. Or rather, Hiccup would solve the puzzles, whilst Toothless guarded him and growled menacingly at the unsettling shadows that tried to creep up and ensnare them.

When at last they came face to face with the Soul-Fury, the multicoloured dragon did not look
pleased to see them. It spread its wings and roared angrily, defensively. *No threat* Hiccup assured it, *It’s okay. You know me. You are me.*

The Soul-Fury stopped roaring, and stared at them through pearl white eyes. The gaze unsettled Toothless; he whined softly and stayed close to Hiccup as the man slowly, carefully moved forwards. Hiccup thoughtlessly comforted him and reached out a hand to the Soul-Fury as well.

*I’m sorry about before* he went on, *It won’t happen again. I know what to do now.*

The Soul-Fury bared its teeth in a warning. Toothless stiffened, but Hiccup hurriedly insisted *No, no, it's okay! Oh… I guess I can't lie to myself. I'm not sure I know what to do* he confessed, *but I have a better idea than I did before. I know you're scared, of something going wrong… because I'm scared... but when you can't run from a threat, you face it* he said determinedly.

*Besides, Toothless is here, so what do I have to be afraid of?*

The Soul-Fury and the Night Fury looked at one another, and bowed their heads to each other, and looked at Hiccup. He smiled at them both and stood between them, one hand on Toothless’ soft snout, and the other reaching out to the Soul-Fury. He knew the glowing dragon was his essence, and he had no idea how they could be separate and yet the same, but it was clearly happening and he didn't question it.

*You know what we need to do* he told them both, and closed his eyes. He pictured what he wanted in his mind. Doubts flickered through him; what if it didn't work? What if they were trapped in his own mind?

Then the Soul-Fury touched its muzzle to his palm and all thoughts, conscious or not, were chased away. On instinct alone he reached out with his will to Stormfly first, because she was his fiancés dragon and Astrid was the closest to him after Toothless, and Stormfly and Toothless were good friends.

He braced himself for rejection, for pain… but whilst Stormfly’s subconscious reflexively barred his from going any further than her surface thoughts, he managed to hold on long enough to be recognised. In his mind’s eye – and perhaps in hers, he didn't know, he would have to ask – Hiccup pressed his hand to Stormfly’s large muzzle, and knew that the connection had been made.

From her his will found its way to her mate, and her children; to their friends, to Hookfang, B&B and Meatlug and their mates and children, and so on. He felt himself gradually getting tired. Even going slowly and connecting with one dragon at a time, instead of all at once, was draining.

He barely made it through the friends and family of the dragons of their friends and family. Without warning, he and Toothless were in the dream cove and he was panting like he’d run a marathon. Toothless crooned worriedly as he supported Hiccup, who collapsed against him as his knees gave out. *What’s wrong? What happened?* he asked, sinking with his human half to the ground.

*Nothing… just tired. It… it was working* Hiccup smiled widely, unable to help feeling pleased.

Toothless flicked an ear-fin doubtfully and asked, *Is it still working?*

*I think so… I’m not sure* Hiccup confessed, *but I think we’re meant to rest now. Let's have a nap* he suggested, settling himself against his dragon-brother’s side as if to sleep, even though he technically already was deep in slumber. Toothless decided he must have been very tired out by it all, and curled around him ready to sleep himself.
When Hiccup awoke properly the following morning, it was from a sleep so restful that his head felt heavy and he didn't want to get up. Lying in bed, he ran through the connections he remembered forming. To his delight, and slightly to his relief, Hiccup found that he could remember all of them. Thinking of one dragon almost immediately brought to mind several others, and several more in turn.

He sat up and looked over at Toothless, who blinked awake and yawned widely, arching his back. “Good morning!” Hiccup greeted brightly. The dragon shook himself vigorously and looked over at his human, purring, happy to see him. *Good morning, Hiccup. You look pleased* he noticed.

“I am; it worked!” Hiccup grinned as he reached for his prosthetic, “I can remember the name of every dragon I connected to last night.” He proceeded to demonstrate by reciting the names aloud. When he'd finished, Toothless inquired, *Can you send your will out to them now?*

“Oh, I can try…what should I tell them?”

*Tell them to give you obeisance.*

Hiccup’s expression was less than impressed. “*Toothless. We said we didn't want to be blindly respected and obeyed, remember?*”

*Yes, but this isn't the same. They'd be acknowledging you as Alpha, and you deserve that much* Toothless insisted. Earning respect was one thing, but not expecting any was another.

“What would I even say? *Praise me, loyal subjects!*? That sounds so arrogant!” he complained, even as they both chuckled. When he'd caught his breath, Hiccup suggested *Why don't I try summoning them?*”

Toothless agreed, so Hiccup opened his door and made to sneak downstairs. *Aren’t you forgetting something?*

“What?”

The dragon gave him a pointed stare. *You haven't exactly made a saddle I can put on by myself.*

“Oh! Right, sorry. Although…now that you mention it…”

*One problem at a time, Hiccup.*

Soon Toothless was saddled up and the two of them were flying in the early morning light to the cliffs overlooking the docks. When they landed, Hiccup felt the doubts crept back.

“What if I can't do it?”

*You can. All you have to do is intend to be heard by the dragons you’ve connected with, and send your will out to them all at the same time.*

“Gee, you make it sound so easy” Hiccup deadpanned, but he supposed it was a little like the Chief Voice he’d been trying to practise before…all of this. He just had to put the same tone into his thought-speak, with a lot of willpower thrown in. Taking a deep breath, he closed his eyes and focused.

He held the names of the dragons he had memorised in his mind, and he sent out the command: *Come.*

For a few moments, nothing seemed to happen…and then the air was filled with wingbeats as many,
many dragons flew up to land in a circle around their Alphas. In almost perfect unison, they bowed
to the pair, with sounds of curiosity and/or contentment.

Hiccup made a swift head count. Every dragon he'd managed to connect to so far was there. He
wanted to break the tableau, but the first thing he said was *I’m sorry if we woke any of you up.*

*As a matter of fact-* Hookfang started to say, until Toothless cut in with a warning growl. *On
second thoughts, I was about to get up anyway, Alpha-Hiccup* he amended hastily.

Hiccup smiled. *Thank you for coming…you might have noticed me poking into your heads last
night. I just wanted to be sure it had worked, that I could connect with all of you.*

*Did it work?* Meatlug asked out of the blue. Everyone stared at her. *Wait…of course it did.
Otherwise we wouldn't have heard you, and come here….sorry.*

*It’s okay* Hiccup said kindly, *If I'm being honest, I was a bit surprised myself.*

*I wasn't* Toothless declared, glancing back at Hiccup on his shoulders and adding, *I never
doubted you for a moment.*

*I thought you didn't think it was a good idea for me to do this.*

*I just didn't want you to be hurt again; but you're not hurt, and you did great* Toothless praised,
*I’m really proud of you, Hiccup.*

The young man felt his heart swell. Overcome, he dismounted just so he could hug his brother, and
Odin damn anyone who cared. *Thank you. I love you.*

Of course Toothless hugged him back. *I love you too.*
If You Will Marry Me

Chapter Notes

Disclaimer: I don't own HTTYD

A/N: This is a flashback chapter set a few months after the events of ‘Heart Bound’ and before the events of ‘Dragon Soul’. In the HBS continuity, Hiccup and Astrid didn’t get betrothed in season 5 of RTTE.

There are also several references to the Dreamworks Dragons season one episode eight.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Arc Two

Winter had arrived for the isle of Berk. This year there would be the Hatching to look forward to. Dragons could mate and raise young whenever they wanted to, but they tended to do so at around the same time, so their hatchlings could grow up with peers of the same age. The dragons of Berk and the surrounding islands had a Hatching every five years; a holdover from the days of the war, when more eggs needed to be laid in face of all the wounded and dead of the raids.

Life went on as normal, even if it had changed forever for two of the residents of Berk. There was nothing remarkable about the day that Hiccup awoke with a decision. If all went well, it might turn out to be one of the most significant days of his (so far) short life.

Before he could get to that part, there was something – or rather, someone – he needed to consider. So right after an early breakfast, he and Toothless went for their morning flight, and he resolved to bring the subject up as soon as he could.

He could put it off – they had the time – but other people who mattered to him did not. Still, it was hard to worry over anything when he and his other half were in the air. Flying was a joy and a rightness, the two of them becoming one and delighting in being together in their element. So long as he could fly with his best friend, all would be right with his world.

After what seemed like far too short a time, Toothless landed atop a sea stack. The two of them stretched and yawned in near perfect unison; Hiccup dismounted and strolled to the edge of the cliff, sitting down and dangling his feet off the edge. He tapped them idly against the rocks, and scratched Toothless behind the ear as the black dragon nuzzled his head under Hiccup’s arm and into his lap.

Bracing an arm against the ground, he let his head fall back and felt the sea wind tousle his hair, which he never really bothered to comb properly. After all, what would be the point? He was always flying, it would only be windswept all over again. Hiccup supposed if he was going to be Chief, he would have to be more presentable, but for now he was happy to leave it a bit of a mess.

Early in the morning, alone, before any of the days responsibilities caught up with them…it was the best time, really the only time, to bring up what was on his mind. Hiccup still felt nervous. He knew
his other half well enough to believe Toothless would not be upset, but this was new territory for both of them. He had to handle the situation tactfully.

“Hey, Toothless? Can we talk?”

*We can now. We could talk since this summer, remember?* the black dragon asked sarcastically.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. “Ha, ha, very funny” he said flatly, “but I'm serious, here. This is important.”

*I’m listening* Toothless perked his ear-flaps in demonstration, before adding *but whilst you’re there…* *

Sighing, Hiccup indulged him and scratched in all the sweet spots around his skull. “You'd better not fall asleep on me” he warned, before taking a deep breath and revealing the big news. “I want to ask Astrid to marry me.”

*You mean you're finally going to finish this ridiculously long courtship and ask her to be your mate properly? And make babies with her?*

“Basically, yes. Hey, dragons can have long courtships, can't they?”

*Dragons just get on with things; and we have time to waste years on getting our desired to mate with us. You humans don't.*

“Yeah, well, I was gonna ask Astrid to marry me…if you're okay with that.”

Toothless made an inquisitive noise and asked *Why wouldn't I be? It's about time.*

“Are you sure?” Hiccup questioned, “cos you know…things would be different.”

*They’re already different* Toothless pointed out. *Haven’t we talked about this before? You said that even if you did mate with Astrid, we’d still be two halves* he remembered, *and if you have to choose between me and her, or your offspring…we’ll have each other no matter what happens, right?*

It wasn't entirely a rhetorical question. Hiccup stroked his scales and reassured him “Oh, of course, always. You and me are a team, and we make a pretty good one” he smiled. “It's just…we're heart bound, I should be putting you first, but if Astrid and I get married I'd have to put her and our children first.

“Well, I suppose I wouldn't have to” he amended, “but I'd be a pretty terrible husband and father if I didn't. I mean, Astrid will understand if I put you first sometimes, but babies…are hard work. Astrid would need help and we wouldn't have as much time to go flying, you might have to wear the other fin since there's no one else but me and Astrid you'd want to fly with you…or is there?”

Toothless thought of everyone they knew, and quickly realised that there really wasn't anyone he would be willing to let take Hiccup’s place. He bristled unconsciously at the mere thought of flying without his other half; the one time he had, after they'd met, had been lonely, dull and wrong.

He knew he had flown by himself for years before meeting Hiccup…but his life before this skinny, sarcastic, brave and brilliant little human, was that even really a life at all? Toothless was sure that the dragon who had grown up in Myrkr and been a slave to the Red Death was not the same dragon he had become after five years of Hiccup’s love and friendship.

"I don't like flying without you either” Hiccup murmured, guessing where Toothless’ thoughts had
gone. He'd briefly ridden other dragons when necessary, but it was never the same. It was only when riding Toothless that he felt he was truly flying and not merely being carried like human cargo.

“All I'm trying to say is that...if I ask Astrid to marry me, and she says yes...that'll be it. There'd be no going back – well, unless she divorces me, which I kind of really hope doesn't happen. I just wanted to give you the chance to say you're not okay with this. If you don't want me to marry Astrid...I won't” Hiccup said simply.

Toothless had to take a moment to appreciate that his selfless and kind-hearted other half was willing to give up everything – the chance to mate, to raise a family of his own – if Toothless decided he wanted to have Hiccup all to himself. A small, selfish part of him wanted to say ‘no, don't marry her, you don't need her, you have me, aren't I enough?’

A nasty, doubting part of himself whispered no, you're not enough, and you never will be.

‘It wouldn't be forever – we’d outlive Astrid…but would it hurt him less if they weren't mates when she dies?’

He'd cope – and then he'd want another mate, one day. There'll always be someone else, it'll never just be you and him. Letting him marry Astrid will only hurt you both eventually. You should say no.

‘If I say no, he'll be hurt now’ Toothless worried. As he warred with himself, Hiccup waited patiently for his answer. How could he give one? He wasn't the one with a desired he was finally going to mate with...

At last the better part of him, the part of him that had shown mercy to a frightened human, the part that matched with that same human as a paw fit into a paw-print, finally spoke up. ‘He's human. He needs a human mate, to have human offspring. It has to be his choice to marry Astrid…I can't make it for him’.

He lifted his head from Hiccup’s lap, gave him a brief nuzzle, and sat back on his haunches. Hiccup looked up at him questioningly. Toothless scratched at his belly with a hind paw as he announced, *I've thought about it.*

“And?”

*And I think you're the one who needs to decide, not me. I know you're just being you, and I appreciate the thought, but I'm not the one marrying here, am I? I'll stick with you whatever you decide. I just want you to be happy* he told Hiccup, with a reassuring thrumming purr.

A small, soft smile appeared on Hiccup’s face. He'd meant what he said, if Toothless hadn't been okay with the idea of him having a wife, Hiccup would have foregone it all. He was in love with Astrid, but he was soulmates with Toothless. He could live without marriage, he could not live without his other half by his side. That would not be living; that would be, at the very least, merely surviving.

He closed his eyes and really considered – did he want this? Did he want to marry Astrid? The only answer he could give was... “Yes. I want to marry her...I'm going to ask her to marry me” he said determinedly, looking out to the horizon. Then he turned to Toothless and smiled. “Thanks for setting me straight; it means a lot. Are you sure there's nothing bothering you about all this?”

*I might as well say it.* *It will...just be Astrid, won't it? I mean, you won't want to marry and mate with someone else after she's gone, will you?”* Toothless asked, trying to sound casual and not like he was really, deeply worried he'd always have to come second to whoever Hiccup was attracted to.
He probably wasn't doing a very good job, because his human looked at him with an expression of understanding sympathy.

“That's a long way off… I can't really say what'll happen. I can't promise I won't ever fall in love with anyone ever again...but I can promise that I won't commit to them the way I'd be committing to Astrid. One day, it's just going to be you and me, and when that happens, it really will be you and me.”

Satisfied, Toothless ducked his head and nuzzled Hiccup affectionately. Hiccup chuckled and got to his feet. “Come on, we'd better head back. I'm already late for today's training... oh, joy.”

They were too busy that day, but Hiccup had the following day off from chieftain training. That morning, Toothless asked him straightaway *So, you're going to ask her to marry you after breakfast, right?*

“Yes...and no” Hiccup replied, “First I have to ask for her parents blessing... oh, and they're going to expect a dowry, I don't... uh...” he started muttering to himself.

*What's a 'dowry'?*

“Well, it's... see, the groom - that's me - is supposed to go to the parents of the bride - that's Astrid - to ask for their blessing and offer a dowry of gold, to prove I can pay for the wedding and support Astrid when she's pregnant and we're raising our children. I don't actually have to give them the gold, just prove that I have it” Hiccup explained.

There was a long pause as Toothless considered this. Finally he said *One, you humans have way too many words for what are basically all the same thing. Two, are you saying that humans have to prove to the parents of their desired that they'd be a suitable mate? Why would her parents even care? They've raised a healthy offspring, they've done their part. You and Astrid are full grown. Creating the next generation should be your problem, not theirs.*

Hiccup's lips quirked in amusement. “You know, I couldn't agree more – but it's not that simple. Marriage isn't just about Astrid and I being able to mate, it's a ceremonial joining of us and our families. Now that I'm training to be Chief, I have to ‘set an example’ and do what's expected.”

Toothless' expression could best be described as incredulous. *You have never done what's expected. From what I can tell, you doing the exact opposite of what everyone tells you to do is the reason anything ever happens to us. Why would you want to start behaving now?*

Hiccup chuckled. “Fair point, but I think we’d better stick to tradition in this case. The only problem is... I don't have a dowry. I have some money saved from when I was working as Gobber’s apprentice, but I spent it over the years and there's only a small chest-full left. That won't be enough” he worried, groaning and dragging his hands over his face. “What am I thinking? The wedding alone is going to cost five times as much as I have, and I can't ask dad for the gold. His gold is Berk’s gold, and you know what happened the last time I asked to borrow Berk’s gold.”

From what Toothless could gather, his brother needed a lot of that brownish yellow metal humans seemed to get so worked up over. So whilst Hiccup paced and fretted, Toothless closed his eyes and tried to remember if he knew anywhere that they might find lots of this ‘gold’. He remembered a few places where he had seen gold, but he didn’t think the gold would be there anymore. Finally, he remembered somewhere that the gold still might be.

“ Toothless? Are you asleep?”
He opened his eyes. *I was thinking. Let me get this straight…you need gold. That yellow metal.*

“I need gold” Hiccup agreed.

*I think I know where we can find some gold.*

“Really? Where?”

*Here on Berk, in the forest. You found it when you were younger. I think it got buried, and maybe
a bit smashed, but it's still there! Maybe. You took a piece of that…parchment stuff from the cave,
and a feather* Toothless explained.

“Actually, it was a quill” Hiccup corrected automatically, before he remembered – he rummaged
amongst his belongings until he found a yellowed scroll, unfurling it to reveal a faded but still
recognisable painting. Hamish I and Hamish II, how the younger had really looked. A runt of the
litter, just like him.

He showed it to Toothless. “This is the parchment you mean, isn't it?” Toothless sniffed at it and
replied. *That’s it. So, let's dig the gold out and use it for this ‘dowry’ thing you need so badly*.

Hiccup felt slightly doubtful; Hamish II had put a lot of obstacles in the way of anyone trying to get
to his and his father’s treasure. What if he didn't want it to be taken?

Hamish II is dead. Besides, if he didn't want the treasure to be found, he wouldn't have made the
map and all those riddles in the first place. I passed the final test, I survived the cave in. Surely he
would have understood, it's for a good cause he told himself firmly.

"Buddy, you are a genius” he praised, “Come on, let's pay the Hoffersons a visit.”

He knocked on the door of the house and hoped it wouldn't be Astrid who answered. He was pretty
sure she'd be out with Stormfly at this time, though. To his relief – and at the same time, not so much
– it wasn't Astrid who finally opened the door, but her mother, Agatha Hofferson.

“Oh! Good morning, Hiccup. If it's Astrid you're after, she's gone out on her dragon” she greeted
brusquely.

“Uh, actually, I wanted to talk to you. And Mr Hofferson. Um, alone” Hiccup confessed. She looked
surprised for a moment…and then she smiled almost slyly, and opened the door wider.

“Well then, you two come on in.”

“Thank you.” Hiccup and Toothless followed her into the house. Her husband, Fredrick, was sitting
in an armchair by the currently empty fireplace, and snoring. Agatha sighed and strode over to slap
him upside the head. “Wake up, you big lug! We’ve got company.”

“Huh? Whassat?” Fredrick snorted and jerked awake, looking around blearily. “I was just resting me
eyes” he mumbled, before focusing at last on the newcomers. “Hiccup! I didn't see you there.
How’re you, m’ boy? I haven't seen hide nor hair of you since the last Stump Day” he remarked,
patting his right leg, that ended in a wooden peg leg.

Stump Day – Gobber’s favourite day – was when all the amputees of Berk got together to swap
battle stories, show off their scars and drink way too much mead. Gobber had been more than happy
to induct Hiccup and Toothless into the club on the first Stump Day after the end of the war.
“Fredrick, you dope. We saw him just a couple of weeks ago, when he came round for dinner, remember?”

“Oh, yes, right. Sorry. My memory’s as bad as my eyes and me leg. You’re lucky, Hiccup, not getting old anymore” Fredrick remarked. Oh, hello, Toothless” he added. The dragon acknowledged the greeting with a brief nod.

“Did you have something you wanted to tell us?” Agatha inquired. From the look in her eyes, he could tell she had already guessed what he was there for. She and Fredrick looked at him expectantly.

Swallowing his nerves, Hiccup twisted his fingers together behind his back and explained “I, uh… you know, Astrid and I are very close, and I think maybe it's time we, um – since there's no time like the present, y’know – I’ve been thinking of taking things further.”

Agatha and Fredrick looked at one another, and then back at Hiccup. “Are you trying to ask what I think you're trying to ask?” Agatha demanded, straight to the point as usual. She had little patience for people who beat around the bush; Fredrick, on the other hand, sympathised with the younger man’s nervousness.

Hiccup cleared his throat. “Um, well, yes. I'd like to ask for your…your blessing to marry your daughter” he agreed. Silence followed. He resisted the urge to bite his lip anxiously or start rambling and stammering like an idiot. Toothless picked up on his wavering confidence and pressed against his side, supportive and encouraging. Hiccup gave him a subtle, grateful pat, and then Agatha broke the tableau at last.

“Well, it’s about time!” she declared, a rare beam spreading across her face as she clapped her hands together.

*That’s what I said!*”

"I've been waiting for this for years” Agatha declared, “I always hoped she'd find a good husband and settle down, but she never was that interested in romance. That is until she started taking an interest in you, of course” she smiled at Hiccup. He returned the smile and hesitantly asked, “So, does this mean I can marry Astrid?”

Fredrick spoke up then. “Now wait just one minute there” he said, heaving himself out of his armchair. He limped towards Hiccup, favouring his good leg. When they were facing each other, Fredrick looked Hiccup right in the eye and demanded, “Tell me, boy, what are your intentions towards Astrid?”

“Uh…to marry her?” Hiccup replied uncertainly; hadn't he just said that? Beside him, Toothless watched Astrid’s father warily, unsettled by what seemed to be mock-threatening body language. He hoped it was only pretend, because he really didn't want to have to hurt the other human to defend his human brother from harm. Hiccup wasn't afraid, merely a little bewildered, so the Night Fury did not posture or growl defensively, but simply watched.

“And what makes you think you're good enough for my little girl?”

“Really, Fredrick?” his wife demanded, rolling her eyes in exasperation, “you're really doing this shtick? It's not like we were gonna say no. He's the chiefs’ son! And a hero to boot…oh, not that we’d give our blessing just because of your status, Hiccup” she hastily reassured him. He remembered that during the first few weeks after the war, he’d had quite a few of the villagers come up to him and offer him their daughters hands in marriage. Suddenly he was not only acceptable, but
desirable, even though he'd had no intention even then of marrying anyone except Astrid. Not to mention that by the time some their daughters were old enough to marry, he'd be in his early forties at the latest. Eww.

So he'd politely but insistently turned them down, and Astrid herself had put off the suitors altogether when she caught them asking him about marriage. She'd strolled up, grabbed him by the shoulders and pressed a short but sweet kiss to his lips. He'd never been offered a pre-emptive proposal again, and Astrid had vehemently denied she had done anything when he tried to ask her about it afterwards.

“Agatha, dearest, you're spoiling the moment” Fredrick complained, his expression shifting from a stern stare to something closer to a disappointed pout. “I wasn't going to say no, but this is all part of the process. I'm supposed to ask him what his intentions are, why should I say yes, I'll break his arm if he breaks her heart, etc., etc.” he pointed out.

Now that was a threat, and Toothless narrowed his eyes in a warning. Hiccup placed a reassuring hand on his snout, signalling stand down, and met Fredrick’s gaze head on. “To be honest, sir, I don't think I'm good enough for Astrid. I don't think anyone could be good enough for someone so beautiful, and brave, and amazing. I have no idea what she sees in all…this” he said, gesturing to himself, “especially when I'm not even all in one piece…but if she'll have me, I'm gonna spend all the time I have with her giving her all the love she deserves.”

There was another pause, just long enough to make Hiccup worry that his passionate speech had sounded as embarrassingly cliché as it did in his head. Then Fredrick smiled broadly and clapped him on the shoulder, saying “Good answer, m’boy! You're right – you don't deserve Astrid, no man ever does deserve their wife, but all we have to do is spend the entire marriage working to be someone worthy of them.” He leaned in closer and added, in a conspiratorial murmur, ‘That, and learn when to say ‘yes dear, whatever you like’.’ Hiccup suppressed the urge to snigger.

“I heard that!” Agatha snapped, before composing herself and smiling kindly at her future son-in-law. “Consider our blessings given; you're a fine young man, and Astrid will be lucky to have you. Goodness knows she's had eyes for no other man but you.”

“Aye, yes dear, whatever you like” Fredrick agreed genially, winking at Hiccup. He adopted a stern expression for a moment more as he declared, “but just so you know, if you hurt my little girl, break her heart or upset her in any way” –

“Mr Hofferson, if I did ever hurt Astrid so much that I couldn't earn her forgiveness, you'd have to enact your revenge on whatever was left after she was finished with me” Hiccup interrupted.

“Heh, true; she is a feisty one. Oh, goodness, I almost forgot. There's still the matter of the dowry to consider” Fredrick recalled, “I’d hate to have to postpone the wedding for another five years because we couldn't afford it or the marriage after.”

“That's the first sensible thing you've said all day” Agatha muttered. She got straight to business and said to Hiccup “That is something to consider, mind. I want my daughter to be comfortable, and not have to scrimp and scrape at any time in her life. You will be able to support her, won't you?” she demanded.

I really really hope so Hiccup thought privately. Out loud he answered “Of course. I'm still working as Gobber’s apprentice, and my dad’s giving me an allowance now that I'm in training to take over from him…and, well, I know where to find some gold here on Berk that should be more than enough to pay for the wedding and keep her comfortable whilst she's, y’know…”
“With child?” Agatha finished for him, “No need to be embarrassed, you know, I've had a child. Besides, I'm your future mother-in-law….on second thoughts, maybe you should be worried” she mused. Hiccup chuckled nervously. Agatha gave him a sharp look and remarked bluntly, “I'm not joking.”

Fortunately, before Hiccup could stick his one good foot in his mouth, Fredrick piped up again. “So where is this gold on Berk? I'm a little surprised you didn't bring it with you” he commented.

“Oh, well, see, the thing is…it's sort of…buried” Hiccup admitted, rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly. Fredrick and Agatha stared at him, one bewildered, the other questioning. He hastily continued, “I know, it sounds silly, but, uh…it was Toothless who reminded me, actually. When I was fifteen, I really did find buried treasure. It was hidden in a cavern beneath the mountain by one of my ancestors, Hamish the Second, and my friends and I found this map”-

“Hold on a minute” Fredrick interrupted, “Are ye saying ya actually found the legendary treasure o’ Hamish I and II?” His accent, Toothless observed with mild interest, got thicker when he was surprised. Of course, until relatively recently he'd had no idea what an accent was, until Hiccup had explained it. What his brother couldn't explain was why he and his friends seemed to have completely different accents to the previous generation of Berk.

“Oh!” Agatha exclaimed, “I remember now. Astrid told us about it. She said something about you getting it in your head that your father didn't appreciate you, so you went off looking for some long lost buried treasure to try an’ prove yourself.”

“Something like that” Hiccup agreed; inwardly he wondered what else Astrid had told her parents. “The thing is, Toothless and I did find it, and we also found this.” He took the faded parchment from beneath his armour and smoothed it out, holding it up to show them the picture on one side. “This is what Hamish II really looked like” he revealed, as Fredrick and Agatha peered at the painting, “He was a ‘hiccup’, like me…and look what's written on the back.” He turned it over and handed it to them for a closer look.

“Hamish II was clever. He set up all these riddles knowing that only someone like him, who wasn't a typical Viking, who used brains instead of brawn – uh, no offence – would be able to solve them. I worked out all the clues, I survived all the death traps – Hamish was pretty intense when it came to hiding things, apparently – and- what?” he asked Toothless, who had just nudged him. *Aren't you forgetting something?* the dragon inquired, *You survived and solved all the riddles because…?*

“Oh, rephrase – I found the treasure with help from my best friend” Hiccup smiled, patting Toothless on the head. Then he added, “of course, the last riddle was all me.”

*Alright, I'll give you that one.*

As for Astrid’s parents, Fredrick looked fascinated, whilst his wife looks more doubtful. “This is…very interesting” Agatha agreed, holding up the painting, “And it’s not that we don't trust you, it's just…I'm afraid it's going to take more than your word for it for us to believe there's actually a heap of gold just waitin’ to be dug up somewhere.”

“I understand” Hiccup nodded, “but, uh, if I can prove I have the gold, then the blessing is a definite 'yes', right?”

“Oh, absolutely. Astrid'll be back any minute, so you'd best skedaddle if you want this t’ be a surprise” Agatha warned him. He thanked them both; Toothless purred and graciously allowed them to pat his head, and then they left. Astrid happened to be landing on Stormfly when they emerged from the house.
“Hiccup? What were you doing in my house?”

“Oh, I, err…wanted to ask your dad something, about the, um, next Stump Day…so, yeah, I'll see you around, okay?” Hiccup rambled, before scrambling into the saddle. Toothless took off and flew away quickly – but as soon as they were a fair distance away, he gurgled in amusement.

*That was subtle. I bet she doesn't suspect a thing.*

“Oh, shut up.”

That night, Toothless-Hiccup snuck out and went into the forest, where the treasure of Hamish II lay buried beneath the mountain. More dragons tagged along – the dragons of Hiccup’s friends, whom he considered his friends too, and a few others who came because whatever they were doing seemed interesting and – for the Rock-Tails at least – there might be snacks.

The first matter to attend to was how to get to the buried treasure. They’d have to clear the collapsed boulders from the entrance to the cave, and then go down to where the treasure was and dig that up as well. Then they had to carry it all out and clean it, and put it in a chest or two. Easy as a glide… more or less.

The dragons made short work of crushing or digging out or blasting apart the rocks. “You know, I just realised something” Hiccup remarked as he reluctantly stood out of the way.

*I What??* asked Toothless; several of the other dragons nearby looked over, interested.

“I was thinking about all the obstacles Hamish put in the way of anyone trying to get to the treasure. They’re all dangerous, especially if you can’t figure out the clues…or even if you can…but what I realised is, all the tests are easier if you have dragons.”

He counted them off on his fingers. “A dragon can melt the ice to get the first piece of the puzzle, and fly you out of the glacier before it collapses. A dragon can hover over that serpent shaped sea stack so you can retrieve the second piece, and a dragon can ward off the Firewyrms long enough for you to choose the third piece. They can catch you when you fall down that deep hole…and maybe they could get you out of that cave-in before you got crushed.

“It just seems odd” he shrugged, “because Hamish II was alive during the war, back when we were still fighting you guys. It's probably just a coincidence…”

*Obviously this human was even cleverer than we thought, if he realised the superiority of dragons even then* Toothless remarked loftily. He gave Hiccup a cool gaze and added, *No offence.*

“All taken.” Hiccup was trying hard not to laugh. The dragons got all the boulders out of the way, and they went inside the cave, mouths aflame. The Firewyrms had fled, but the deep pit was still there, and they flew down into it. Toothless fired a blast at a nearby stalagmite, just enough to make it glow and illuminate the cavern. *This would be a good place to nest* remarked one of the tag along dragons, whose name Hiccup couldn't recall off the top of his head.

“The treasure’s through there” he said, pointing at a caved in tunnel. *More digging?? Hookfang asked with an annoyed groan. Toothless glared at him and hissed *Don’t complain. Hiccup needs this gold. If he doesn’t have the gold, he can’t marry and mate with Astrid, and then we’ll have to spend even more time smelling their desire and urge to mate.*

*Human mating rituals are very strange* Stormfly remarked to Hiccup, *but you're an excellent suitor for Astrid; I do hope she accepts you as her mate.*
“Me too” he smiled, petting her snout, “but, uh, you guys do realise that those scents are probably going to get worse after Astrid and I get married, right?”

*It’s not the scent we mind* Toothless informed him, *It’s that you never do anything about it. You humans don’t even realise you’re making these scents. You have no idea how many times you’ve been near Astrid and we dragons have been telling you, ‘just rut already!’*

“Duly noted” Hiccup said wryly, torn between amusement and mortification. He was about to explain that...*No, actually, I’ll let them find that out for themselves. We should start digging the gold out, then*” he decided. The dragons got to work clearing the tunnel...eventually they got enough rocks out of the way to clamber through into the chamber beyond, where they could climb across to roughly where the treasure was and start digging from there. Of course, the passage itself was larger now, on account of they had to make room for the bigger dragons to crawl in.

*Why did the dead human put all this gold here if he was just going to drop rocks on it?* Barf wondered.

*What’s so good about gold, anyway?* asked Belch. *You can’t eat it, or nest in it, or set it on fire…*

Hiccup did his best to answer both questions. As the night wore on, he and the dragons uncovered the shattered gold, and with his dexterous human fingers he gathered up the pieces. When they had filled up both of Toothless’ saddlebags, Hiccup was yawning too much for the Swift-Wing’s liking. He insisted they could come back in a few more nights to gather up the rest, and on taking his tired human back to bed.

The next morning, Hiccup overslept and missed his early training. Stoick wasn't happy, and came into his room to wake him. Toothless placed himself between his brother’s bed and the larger human male. He growled warningly – Hiccup was not to be disturbed.

“Don't you start with me, you overprotective, overgrown lizard!”

Toothless switched tactics and pouted instead. “Oh, don't look at me like that.”

*Whimper.*

“I mean it, stop that.”

*Whine.*

“Argh! Fine, you big scaly babysitter, I'll let him lie in – but just this once!” With that, Stoick stomped off, grumbling to himself about disobedient sons who stayed up all night instead of getting sleep like a sensible person and missed important matters.

When Astrid’s parents saw the saddlebags full of gold, they dismissed every doubt they had. “Oh, this will be more than enough to pay for the wedding – and you say there’s more? Goodness me, you and Astrid will be well off” Agatha remarked happily. As if on cue, her daughter chose this moment to walk into the house. She had every right to, of course, she *lived* there. Astrid saw the gold, and her parents bright expressions, and her boyfriend, and asked “What's going on?”

“Oh, Hiccup here was just showing us his dowry” Fredrick replied without thinking – a moment later, at a glare from his wife, he hastily said “Oops...probably shouldn't have mentioned that, should I?”
Astrid stared. “Dowry?” she repeated, “as in a marriage dowry?!”

Hiccup cleared his throat nervously and awkwardly said, “Surprise?”

Her expression unreadable – a strange mixture of elation and terror – Astrid turned on her heel and ran back out of the door. “Astrid!” her mother cried, running after her, and slapping Fredrick up the back of his head as she went. Hiccup stared at the door, mouth open, and then turned to his future father-in-law with a helpless look.

“I don't understand women” he lamented. Mr Hofferson gave him a commiserating pat on the shoulder.

Hiccup and Toothless looked all over the island before finding Astrid and Stormfly in the forest. She was sitting on a log, her dragon waiting patiently nearby. Hiccup dismounted; Toothless gave him an encouraging nuzzle and pushed him firmly towards his desired. Hoping it wasn't too late, that he hadn't ruined everything before it had even begun, he walked over to the log and asked quietly, “Mind if I join you?”

For a moment she didn't reply, and his heart sank. Then she patted the log beside her and murmured, “Sure”, without actually looking at him. Hiccup climbed over the log and sat down, twisting his hands in his lap and struggling to think of what to say. Eventually, it was Astrid who broke the uncomfortable silence. “I…I'm sorry, okay? For running off.”

“…Why did you run?” Hiccup asked quietly. He wasn't cross, he just wanted to understand.

“You were going to propose.”

“Yeah, I…were you going to say ‘no’?” he asked, “Astrid, do you not want to marry me?”

She looked at him then, finally. “It's not that” she admitted, “it's just…I'm not ready” she confessed in a whisper.

“For what?”

“Marriage. Motherhood. All of it. My whole life, I strived to be the best warrior on Berk…I don't know the first thing about running a home or raising a child! I can carry an axe, that doesn't mean I know how to carry a baby. They'd be dependent on us and what if when they misbehave, I lose my temper and hit them!” she rambled worriedly, “Not to mention all the cooking and cleaning, and I hate sewing…”

“I can do the cooking and sewing” Hiccup offered, “I'm pretty good at them. I kind of have to be, what with dad being so busy and mom…heh, maybe we should make you the husband and me the wife. Our marriage would be the very definition of 'role reversal’” he joked. Astrid made no comment. He sighed and continued, “Astrid, being scared of a big change like this…it's normal. I've barely started training to be Chief, and I know it'll be a few more years before dad passes the mantle onto me…but I'm still scared. I don't know if I can live up to him…but what I do know, is that you'll be there for me, and I for you.

“As for having a baby…I don't have experience with babies either, but we can figure it out, together. Your mom will be there to help you, there's lots of women in the village who can help. Having a baby won't be the end of the world” he reassured her. She gave him an uncertain smile, and he squeezed her hand. “You're Astrid. You never back down from anything. I don't care if you're not the perfect wife – in my eyes you are – and I'd never ask you to be; but to tell the truth, I think you'd be a wonderful mother. You know why? Cos you are responsible, and kind, and of course you're not
going to hit them. You'd never do that.

“You remember when we first got together? That time you were blinded…I meant what I said, in the forest that day. We have been through so much together and I am with you, always.”

“You say that”, she began after a few moments, “but now that you're…don't get me wrong, I understand. It's not your fault, either of you…but you can't promise ‘always’, you can't make the vow ‘when we meet in the halls of Valhalla...’

“Yes, I can” Hiccup said determinedly, “I will love you until I die. I can't promise you're the only girl I'll ever love…three hundred years is a long time…but I do promise I won't marry anyone else after you. And you never have to worry about me breaking that promise, because I made it to Toothless as well, just for a different reason. You are my desired. I know I'm going to outlive you and I want to spend the time I have with you, with you. You are and always will be the only woman I want to call my own...” he reached a hand into his pocket and pulled something out.

It was a bronze circular disc, engraved with two entwined dragons and hanging from a simple chain. “This was my father’s betrothal gift to my mother” Hiccup explained, “and he passed it onto me, to give to you. Astrid, will you marry me?”

“Yes” she smiled, blushing, suddenly shy. Her doubts were assuaged; what was she, the mighty Astrid Hofferson, doing worrying about not living up to a challenge? For that was all being a mother would be; she'd have a duty to care for and raise her child, and the reward if she succeeded would be grand. She was in love with Hiccup; she wanted to marry him. She wanted to be his and for him to be hers.

“You mean it?” Hiccup’s eyes lit up with an infectious joy, shining as if the sun itself had taken residence within the light green orbs. He put the pendant around her neck; Astrid held it up to admire it. “This is beautiful…but, I didn’t get you anything.”

“Yes, you did. Astrid, you gave me the best gift you could have – you said yes” he smiled at her. It was sappy, and touching, and it made her want to kiss him, so she did. He kissed her back.

Toothless and Stormfly, despite their curiosity about human mating habits, politely gave the couple some privacy…but oddly, they still did not mate. Astrid’s parents and Hiccup’s father were absolutely thrilled when they heard that Astrid had said yes, and Agatha promised to help her daughter raise and take care of the baby.

That night, when Hiccup was getting ready for bed, Toothless asked him *Are you and Astrid going to mate in her nest – I mean, house – or here?*

Hiccup gave him an innocently bewildered look. “Oh, didn't I tell you? We're not supposed to mate until after the wedding, and the wedding isn't until the autumn.”

*Autumn?*

“Well, we need time to prepare and make sure there'll be enough food. It's traditional to have weddings in autumn” he explained.

*Are you telling me that after all this time, and everything we’ve been through the last couple of days, you and Astrid are still not going to mate?*

“Pretty much.”

Toothless’ jaw actually dropped. He got to his paws, padded over to the nearest wall, and lowered
his head until it was pressed against the wooden panels. Then he uttered a long, low moan.

*I don’t understand humans!* 

Chapter End Notes

A/N: I’m not 100% sure about this chapter; the characters (especially Astrid) might be a bit OOC. Also, the ending is way too rushed, but this chapter is long enough as it is. I don’t know how to write romance, and it shows.

I wanted to pick up the pace a little, and move the story forwards. If you don’t like Hiccstrid, that’s fine, but please don’t make a big deal out of it. Don't worry; there will still be plenty of focus on Toothless-Hiccup.

It would be great if you could check out my DeviantArt page, where I've posted my interpretation/defence of Hiccup and Astrid’s relationship. The link is http://10blue10.deviantart.com/journal/Hiccstrid-Why-it-Works-680939920
Wedding Day

Chapter Notes

A/N: I'm taking some artistic liberties and describing my own take on a Viking wedding. Also, this particular chapter has an M RATING, for somewhat explicit references to sex and nudity.

YOU HAVE BEEN WARNED.

This is the only chapter to have songs. These being ‘Something Just like This’ (Chainsmokers ft. Coldplay) for the pre-wedding rituals, ‘I See the Light’ (Tangled) for the wedding itself, ‘For the Dancing and the Dreaming violin cover’ (Taylor Davis), and ‘Perfect’ (Ed Sheeran) for the dance.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After months of careful preparation, delayed due to…unexpected circumstances…the Big Day had finally arrived. As per tradition, it was being held in the autumn in time for harvest, and on a Friday to honour the Goddess Frigga, She of Marriage and Motherhood.

The wedding ceremony itself wouldn't be until that afternoon, yet there was much to do in the meantime. As per tradition, Hiccup and Astrid were not to see each other before the ceremony. Thus did Astrid find herself in the village bath-house, preparing for the first ritual, the Cleansing of Maidenhood.

Attending her were her mother, Hiccup’s mother, Ruffnut and Heather, who had been absolutely thrilled when she heard that Hiccup had proposed. It had been quite the sight to see the normally self-controlled and patient Berserker General squealing and jumping up and down along with her fellow shield-maiden.

The Cleansing went as follows – first, her witnesses, Ruff and Heather, would help her strip away the clothes she wore as an unwed maiden and give them to her mother, to be kept safe until she had a daughter of her own to pass them down to. Cloth could be hard to come by, so it was better and less costly to simply repair and pass on unwanted clothes.

The final item to be removed would be her kransen, the studded leather circlet she had worn ever since she could remember and which was a symbol of her virginity. The circlet was a family heirloom, passed down to her from her mother, and one day Astrid would pass her kransen down to her own daughter.

As they removed her outer garments, the three young women talked eagerly about the wedding. “Congrats on being the first of us to get hitched, A” Ruffnut grinned. She sighed heavily and remarked, “Perhaps I’ll be next, when Eret finally comes to his senses and stops spurning my advances.” Astrid and Heather wisely did not comment.

Despite his misgivings and initial hostility, Eret had taken to dragon riding and training like a pro. His crew, whilst they were willing to be friendly to dragons, weren't quite as up to actually riding them. Eventually, though, both Tinni, his brother Uggi, and Noam, had bonded with dragons of their own – a Zippleback and a Gronkle.
The former trappers-turned-riders still had their ship, now remodelled to allow Sky Fire, Flash&Fog and Limestone to live there with their human partners. They had set course for Berk as soon as word came of the wedding, after quite a successful run of both rescuing dragons from trappers along the Norwegian coast, and being paid to ‘dragon proof’ villages. It was amazing what a difference barrels full of eels near fish stores or chain mail nets over paddocks made.

When Astrid took off her kransen for the last time, and placed it on a cushion held by her mother, she actually teared up a little. “Oh, Astrid, what’s the matter?” Agatha asked worriedly, handing the cushion to Valka. Astrid shook her head, wiped at her eyes and replied, “Nothing, it’s just…it’s hard to believe this is really happening.”

Agatha stepped forward and kissed Astrid on the forehead, and pulled her daughter into a hug. “You’ll be fine, dear. Be strong.”

“I will, mom.”

With her clothes taken, the proper Cleansing could begin. Astrid, escorted by her attendants, left the changing rooms and went to the steam room. Stones heated by dragon-fire – more specifically, by the bath-house owners unusually patient Monstrous Nightmare – had cool water sprinkled upon them to create a luxurious cloud of steam. In their underclothes, the five women sat on slatted benches, gently swiping bundles of birch across their skin to open the pores. Valka and Agatha were gently swiping, at least – Ruffnut managed to rope Heather and the bride-to-be into a brief but energetic three-way switch fight.

Astrid washed with soap, to symbolise washing away her maidenhood and purifying herself for the wedding night. Even with the concern of falling pregnant – and this wasn't her ‘time’ so perhaps she’d get away with it…Astrid was looking forward to that part. She was hot, and she knew it, and she did find Hiccup attractive….in his own skinny, tousle-haired, freckly sort of way.

“I guess I am a bit nervous” she confessed when asked about it, “but we’ve already talked about it, him and me, about concerns and what we might like and that sort of thing.” Well, she had told him what she would like, and Hiccup…had blushed and stammered adorably, and said he’d do whatever she wanted and she could do whatever she wanted with him, the fact that she wanted him to make love to her at all was incredible enough on its own.

They’d had to have a bit of a serious talk about how Astrid did want him, he was her ‘desired’ just as much as she was his, and he'd better be ready to take the lead sometimes – she didn't want to be on top, metaphorically or otherwise, all the time in their relationship.

“So has he told you how big it is?” Ruffnut inquired bluntly. The other women stared at her. Mistaking their looks of incredulity for ones of bewilderment, the female twin huffed, rolling her eyes, and continued, “You know, has he told you how big his”-

She launched into a slightly garbled description of male genitalia, cut off almost straightaway by Astrid’s hand clamping over her mouth. “I am not going to tell you that” she hissed, “and how do you even know about…that? You haven't…have you?”

Ruffnut pulled away and gave an exaggerated insulted gasp, pressing a hand to her chest. “Astrid Hofferson! Are you accusing me of being involved in illicit affairs? Sadly, no – like I said, I haven't worn Eret down yet. Nah, I just know what guys look like down there cos I've seen Tuff’s you-know-what.”

Astrid stared at her in horror; Ruffnut saw her expression and grimaced. “No, not like that. Eww,
seriously Astrid, I know I'm weird but seriously? We're twins, duh! We grew up together, we shared a womb. We used to run around the village naked and shrieking when we were toddlers, remember?"

The young bride suddenly did remember, and immediately wished she hadn't. “Heather, pass the oil please. I need to cleanse my brain.”

Ruffnut shrugged and said “Well, hey, you ought to know what to expect. Like Heather said, it's gonna be kind of awkward for both of you, but Hiccup wouldn't make you do anything you didn't like, he's too nice for that, so you just gotta take it slow and figure things out one step at a time, y'know?”

Astrid actually felt rather touched. “Yeah, you're right. Thanks, Ruff.”

“No problem – and hey, if worse comes to worse, you can always amuse yourself with laughing at his little”-

“RUFFNUT!”

The birch fight resumed as Astrid leapt to defend her soon-to-be husband's honour.

The two mothers exchanged a look. “Welcome to the Haddock family” Valka said calmly. Agatha cleared her throat and remarked, “Perhaps we should change the subject…”

It was considered ill luck for the bride and groom to view each other before the wedding. Besides, Hiccup had his own ritual to undergo – The Retrieval of the Sword. He planned to descend into Hamish’s Cave and find a sword for the wedding there; the descent and emergence symbolising the ‘death’ of his bachelorhood and his ‘rebirth’ as a soon-to-be married man.

Hamish II actually was his ancestor – his Great Grand Uncle, to be precise. The heir to Hamish I had ventured out to explore beyond Berk and never returned, leaving his brother to inherit the throne. Hamish II’s brother had grown up and married, and his wife had given him a son who in turn grew up to be the father of Stoick the Vast, and Hiccup’s paternal grandfather.

Hiccup and his attendants made their way from the village that morning, into the forest. Apart from his father, Hiccup’s other three attendants were Fredrick, Fishlegs…and Dagur. “I can't believe my little brother’s getting married!” the Berserker Chief declared for about the hundredth time. “You're a man now, Hiccup. All you need to do is grow a beard.”

Hiccup actually was tempted to grow one, at least when he needed to start looking older than twenty. He was twenty two now, so it didn't make much difference, but it would in time. Toothless wasn't entirely pleased with this idea. *Creatures are supposed to be covered in skin, fur or scales, not something in between* he complained when Dagur brought the idea up.

*Would you rather I was bald?* Hiccup asked.

*…On second thoughts, you can grow a beard.*

“How do dragons get married?” Dagur asked out of the blue.

“Err, Dagur, dragons don't get married” Hiccup corrected.

“Oh, come on! They live for thousands of years, they must have loads of cool ancient traditions. What's a dragon wedding like?”
“Everything you need to know about dragon mating rituals is in the Book of Dragons” Fishlegs insisted.

“I don't do reading, Fish. And before you ask, I can read, I just choose not to. So, how do dragons get married, or become mates, or whatever you want to call it?”

“Well, if you must know, it depends on the breed. A lot of dragons are polygamous – which means they have more than one partner.”

“I knew that.”

“Some kinds have harems” Hiccup interjected, “Changewings, for instance. Sometimes they stay with a mate until their offspring are full grown and choose a new mate for the next one. Sometimes they have several offspring with the same mate…”

“There, see?! That's kind of like marriage. So what do they do?”

Hiccup sighed at his persistence and launched into dragon-lecture mode. "If a male is attracted to a female, he'd be her suitor, and she becomes his ‘desired’; because she's desirable, you see. The more desirable a female, the more suitors she has.”

“Makes sense.”

“Yeah, so the male tries to impress and attract his desired – bringing her gifts, showing his strength and speed, that kind of thing – to prove he'd be a good mate. They usually try to show they'd also be compatible, y’know, personality wise. Eventually the suitors get whittled down until the female accepts one, and they announce themselves a pair to the pack and go off to mate and everyone else celebrates – except for the ones she rejected, who go off to sulk” Hiccup explained.

Dagur nodded sagely, as if they were discussing matters of grave importance. “Does that mean the dragons are going to be celebrating for seven days straight with us?” he inquired.

“Maybe not that long, but they are going to celebrate. The dragons are thrilled” Hiccup smiled, “They're a bit confused – they don't quite understand what all the fuss is about – but they're thrilled. Plus, they've promised to be on their best behaviour for the wedding and the Seven-Day Revelry” he revealed.

Two dragons chose that moment to come careening out of the bushes in the middle of a squabble. The entire party was brought up short, and Toothless leapt forwards, snarling cross agitated stop that! *Get lost!* he ordered sharply, *Take your squabble and your dead boar somewhere else!*

The two Spike-Tails fled, one barely managing to snatch up the carcass they'd been fighting over. Toothless growled after them, tail tip flicking irritably, until Hiccup put a hand on his saddle and tugged him on. *Remind me again why we're walking there?* he inquired.

*Oh, believe me, I wish we were flying too; but we need to give Astrid time to go through her first preparation ritual.*

*Rituals* Toothless snorted disdainfully, *Must be human talk for ‘make a big fuss about nothing’. You humans have so many rules and rituals for this ‘marriage’ thing that it's a wonder you ever get round to breeding at all.*

*Ha, ha, you're a funny dragon* Hiccup deadpanned, *It can't be far now. Besides, if you're that sick of walking you can always go stretch your wings* he pointed out. Toothless had reluctantly agreed to wear his auto-tail, just for the night, so he could fly and celebrate with the other dragons
instead of being stuck on the ground whilst Hiccup was…otherwise engaged.

*I’ll be fine…but your foot is hurting.*

*It’s just my heel, I'm f*-% “Whoa!” Hiccup yelped as Toothless ducked behind his rider and deftly tossed the man onto his shoulders. “Toothless! I don't need to be carried!”

*Grab your riders and let’s get a move on* Toothless told the other dragons. The next thing the others knew, their own dragons were pushing at them to mount up, and when everyone was in the saddle, the dragons picked up the pace.

“What the devil are they doing?”

“Toothless got impatient!”

They made it to the cave. His attendants and their dragons waited outside whilst Hiccup ventured into the caverns – with Toothless, of course. Traditionally, the groom retrieved the ancestral sword alone, but no-one believed Toothless would be willing to be separated from Hiccup, so he’d been allowed to accompany his other half. Stoick grumbled a bit about ‘breaking tradition’, but they all knew that if the Night Fury had been told to stay behind and chosen to ignore them, there wasn’t a thing they could have done.

“So, we need to find a sword, in good condition” Hiccup explained once they were down in the cavern, “Not too rusted, not broken, and not too heavy.”

*Don’t you already have plenty of swords?* Toothless asked even as he helped Hiccup search around.

“It’s supposed to be for good luck, getting an ancestral sword” Hiccup replied, “If Astrid and I have a son, one day he will inherit the sword I choose. I still have the sword my parents held in trust for me; I just never managed to use it.”

*Why not?*

“They were expecting someone bigger.”

Many of the swords they found were not suitable, but at last, Toothless found something peculiar. *Over here!* he called, and Hiccup ran over to look. *It looks like the picture on my tail-fin* he said, and sure enough, carved onto a circle of stone was the Hooligan tribe insignia.

“I wonder…” Hiccup pressed down on the engraving – it sank into the ground, and before their eyes, a scabbarded sword rose, embedded in a circular pedestal. “What was it with this guy and pedestals?” Hiccup wondered, walking over and trying to tug the sword free. It didn’t budge. “Okay, think. Hamish valued brains over brawn, so there must be some way to…” he looked for a clue, and then he saw the carving of a Monstrous Nightmare coiled around the sword. I wonder…

He took a capsule of Fire-Scale saliva, one of the spares for Inferno, and carefully poured the contents over the pedestal, where the sword met the stone. The scabbard shifted, but still did not slide free; Hiccup quickly realised that the Fire-Scale was coiled around twice, so he needed to use two capsules. This time he pulled the sword out with ease, pulling a rag from his pocket to dry the spit off. “Who needs muscles?” he asked jokingly; Toothless gave him a dragon smile.

He drew the sword to check its condition; the scabbard had protected it from rust, and the blade was short but light. Really, it was the perfect size for someone as small as Hiccup had been, or Hamish II.
“Wait a minute…Toothless, give me a low flame”. In the light of his dragon’s fire, Hiccup peered closer at the hilt. “His name is carved on here; this is his sword! The actual sword of Hamish the Second. I think the name of the sword is carved here too…” he held the sword flat and read aloud the engraving along the flat right hand side. “Endeavour.”

The two of them soon emerged from the cavern. “Did you find a sword?” Fishlegs asked eagerly.

Hiccup drew and held up the short sword. “This is Endeavour, the sword of Hamish the Second” he announced, before adding. “I know it's his, because it has his name on the hilt, and because we found it embedded in a pedestal. Seriously, I think the secret pedestal thing might have been an obsession of his.”

The moment was interrupted when a certain Monstrous Nightmare descended from the skies – and tipped his rider off when he bowed to his Alphas. Snotlout got to his feet, brushed the dust off, and shot a glare over his shoulder at his dragon. Hookfang either didn't see it, or was ignoring him. Probably the latter.

“Gobber told me to tell you that the women are nearly finished at the bath-house” he informed the others, before pointing an accusing finger at Hiccup and saying “And you'd better make it up to me for your mentor turning me into a messenger boy.”

“Well, Astrid’s the future chief, perhaps you should take it up with her” Hiccup suggested calmly, before turning to his father and inquiring, “Can we fly back? I think the dragons are gonna go crazy if they can't get up in the air.”

Stoick thought about it and sighed. “Only if we take the long way round” he agreed, and the dragons (as well as the younger Vikings) roared or cheered. The current Chief and Fredrick exchanged long suffering looks.

Fortunately, they made it to the bath-house without incident, and without running into the women, who by now would be at Astrid’s childhood home. Toothless flat-out refused to wait outside whilst Hiccup went through his own Cleansing ritual. The steam room was rather crowded, but the dragon made himself useful – to Hiccup anyway – by growling at the others when they tried to tease his brother about his chest hair, or rather lack thereof.

Just as Astrid had been advised on being a wife by her attendants, so Hiccup’s attendants advised him on being a husband. Or rather, Stoick and Fredrick gave advice, and Fishlegs made helpful suggestions (that mostly amounted to “don't make her angry”) whereas Dagur…had taken it upon himself to advise Hiccup on being a lover. He had lain with women before; he’d never been a fan of that whole ‘celibate before marriage’ thing – and he was full of what he thought were very useful tips.

Hiccup once thought the most mortifying conversation/lecture of his life was when he was a young teen and his father tried to give him a ‘talk’ about ‘becoming a man’. This might have topped it. Toothless was being absolutely no help; the dragon had listened with rapt attention, fascinated, to the description of human mating habits – and ended up sprawled on the floor, laughing his tail off.

“Dagur, I appreciate you trying to help, but seriously, shut up” Hiccup hissed through gritted teeth, face burning, and not from the steam. “I can figure it all out on my own!”

“Aww, but I'm only trying to help. This stuff really works! The ladies go mad for it, and I should know. There's this thing you can do with your”-
“We don’t want to know!” all four of the others shouted.

Hiccup was uncomfortably, extremely aware of his physical shortcomings right now; his skinny body, the way he got so clumsy when he was nervous, the fact that he had no idea what he was doing and Dagur’s ‘pointers’ were not helping…

*Stop worrying* he heard Toothless say. The dragon was lying on the hot stones, eyes closed and purring in apparent bliss. *Astrid wouldn't have accepted you as her mate if she wasn't attracted to you. You're thinking about it too much. Trust your instincts. When you finally get to the mating part of all this nonsense, you’ll just know what to do.*

It was the best piece of advice he'd gotten all day. *Thanks.*

With the Retrieval and Cleansing complete, all Hiccup had to do was dress for the wedding. There was no particular dress code, but he and Toothless had taken to wearing peytrals on formal occasions. The chest pieces were made of grade two Gronckle Iron, polished to a brilliant sheen, embedded at the top with two rare moonstones and engraved with the same stylised depiction of Toothless that adorned Hiccup’s shield.

Adorned in his formal wear and with Hamish II’s sword at his hip, now cleaned and in a scabbard that wasn't worn and cracked, Hiccup and the others made their way to the steps of the Great Hall. For better visibility, weddings were traditionally held outside whenever possible; the dragons had even flown up to the lowest clouds and shredded them apart with wingbeats and fire, leaving the sky clear but for wisps of white too high to reach.

At a signal from Stoick, the horn was blown, and all the villagers gathered around, many sitting or standing on their dragon’s saddles for a better view. The last to arrive was the bride herself; Astrid swooped in on Stormfly, riding side-saddle. Her father helped her dismount and led her over to the altar. As she approached, Hiccup gazed at her in wonderment; she wore a beautiful flowing blue dress, smooth silver pauldrons shining in the sun (she wouldn't be Astrid if she didn't wear some armour, after all).

She wore the bridal crown, an elaborate weaving of silver filigree, flowers and feathers, with her hair braided in a thick weave around her head and falling in a curled waterfall of blonde down past her shoulders. To him, she seemed like she’d descended straight from Valhalla itself, and he could hardly believe his luck, that this beautiful woman wanted to spend the rest of her life with him, of all people.

“People of Berk!” Stoick boomed, “We have gathered to bear witness to the joining of two great houses through the union in marriage, with the blessing of the Gods, may they be willing, of Astrid Hofferson and Hiccup Haddock!”

The cheers that greeted this declaration were nearly deafening. “We call upon the Gods to bless this union. Odin, the All-Father, we beseech thee to confer your wisdom and warrior’s strength upon the groom, so that he may honour and defend his bride to his dying breath. Frigga, Goddess of Marriage and Motherhood, we beseech thee to bless the womb of the bride, so that she may safely bear strong and healthy children. We give this burnt offering in the name of the Gods!”

Both the bride and groom had agreed that they ought to involve their dragons in the ceremony. It had been decided that from now on, the dragon best suited would place the offering on the sacrificial pyre, and the other would light the flames. The bride and groom moved aside. Stormfly stepped forward, head held high and proud, the body of a sow in her jaws. She placed it on the pyre with care, and moved back as Toothless stepped forward, firing a single small blast to set the pyre alight. The Vikings cheered, and some of the dragons roared excitedly, even though they were all
wondering why the humans were burning a lot of perfectly good meat.

Gothi came forward with a bowl of the sacrifices blood. Stoick held it in one hand, and dipped a bundle of fir twigs, the hlaut-teinn, into the liquid. Making the sign of the Hammer, he flecked the couple and their witnesses with the blood, to signify the blessings of the Gods being conferred upon them.

*Can I lick that off of you?*

Hiccup managed to keep a straight face. *No.*

“Now the groom and bride shall present their swords!” Stoick announced.

Hiccup unsheathed and held out the blade, and spoke the words he'd been practicing in his head since he found it. “I give unto you, the sword called Endeavour, the blade of Hamish the Second; son of one of our most revered chieftains. I entrust it to your care, so that you may one day gift it in turn to our son, should we ever have one”. Nailed it he thought in relief, pleased to have not stumbled over his words.

Smiling, Astrid reached out and took the rather nondescript blade. Heather stepped forward, a second sword in hand, and handed it to Astrid, taking the other at the same time. Astrid turned back to face Hiccup, holding up the sword, and declared “I accept your gift, and offer in turn the sword of my father, so that the duty of his protection over me shall fall to you. Not that I need protecting” she couldn't help but add, and the assembled observers chuckled.

Hiccup took the sword and sheathed it in his scabbard. Fishlegs and Ruffnut both stepped forward, holding small cushions from which the couple lifted the rings. They placed each ring on the other’s finger, and held hands as they spoke their vows.

“I, Hiccup Haddock, take Astrid Hofferson as my wife, to honour and protect, to cherish and adore, from now on and after we meet in the Hall of Valhalla, and until Ragnarok tears the sun from the sky.”

“I, Astrid Hofferson, take Hiccup Haddock as my husband, to honour and protect, to cherish and adore, from now on and after we meet in the Hall of Valhalla, and until Ragnarok tears the sun from the sky.”

“Let it be known that on this day, in witness of Berk and of the Gods, it is my honour to pronounce Hiccup and Astrid to be wed! You may kiss your – or that works too” Stoick corrected himself, as Astrid immediately pounced on Hiccup and began to snog him senseless. To his credit, Hiccup took it in stride; he even managed to dip her, and whistles rose from the cheering crowd.

Finally, Hiccup and Astrid announced their union as dragons did; he took Inferno from where it hung at his belt, and they grasped it together and held it high, and ignited it so that they flamed as one. The Vikings ducked and cried out in surprise as first Toothless, then all the other dragons threw their heads back and flamed in unison, with wing flapping and shrieks that sounded peculiarly like applause and cheering.

Then came the wedding feast, where Hiccup and Astrid drank the bridal ale, and the dance. As they gently swayed in each other’s arms, the band began to play a slow, wordless rendition of ‘For the Dancing and the Dreaming’. Feeling bold, Hiccup hummed along with the bars, and began to quietly sing a version he was making up on the spot.

“I'll soar and glide through stormy skies, with ne’er a fear of falling, and gladly ride the winds of life,
if you will stay with me. No scorching sun nor freezing cold, will stop me on my journey, if you will promise me your heart…"

“And love me for eternity” Astrid joined in, “My dearest one, my darling dear, your mighty words astound me; but I’ve no need of mighty deeds when I feel your arms around me.”

“But I would bring you rings of gold, I’d even sing you poetry, and I would keep you from all harm, if you would stay beside me.”

“I have no need for rings of gold, I care not for your poetry. I only want your hand to hold…”

“I only want you near me.”

“To love, to kiss, to sweetly hold, for the dancing and the dreaming; through all life’s sorrows and delights, I’ll keep your love beside me. I’ll soar and glide through stormy skies, with ne’er a fear of falling, and gladly ride the winds of life, if you…will stay with me…if you…will stay with me.”

Their song ended with the music, and a new tune began to play. “You look beautiful” Hiccup murmured, “Absolutely perfect…thank you.”

Astrid hummed happily, and rested her head on his shoulder. “What for?” she asked.

“Everything. Giving me a chance; I know I’m probably not the sort of man you always pictured yourself marrying…”

“Shut up” she chuckled lightly, “You’ve been the man I’ve pictured marrying for at least three years…you were planning to all but worship the ground I walk on, right?” she inquired jokingly.

“I can if you want to, milady.”

“Then kiss me” she insisted, and he was more than happy to oblige.

The married couple were escorted by their witnesses, as per tradition, to the groom’s dwelling. Outside his house, Hiccup carefully removed the bridal crown from Astrid’s brow, and handed it to Heather. She in turn removed his scabbard from his belt – shamelessly invading his personal space – and handed it to Fishlegs. Then she remarked that she couldn’t wait to get a hand on his other sword, and he went crimson, and she laughed. They shooed their attendants away; Hiccup told Dagur that no, he didn’t need any last minute pointers, and Astrid threatened to punch Ruffnut if she didn’t quit making lewd comments.

Finally, only they and Toothless were left. “Don’t worry, Toothless; I’ll give him back to you in the morning in one piece” Astrid smiled, running a hand over the dragons scaly head. Toothless nodded, and nudged them both towards the door. He wanted them to get on with things, because the scent of their desire for one another was clogging his nostrils, and it was almost making him want to fly all the way to Myrkr to find a female to mate with himself.

“Oh, okay, Mr Impatient; we’re going” Hiccup chuckled. “Oh, wait, hang on” – he darted to the door and wedged it open, before coming back and scooping Astrid up into his arms in a bridal carry. She squealed and giggled, and he adjusted his hold with some difficulty before saying “You did say you wanted me to take charge.”

“I’m not complaining” she said breathlessly. He carried her inside, and she pushed the door shut. Once they were out of sight, Toothless said *good luck*, turned and leapt into the air, rising with strong wingbeats towards the huge and glowing harvest moon. He threw his head back and roared,
and all around the island, dragons took up the cry, celebrating in their own way the union of their Alpha with his desired.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: You may have noticed that I referred to Hamish II as Hiccup’s great grand uncle, which is the familial relation of Hiccup II to Hiccup III in the books. I haven't read the books, but I have read the wiki.

Part of my personal headcanon for the show is that Hamish II is the animations version of Hiccup II, at least in name. My reasoning goes as follows:

In the episode, Hiccup himself says “You know it’s Viking tradition to call the runt of the litter a ‘Hiccup’”. The painting of Hamish I and II that he finds depicts Hamish II as being small and lanky, like him. He even says “Hamish II was a ‘Hiccup’, just like me!” I think that Hamish II was also a ‘runt’ growing up, and ‘Hiccup’ was either a nickname or troll-warding middle name.

If the Hiccup we know and love is Hiccup Haddock the Third, it stands to reason there must have been two previous Berkians with that name in some form. Until it’s stated otherwise, I'm going to headcanon Hamish II and animation Hiccup II as the same person. Before anyone asks, I don’t think Hamish I is Hiccup the First. I have yet to figure out a headcanon for my version of Hiccup the First, but I probably will at some point.
A New Arrival

Chapter Notes

A/N: M rating for the first part of this chapter as well guys.

For the sake of privacy, Toothless and Hiccup had learned to form mental barriers. Toothless was not privy to his other half’s thoughts and feelings that evening; but the deepest, most raw emotions could not be so easily blocked. Twice did the Night Fury experience an echo of intense passion that compelled him to roar at the moon and fire blasts into the sky, feeling the euphoria with none of the lust.

He flew out to the other islands in their territory, to spread the news of Hiccup and Astrid’s union to more of their subjects. Stormfly accompanied him, chattering about how thrilled she was, what their offspring might be like, perhaps her own fledglings could play with the little one when they were big enough if Lightning, Thunder and Rain were very careful…Toothless tuned her out after a while.

It was nearly mid-morning when he decided to sneak back inside the house, but Hiccup and Astrid were still asleep. They both looked so peaceful, Hiccup snoring lightly with his arm around his wife’s waist as her head rested on his bare chest. They smelled like each other, so much so that it was almost as if they were one being, and Toothless felt a flicker of doubt. Could Hiccup really be his other half if he was also Astrid’s? Could someone have two other halves? He wasn't sure he wanted to be Hiccup’s other third.

Then Hiccup stirred awake, and like a magnet his eyes found those of his dragon-brother’s, and shone with pure love. He smiled sleepily and reached out a hand; Toothless crept forward and rested his chin upon his human-half’s shoulder, head tucked under his arm. The doubt faded…he was not excluded, and if anyone could have two halves, it was his Hiccup. He could feel that the man had not missed him – and rightly so – but was happy to have him there now.

With his arms curled around the two people he loved most in all the world, Hiccup sighed in contentment and wished he could stay like that forever. Presently, Astrid blinked awake; she reached over to gently scratch Toothless behind the ear, and he rolled an eye to peer at her, purring deep in his chest. “Good morning” Hiccup murmured, “Did you sleep okay, milady?”

“We did tire each other out last night” she replied in a sultry sort of tone; at least, she thought it was. “Yeah…so, um…how was it?” he asked, adorably nervous.

“Last night?” Astrid stretched, cat-like, and settled against his side once more. “It was great. Did you enjoy it?”

“Yes” he replied immediately, “Very much so. All of it. We should do that again sometime.”

“I agree. I give it…hmm…seven out of ten” she said teasingly.

“So…room for improvement, then?”

“I s’pose we’re both still learning. I’m just glad I get to tell Ruffnut she was wrong.”
“…about what?”

“Oh, nothing.”

*Is this another weird human mating ritual?* Toothless inquired, *Talking about how it went afterwards? It's just sex, you know. It's nature. You don't take this much of an interest in, say, defecating, do you?*

Hiccup chuckled, amused more by his friend's tone than anything else. “What's so funny?” asked Astrid. He told her what Toothless had said, and she giggled as well. “Us humans are silly, aren't we?” she cooed at the dragon, before sighing. “Y’know, it's times like this that I wish I could understand him too.”

“Well, the thing is…the heart bind lets me understand dragons, but it also seems to let me understand other languages than Norse. Only I started thinking about it, and I realised that something didn't add up” Hiccup began to explain.

“What's that?”

“Me being able to understand people when they speak a different language is one thing; but they shouldn't be able to understand me. As far as I can tell, I'm still speaking in Norse when I reply, so unless whoever I'm talking to speaks Norse as well, it should just sound like gibberish to them. But I've asked Eret's crew, and they all say it sounds like I'm speaking in their native tongue – just, with my accent, that's the only way they can tell that I'm not a native speaker.”

“I think I follow…”

“It's like I'm getting inside their heads somehow and making them think I'm speaking their language, and I think they're speaking mine. I dunno; it's confusing. The thing is, if I can do that without meaning to with languages, maybe I can do it on purpose with the thought-speak.” He was gesturing the way he always did when he was getting into a topic, and he went on eagerly, “I could try to help you hear it too – or, or, we could go back to the Ice Nest and ask the King for help, he helped me think-speak properly so maybe he”-

Astrid pressed a finger to his lips as he rambled, and smiled softly. “I think you're getting a bit ahead of yourself, babe” she told him, “Let's just relax and enjoy our honeymoon, yeah?”

“Yes, dear, whatever you like” Hiccup recited. Astrid huffed at him; he grinned and kissed her before threading his fingers through hers. Toothless sat with his head tucked under Hiccup’s other arm, eyes closed. Presently, he wriggled out of the group hug and gave his other half a hopeful purr, eyes big and pleading. Hiccup knew straightaway what he wanted. “Astrid…” he murmured.

Sighing, she pulled her hand back and muttered, “S’okay…I said I'd share. You go flying…mind if Stormfly and I tag along?”

“I think he wanted me to himself for a bit” Hiccup said apologetically, “but tell you what, when you're ready, you can come and join us - can't she, bud?” He looked at Toothless for his opinion. The black dragon groomed himself unconcernedly, saying *If she likes, she can come with us now. Our subjects will want to congratulate you both, I imagine.*

Hiccup relayed this suggestion to Astrid, who happily agreed to the idea. “Great. So, shall I just put your saddle on, or do you want to wear your…?” Hiccup trailed off at the expression on Toothless’ face. “Right. Stupid question. Of course you want to wear your normal tail fin.”

*I want to fly with you. *This thing* Toothless flicked the auto-tail, *does not count. I agreed to wear
it last night and that was it.*

“Can you just try us flying with that tail fin? I promise it won't be any different.”

Toothless shook his head. *Yes, it will. I know it will.*

“Stubborn dragon. Give me ten minutes” said Hiccup, his eyes saying be patient. Toothless stood back and waited whilst Hiccup pulled himself reluctantly from the warm bed and started getting dressed. Dragons had no taboo against nakedness, for obvious reasons, so he wasn't concerned about the Night Fury watching him. What really made the blood rise to his cheeks was when he glanced at Astrid and saw her eyeing him with a lazy, very appreciative smirk on her face. It was ridiculous, given what they'd gotten up to the night before, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

Finally they were ready, and soon both Toothless and Stormfly were climbing up into the bright blue sky. Flying with his other half was always a joy, but this morning was even better than normal. The lingering bliss Hiccup felt swirled and mixed with the elation of flight, spiralling up as they did into bursts of euphoric energy, released in roars and excited screams.

He and Stormfly raced and danced in the way of dragons, looping and twirling around each other in a complex pattern. Their riders held on and laughed and urged them faster, caught up in the joyful adrenaline rush. When their dragons landed for a rest, Hiccup and Astrid stumbled out of their saddles and into each other’s arms. They kissed passionately, oblivious to anyone watching, and the dragons could scent their desire to mate…then, to Toothless’ slight bewilderment, Astrid grabbed Hiccup by the upper arm and dragged him back into the house.

The Night Fury and Nadder stared at the shut door. *I guess they must want to mate again* Stormfly remarked, clicking thoughtfully, *Alpha-Hiccup did say humans had the urge to mate more often than dragons* she remembered.

Flapping wings and obnoxious huffing signalled the arrival of their defence party. “So much for coming to say congrats” Snotlout rolled his eyes, “Great idea, Fishlegs. It's not like they could be busy or anything.”

“Hey, I didn't know they'd be…I'm sure they won't be long!”

Snotlout dismounted and walked over to Barf&Belch, smiling disarmingly (he would say) up at Ruffnut. “You know, babe, you and I could be busy as well, if ya know what I mean. Just say the word and you can have all of this” he said, flexing his biceps and kissing them. Ruffnut pulled a face, and Barf’s tail came around to knock the arrogant Viking to the ground. He landed in a puddle and scrambled to his feet, spluttering.

“Good boy, Barf!” Ruffnut praised, cackling at Snotlout’s misfortune. “You remembered the trick I taught you!”

“Hey! How did you teach our dragon a trick without me?”

“Easy, I just taught my half the trick. I call it the ‘make Snotlout stop annoying me’ trick. Pretty cool, right?”

“I'll say! Can you teach Belch that trick?”

“Teach him yourself! He's your half of our dragon!”

“No! Don't teach him that! Come on, princess, don't be this way – augh!”
“Err, Ruffnut, maybe you should make Barf stop knocking Snotlout over.”

“Are you kidding? This is hilarious! Do it again!”

Barf obliged. Snotlout lay in the dirt and groaned. “What do you want from me?”

Whilst their riders bickered, the dragons tuned them out and focused on a conversation of their own. *When Alpha-Hiccup and Astrid finish mating, you will give them our congratulations, won't you?* asked Meatlug.

*Yes… but you can always congratulate them yourselves. They won't be in there forever* Toothless said confidently.

*We’re going to eat at the Great Hall* Hookfang revealed. *Are you two coming with us?* he asked Stormfly and Toothless. The Nadder chirped agreeably, but Toothless politely declined.

*I’ll catch up with you later.*

*You don't need Hiccup, you know. Aren't you wearing that other fin, the one that lets you fly on your own?* Suddenly, all eyes were on his red tail fin, and Toothless licked sheepishly at his own shoulder, avoiding their gaze. *I asked him to put the normal one back on* he admitted, *I didn’t think he and Astrid would… do this.* He looked at the door behind which his other half and his other half’s mate were doing things he'd rather not think about.

*Big mistake* Hookfang snorted. Meatlug and Stormfly glared at him, and the latter snapped *Hookfang! Toothless is one of our Alphas, show some respect!* The Nightmare rolled his bulbous eyes. *My deepest apologies. I should have said, that was a big mistake, Alpha-Toothless.*

*Hookfang! Why you!-*

*Leave it, Stormfly. He's not worth it* Toothless snorted dismissively, turning hooded eyes on Hookfang. *Just so we're clear, I don't think it was a mistake. I don't care if I have to wait for Hiccup - I'm used to it.*

*I hope so, Alpha-Toothless, because you're gonna be waiting for him a lot from now on.*

*What do you mean?* Meatlug asked worriedly.

*Alpha-Hiccup has a mate now; which is great, hurray, we’re all very happy for them. But we all know what's going to happen now, don't we?*

*This isn't going to come between Hiccup and I* Toothless insisted. *We’ve talked about it. I don't mind sharing him with Astrid and he said she doesn't mind sharing him with me.*

*No offence, Alpha-Toothless, but that's not what I meant. Every hatchling knows that you find your desired, court them, mate with them, and raise a clutch of eggs. Humans don't lay eggs, but the point still stands.*

*So Astrid will have a baby* said Stormfly. *What is your point, Hookfang?*

*I thought it was kind of obvious. Hatchlings, babies, whatever you want to call them – they don't
share. Alpha-Hiccup’s offspring isn’t going to want to share him with you.* Hookfang told Toothless, cruelly adding *When the baby is here, he’ll love them more than he loves you.*

Toothless resisted the urge to flinch, barely, but Stormfly reacted worse than he did. *How can you say that?!* she screeched indignantly, startling the humans nearby, *Toothless-Hiccup are heart bound! A baby isn’t going to change that! Take it back right now or I’ll!*-

*Shut up, both of you* Toothless snarled irritably at them, *Just go eat your stupid fish.*

Hookfang tossed his head haughtily and declared, *You know I'm still right*, before taking to the air.

“What the – hey! HOOKFANG!”

*Take your human with you!* The Nightmare couldn’t be bothered to land again and let his rider climb on, so he just snatched Snotlout up in his talons. The other riders got the hint that maybe it was time to leave, until only Stormfly and Toothless were left. The Nadder was still fuming over Hookfang’s insensitivity. *Of all the callous, rotten egg-for-brain things to say!* Stormfly growled and flexed her wings, tail lashing. *I swear, sometimes I just want to claw his skinny-*

*Give it a rest, Stormfly* Toothless snapped at her, and she flinched away from him, spines rattling. He sighed, shoulders slumping, and apologised. *I’m not upset* he lied, *and please don’t waste time on Hookfang. He is an idiot and not worth the effort.*

*You’re telling me* she snorted, before ruffling her wings awkwardly and adding quietly, *I am sure he did not mean what he said, Alpha-Toothless.*

Toothless gave her a long-suffering look. *I know what he meant. Now please, go enjoy your*-

He didn’t have to finish, for at that moment the door to Hiccup’s house opened, and the married pair stepped out. Their skin was pink, their eyes were bright and their clothes were rumpled. Astrid combed her fingers through her hair, picking at the knots it had tangled into, and cleared her throat. “Well, that was fun” she said to no-one in particular.

Behind her, Hiccup leaned against the door jamb, eyes dazed. He opened his mouth to speak, but all that came out was “Uh…” and a dopey smile.

“I know you liked it too” she smiled at him, “I kinda derailed our plans there, didn’t I? Sorry” she said, not sounding remorseful in the slightest.

Hiccup shook his head, still dazed. “No, no…plans? What plans, I like…I like this plan. The plan with all the kissing and…stuff” he rambled, putting his arms around her. Astrid giggled and pecked him on the lips.

“I quite like the kissing and ‘stuff’ myself. Speaking of which, have you got Inferno in your pocket or do you just really like being near me?” she asked with a flirtatious smirk.

The implication went right over Hiccup’s head. “Uh, no, it's on my belt…but, I mean, yes, of course I like being near you” he smiled at her. He was very confused when she groaned, and then giggled again.

“Never mind. C’mon, after that I'm starving.” She briefly squeezed his butt – he squeaked – and strolled over to Stormfly, casting him a sultry smirk over her shoulder.
Hiccup blushed, cleared his throat, and got into his own saddle. “After you, milady” he smiled courteously. She gave him a pretend curtsey from the saddle, and nudged her heels against the Nadder’s sides, signalling to take-off.

Hiccup and Toothless weren’t far behind. The two of them slowly lowered the mental barriers they’d thrown up, becoming aware of each other’s emotions once more. At first, the bliss still fogged his mind, but presently Hiccup noticed his dragon-brother’s lingering irritation.

*Toothless, is something wrong?*

*Nothing, Hiccup. Just something stupid Hookfang said.*

*What did he say?*

*…He thinks that when you and Astrid have your own offspring, you will love them more than me. Like I said, stupid.* His ear-fins flicked dismissively, but Hiccup could still sense a frisson of doubt.

*I will still love you. You, Astrid, the baby…I’ll love all of you, just-*

*In different ways* Toothless finished for him, *I know.*

*Were you bored? I knew you should have kept your auto-tail fin on. In case of unexpected… events.*

*Is that what you call having the insatiable urge to breed like Biters?* Toothless asked teasingly, gurgling laughter at Hiccup’s blush. *You’ve mated now, twice, you shouldn't be embarrassed anymore.*

*I know, but…shut up.* By then they’d reached the Great Hall, and were immediately surrounded by celebrating Vikings all congratulating and toasting the happy couple with flagons of mead.

Gobber was singing wedding ballads at the top of his lungs off key, Valka and Agatha hugged Hiccup and Astrid and then swapped over, Stoick and Fredrick laughed heartily and boasted about how proud they were to have joined two great houses of Berk.

Hiccup being Hiccup, he made Hookfang apologise as soon as possible. The Fire-Scale had realised by then that he may have crossed a line; he reluctantly admitted he’d been insensitive, and promised not to say anything like that again.

Astrid accompanied him and Toothless as they made a circuit of the island; Hiccup introduced his new wife to his subjects, and in turn Astrid met the mates of the dragons she knew. Some of the younger dragons offered them gifts, copying the humans; interestingly shaped or coloured rocks, bits of shiny metal, a boar skull.

The whole time, Hiccup was in such high spirits that Toothless couldn't help being in a good mood as well. He was glad that his other half had a mate now, if it made him this happy. *I don't care how busy he might be, or how much I need to share him with his mate and offspring. So long as he’s happy, that's all that matters.*

It was a week or two after the honeymoon when Astrid began to realise something was amiss. It began with her getting cramps, and bleeding, but she dismissed it at first. Surely it was only her ‘time’, and nothing to worry about. Only…she started feeling more tired than usual, and losing her appetite. Hiccup noticed after a few days, and worriedly asked if she was sick, but she assured him she was just under the weather. It was nothing to worry about.
Yet her body kept changing against her will. Her breasts grew swollen and sore; her back and stomach ached. She felt unusually nauseous sometimes. Hiccup fretted when he noticed, but Astrid insisted it was only her ‘monthly time’ that was causing the problem. The side effects were lasting longer, that was all, and what would he know? He was just a man, she'd muttered irritably.

Both her mother and Hiccup’s knew it was nothing of the sort; and it wasn't long before they decided to hold an intervention. Valka and Agatha invited Astrid to come talk to them in private; she and Hiccup had been working together on some problems Stoick had set them to solve, as part of Astrid’s new training to be the Chief of Berk.

Left behind with the dragons, Hiccup tried to continue the work without Astrid for a few moments. Soon he put his pencil down and sighed, head in his hand. *I wish she’d just tell me what the matter is* he complained aloud.

Stormfly peered at him out of the corner of her eye and clucked in a motherly, concerned sort of way. *Is something wrong, Alpha-Hiccup?*

He had long since given up trying to get the dragons to not use his title nearly every time they addressed him. *Something is wrong with Astrid. I know she's not well, but she won't talk to me about it. I'd help her if I only knew what was wrong!*

Stormfly was taken aback, as was Wave Crest, Agatha’s own Nadder. *You don't know?* the older Spike-Tail asked him.

Meanwhile, Stormfly turned to Toothless and asked, *You haven't told him?*

Hiccup frowned, bewildered. *I don't know what?*

*I was waiting for her to tell him* Toothless explained.

*Tell me what? Would one of you please explain what you're talking about?*

*Hiccup, really, it should be obvious* Toothless chided him, and the young Viking looked more confused than ever.

*Perhaps it is not so obvious, Alpha-Toothless* suggested Cloud Jumper, respectful but with a thrumming purr of amusement. *Or such a clever person would have realised the truth by now, surely.*

Hiccup eyed the Stormcutter with mock-suspicion, not sure whether he was being complimented or teased. He got the strangest feeling it was a bit of both. *What is that supposed to mean, Cloud?*

*It's alright* Hiccup said magnanimously, before drawing himself to his full height – which was laughably small compared to the dragons around him, yet they looked at him as if he were a commanding presence and not a one-legged scrawny human. *Alright, enough is enough. You all clearly know something about Astrid that I don't, but I'm her husband, her mate, so I have a right to know. So I'm only going to ask this once – what is wrong with Astrid?*

There was a long pause, as the dragons glanced at each other, and then Stormfly asked eagerly, *If he really wants to know, can I tell him?*

*If you like* Toothless agreed, shifting his weight to a more comfortable seat. Hiccup looked at
Stormfly expectantly, arms folded, eyebrows raised. She gave a happy trill, shaking her wings and head in excitement, and declared, *Astrid isn't sick, Alpha-Hiccup! She’s expecting!*  

*Expecting what?* Hiccup asked, brow furrowed, oblivious. The dragons all rolled their eyes and groaned in exasperation.  

*A baby, you stupid human* Toothless huffed.  

“*What?*”  

*Really, Hiccup, think about it. You and Astrid have mated; way too many times, if you ask me, but you humans seem to mate just for fun. Everyone knows, when you mate, you have offspring. Honestly, are all human males this oblivious, or is it just you?*  

Hiccup spluttered, looking around at the dragons in wide eyed shock. A passing villager called over to ask if he was alright. “Yes! Yep, uh-huh, everything's fine!” he smiled widely, giving them two thumbs up. The man swiftly moved on; Hiccup waited until he was out of sight before rounding on the dragons. *Astrid is pregnant?! How do you even know that?* he demanded.  

*Her scent has changed. I don't think I can explain how* Stormfly revealed with a small apologetic whine, *but there's no mistaking it, Alpha-Hiccup. It is a little different to when a drakaina has eggs inside, but as your other half says, you and Astrid have mated…it stands to reason she'd be carrying a child.*  

The news had struck Hiccup mute; he stood there, mouth slightly agape, struggling to digest this revelation. Astrid. Pregnant. If she really was…then that meant…he shook his head. *But, but…if she…she would have told me if she was, y’know…wouldn't she?*  

*Actually, that's what her mother and ours are talking about right now* Toothless informed him. *They’re trying to persuade her to tell you the truth. I suppose now she doesn't have to.*  

*How do you know what they're talking about?*  

Toothless’ ear-fins flicked. *They’re only inside the house, and you know I have excellent hearing.*  

Hiccup frowned. *It's rude to eavesdrop* he protested, wagging his finger disapprovingly at the Night Fury, who merely blinked at him. *Bad dragon.*  

Before Toothless could reply with a witty retort, the door suddenly swung open behind Hiccup, and he spun around, nearly tripping over his own foot. “Astrid!”  

Her head was bowed…when she looked up at him, he could see red rimming her eyes. It surprised him, because Astrid never cried: at the same time, he wasn’t surprised at all. “There’s, um…there’s something I have to tell you” she informed him. A thousand words died on his tongue and he just nodded dumbly, stepping aside.  

Valka and Agatha emerged from the house; the two older women gave the couple sympathetic smiles and made themselves scarce. When Cloud and Wave had flown away, Astrid went to sit on the grass outside their house, and patted the patch next to her. Hiccup joined her, and the two of them sat in silence for a few long moments.  

At last, Astrid looked at him and said “Hiccup, I…the truth is…” She trailed off, looking more nervous than he ever remembered her seeing. Wanting to help, he reached over and took hold of her hand, kissing the back of it and holding it between both of his own.
“It's okay…I know” he told her quietly, “I know you're…expecting.”

Bewildered, she asked “How can you possibly…?”

“The dragons told me. They can, um, tell by your scent.”

“Of course they can…why did they tell you?”

“Um, I sort of made them. I just wanted to know what was wrong, and they knew something, so I…Astrid, why didn't you just tell me?”

“I was going to” she assured him hastily, “honest. But you’re supposed to wait for the first couple of months in case…and besides, I wanted to pretend for a little while longer that everything was normal. I mean, this is…huge.”

“Yeah…” He took a deep breath, blew it out and nudged her. When she glanced at him, he grinned a bit and murmured, “We’re gonna have a baby.” A look of awe came over his face as he whispered, “I'm gonna be a dad.”

“I'm gonna be a mum” Astrid said, more glumly. She looked at Hiccup again and said, “We are so not ready for this, you know.”

“Are we ever?” He put an arm around her shoulders, and hugged her. “At least we have each other, right?”

She lay her head on his shoulder and sighed. “Yeah.”

Toothless padded closer and lay down on Hiccup’s other side; Stormfly came to lie beside Astrid. *You have us, too. I'll be here for you, Hiccup* the Night Fury told his human, who smiled gratefully at him.

*Thanks, bud. That means a lot.*

Astrid heard Toothless crooning; then Stormfly purred, and gave an inquisitive whistle. Hiccup chuckled lightly, and said “She’s wondering if her triplets can play with the little one when they're old enough.”

That was much too far ahead for either of them to think about…but Astrid still smiled at her Nadder friend and nodded. “Yeah. Who knows? Maybe one of them’ll become our baby’s dragon” she wondered, resting a hand on her still flat belly. It was a nice thought.
Part of the Family

In an ironic twist, Hiccup himself ended up worrying the most about the pregnancy. Once she'd come to terms with the fact that she was with child, Astrid took it all in stride. She absorbed all that the mothers of Berk told her about raising a child, the highs and lows, and spent long evenings sitting by the fire, rubbing her rapidly growing belly and talking to the little life growing within.

Hiccup fretted. He hovered around Astrid, trying to make sure she ate properly and didn't strain herself (*no, here, let me pick that up*). He scoured the house top to bottom and got rid of anything that might harm his pregnant wife or the baby (*They might get a splinter!*). He worked himself up over how the village was full of sharp swords and axes and fangs and claws and *oh Thor so many things could go wrong!* It drove Astrid up the wall, and eventually she told him in no uncertain terms that he needed to get his act together.

As for Toothless…he was fine. Excited, even. He was going to be an uncle! He'd never been around a pregnant female this much, and the pregnancy seemed to fascinate him. Astrid let him listen to the baby when it began to kick…he had heard hatchlings moving through the shell of their eggs, but it was nothing like this. In fact he treated Astrid's belly like a giant egg, trying to keep it warm (just not with fire, he wasn't stupid) and crooning to it. Astrid didn't mind; she thought Toothless doting attention on her bump was sweet, which made Hiccup pout, given that he was trying to do the same.

In the early days of the pregnancy, before Astrid grew too big, they flew along with Valka to the Ice Nest. The King could not simply give the other humans the ability to hear thought-speak, but he could help open their minds enough for Hiccup to bring them into the ‘web’ of the pack. It was easier with Valka, for some reason. Hiccup got another migraine, but it was worth it to see the looks on his wife and mother’s faces when they heard the dragons talking for the first time.

Astrid went into labour late one night in the summer. The womenfolk in the family and the midwife would help deliver the baby, but Hiccup stubbornly refused to leave Astrid's side. There wasn't room for all of them and Toothless, so he reluctantly waited downstairs with Stoick. He curled up, and tried to ignore the pain in his paw. It was only an echo of the pain in Hiccup’s hand, because Astrid was holding his hand very tightly, because giving birth was very painful.

He was very tense, because it took a long time and there was a bit too much screaming and cursing for his liking (laying eggs was so much easier, he'd gathered, if only the humans could do that instead). At last, though, he and Stoick heard a slapping sound, followed by a wail. “Ha! My grandson or granddaughter sure has a good set o’ lungs on ‘em!” Stoick boomed in approval.

The sound was actually starting to hurt Toothless’ ears, but he ignored it. He could get used to it. There was more waiting, but finally, Agatha came downstairs smiling and crying at the same time. All the humans smelled so happy but they were crying too, except the midwife but Toothless didn't know her properly. Valka told him he could go and see the baby if he liked, Hiccup had asked for him.

So he went upstairs and pushed his way in through the door. The room smelled strongly of blood and sweat and strangely, happiness. Astrid was sitting in bed, looking very dishevelled and tired. In her arms she cradled a bundle, and Hiccup sat in a chair beside her, both of them smiling with tears in their eyes. Hiccup looked up when he entered, and Toothless could feel his joy. “Hey, you” he

Toothless crept forwards, moving round the bed to Hiccup’s side. He nuzzled his beloved other half, and peered down at the baby in Astrid’s arms. A female: she smelled of her parents, and most strongly of what the dragon thought of as human yolk. She was very small, and pink, and even more hairless than most humans. Astrid and Hiccup were gazing at her as if she was the most beautiful, precious thing they’d ever seen. “Toothless? What do you think?” asked Astrid.

The dragon purred approval. *She’s lovely. Does she have a name?* he asked curiously. Astrid smiled. She and Hiccup had talked and argued for ages over what to call their child, but they had finally agreed on a name that felt right. “Her name is Helena” she told Toothless, smiling down at her daughter, “Helena Freya Haddockson.”

It was a bit harder than Toothless thought it would be.

He did love Helena. Really, he did. She was his niece, she was family, and a hatchling – in a manner of speaking – of his flock. He would never let her come to harm. Sure, she was very loud, and rather smelly, and kept Hiccup and Astrid awake much of the time…but it wasn't as if she could help it. She was just a baby. She didn't know any better.

The dragons tried not to bother their Alphas too much, so Hiccup wouldn't have to leave his mate and offspring too often. Toothless tried not to be too upset when Hiccup persuaded him to wear the auto-tail, so he wouldn't be confined to the ground so much. He didn't really use the tail to fly except when he absolutely needed to. He only wore it so Hiccup wouldn't worry.

It was fine. It was all fine. He’d known from the beginning that things would be different, that Hiccup would be busier. They still got to fly together sometimes, even if it wasn't the same as with his proper tail-fin. Sometimes Hiccup would be too tired to fly, and if all Toothless got was a few grateful pats or a hug goodnight before Hiccup collapsed on the bed with Astrid…that was fine. He couldn't help it. He was tired.

Toothless wished he could help more. He couldn't feed Helena, or change her…he tried to rock her little cot with his paw, very carefully…but when she saw him, sometimes she cried. He was big and unfamiliar and scary, and Toothless realised that maybe he should keep out of the way.

Despite what his brother might say, Toothless was a mature adult. He didn't need to be coddled like a frightened hatchling huddling under its mothers wing. He had no right to take Hiccup’s attention away from the baby, no matter how irritating she could be, because Helena needed to be taken care of and he, Toothless, could take care of himself. He knew Hiccup still loved him, and loved Helena; despite the late nights and messes and everything else his other half was still happy, and that's all that matters he told himself.

Of course it couldn't last forever.

One day, when Helena was about two months old, Valka was babysitting her granddaughter whilst Astrid had chieftain lessons with Stoick and Toothless-Hiccup were attending to their duties as one the Alphas. She sat by the fire, cradling the little babe in her arms and softly singing a lullaby to her.

“The sky is dark, and the hills are white, as the Storm-King speeds from the North tonight; and this is the song the Storm-King sings, as over the world his cloak he” – she stopped, startled, when she heard the door creak open. Toothless padded inside, his claws scratch-scratching against the wooden floor. His head was hanging low, ear flaps drooping, and Hiccup was nowhere in sight.
“Toothless?” she asked in surprise. The dragon paused and glanced at her. Worried, Valka inquired “Are you alright? Where's Hiccup?”

She had never seen one without the other. Something was clearly very wrong, but Toothless just crooned sadly and replied *He’s helping Astrid with her lessons. I…I hoped we could go flying together, but he's busy…so I came home.*

He made to go upstairs, but Valka could not help herself. “Toothless, wait.”

Paws on the steps, he stopped and looked at her. His eyes were large, and sad, and even in the light of the fire, they didn't seem to shine. *Enough is enough* she told herself firmly, and said aloud, “Please, come here.”

Toothless came over listlessly. “Toothless, dearest. I can tell something has upset you. You can always talk to me. I care about you very much” she told him, smiling gently. The black dragon purred at her, his sounds saying grateful but his body saying resigned.

“Have you and Hiccup fallen out?” she guessed. Toothless shook his head. *I'm fine* he insisted, not meeting her gaze.

Valka shook her head at the poor, stubborn Night Fury. “I hope you haven't been lying like this to Hiccup” she said, not disapprovingly, just in concern. Toothless flinched. Clearly, she had hit a nerve, and he curled further in on himself.

*I haven't lied to him.* At her doubtful expression, he protested *I haven't! I just…haven't told him anything – because there's nothing to tell!* With that, he lay down and draped his tail over his head, fanning it out to hide his face.

Valka waited a few moments, soothing a grizzling Helena, before she said gently, “Alright. Then I'll tell him nothing.”

There was no response from her adoptive dragon son, and Valka sighed. She had every intention of not letting Toothless keep this secret from his other half much longer. Living in the Ice Nest, she had seen quite a few pairs of dragons she now understood, with hindsight, were heart bound. She'd seen them protect each other, comfort each other, share with each other…Hiccup and Toothless had a bond like nothing she'd ever seen, and it looked so wrong for Toothless to be here, alone, and not by his brother’s side.

She was just about to speak again when she heard a whimper. At first she thought it was Helena and looked down, but the baby dozed peacefully in her arms. Then she realised the whimpers were coming from Toothless; he was crying, and her motherly instincts compelled her to soothe.

She didn't want to disturb Helena by shifting out of her chair, so she simply said worriedly, “Toothless, what's the matter? I do wish you'd tell me what's wrong.”

The dragon whimpered again, still hiding beneath his own tail, but this time he spoke too. *Hookfang was right…he does love her more than me.*

Valka’s brow furrowed in bewildered concern; she didn't know who Toothless was talking about, but she could guess. “You mean…you think Hiccup loves Helena more than you? Oh, sweetie, you know that's not true. You, Astrid, Helena – Hiccup loves all of you dearly, just in different ways.”

The dragon snorted dismissively, but his body was tense. *Not different enough* he said, a little resentfully.
Valka stared, trying to make heads or tails of what he was saying. It almost sounded like…but surely not… “Toothless, are you…jealous, of Helena?”

The tail whipped away from his face; Toothless looked at her square on, his reptilian eyes cold, and curtly replied, “No, I am not. Even if I was, what difference would it make?”

Valka’s frown was now one of disapproval. She felt sympathy for him but he was acting childishly, and she could tell he was trying to be mature. “Don’t take that tone with me” she scolded, as if he were a stroppy human teenager and not a large, sharp clawed and fanged fire-breather who was actually older than her.

The co-Alpha cringed submissively in the face of her motherly disapproval and apologised at once. *I’m sorry. I’m really not jealous…I can’t be. Helena is just a baby. It's not her fault she needs so much attention.*

“That’s true…but it doesn't mean you might not feel jealous of the attention she's been getting...attention that Hiccup hasn't been able to give to you?” she guessed. Toothless whined sadly, and weakly protested. *I don't need...she needs him more than I do.*

“Toothless, please tell me…why do you think Hiccup loves Helena more than you?”

Another whimper. *I know he still loves me...but when he's holding her, when he’s just looking at her, he feels this, this happy-proud-protect-you-always sort of love, and it's so similar to the love I have for him. It's not quite the same, but…if I love him so much, and he loves her so much, in the same sort of way…*

*We’re supposed to be two halves, we’re heart bound…but now he’s two halves with Astrid, and Helena is half of him…where does that leave me? I can't help take care of my own niece, all I can do is not let Hiccup have to worry about me when he needs to take care of her. He has to put her first and that's...fine, it's fine, he doesn't need me and I...don't…*

He whimpered again, moaning in grief, and Valka’s heart ached for him. “Why haven't you told Hiccup how you feel?” she couldn't help asking.

He flinched again, wings twitching. *I can't. I told him I'd be okay with this. If he found out I'm not...if he knew I sometimes wish I'd said no - if he knew I've been avoiding Helena because she's afraid of me and frustrates me!* -

As if sensing his mounting distress, Helena woke up and bawled. Toothless suddenly stopped, wide eyed, realising what he'd said. It was too late to take it back now. He felt like he'd thrown himself off a cliff, broken that wretched auto-tail, and now all he could do was plummet.

Whining guiltily, he looked away from Valka as she soothed her granddaughter and hid his face in shame, licking at his own scales in a futile attempt at distraction. *I care about her, but…I should love her as much as he does. She's important to him. She should be that important to me too.*

Oh, Toothless…Valka looked at him with not just pity, but sympathy. She knew what it was like to keep her distance to try and protect someone she loved. She knew what it was like to keep a secret so long, she feared the discovery of her keeping the secret more than the discovery of the secret itself. Valka knew how much it hurt.

Helena looked up at her soulfully. Valka kissed the babes little forehead, gathered her up and carefully rose from the chair. She walked over and knelt in front of Toothless, cradling Helena in her arms. “Toothless, son. Look at me.”
He did. “I know how you feel. I did the same thing you're doing, for twenty years. Don't make my mistake. Sit up, please” she instructed, kind but firm. Toothless obeyed, his eyes dull. Valka told him to sit back on his haunches and hold his forepaws out. Then, to his utter bewilderment, she held out the baby swaddled in furs and gently prompted, “Here, hold her.”

*What are you doing?!* he squeaked, recoiling.

“Hush. I'm giving this little treasure a chance to spend time with her uncle.”

*Valka, don't - I'll make her cry, I'll scare her, I might hurt her!* he protested, freezing in place, terrified.

“That's not true and you know it. Do you know why Hiccup’s love for you and Helena feels so similar? Because he loves you both unconditionally. If Hiccup is a part of Helena, then you are a part of her too, and she is going to love you and her parents very much” Valka told him gently. So reluctantly, nervously, he allowed her to place Helena into his curled forelegs.

Toothless looked down at the baby lying cradled his paws. She looked up at him, and he saw the fear in her eyes gradually give way to curiosity. He knew she was his niece but he hadn't really felt it until now. She was his niece. She was *Hiccup’s daughter.*

He hadn't been this close to her before. His keen eyes picked out tiny freckles on a nose that was a miniature of Astrid’s. She’d inherited Hiccup’s ears, poor thing. Her little curls were blond, almost white, and her eyes were baby blue…her hair might darken to auburn, or her eyes might change to green.

She burbled, and kicked her little foot, and reached a clumsy, tiny hand up to him. Toothless lowered his head, and Helena’s fingers brushed against his snout. She couldn't hold her arm up long enough, but in that brief moment, he saw her eyes go wide and round with innocent wonder. She was so adorable, and so full of potential.

He purred at her, and nuzzled her very, very gently. *Hello, Helena. My name’s Toothless, and I'm your uncle. I’m also a dragon. Your mummy and daddy are two of the best humans I'll ever know… and we all love you, very much* he told her, really believing it. At last, he let his guard down, and the barriers he'd subconsciously formed between himself and his other half fell away.

Not long after, the door opened. Hiccup staggered into the house, Astrid and Stoick close on his heels. He ran up beside Toothless and wrapped his arms around the dragon’s neck, rambling about how relieved and sorry he was. Then Astrid was hugging Toothless from the other side, telling him he was stupid and he'd better not do anything like this again.

Stoick and Valka walked into their bedroom, giving the four their privacy.

Helena made a confused noise; Toothless looked down at her and told her, *Your parents are very strange.*

“We're *relieved,* you daft dragon” Astrid corrected, “We knew you were upset the whole time.”

*You did? Even…* Toothless glanced uncertainly at Hiccup.

“Of course I knew. I could tell you were hiding how you felt from me…I am so, so sorry I didn't talk to you sooner” Hiccup apologised, “I just thought you needed space, that you'd come to me in your own time. I never thought…oh, Toothless, why didn't you? We’ve been heart bound for two years, best friends for seven…when are you going to get it through your thick, scaly head that you can tell me anything?” he admonished gently.
*I should have* Toothless admitted, whining guiltily, *I'm sorry. I just…wanted so badly to be able
to cope. I didn't want you to worry about me when you were taking care of Helena. I told myself it
didn't matter if I was upset, that it was all worth it so long as you were happy* he explained.

“How can I be happy if I know you're not? You matter to me. Toothless, you matter. You're a part
of this family too. I don't care how long it takes, so long as I know you'll come to me when you're
upset. I can be there for you and Helena both; and I'd worry a lot less if you just talked to me.”

Toothless felt foolish and loved all at once. *I promise. No more secrets.*

“You matter to me too” Astrid added, nudging him. “If there's anything you can't tell Hiccup, you
can always come to me.”

“Astrid…”

“What? I meant for surprises and stuff. Nice ones!”

*I love you three so much* Toothless crooned, folding his wings over his brother and sister-in-law
and nuzzling his niece. Hiccup and Astrid hugged him and their daughter both.

Presently, Astrid pulled herself free of the group hug. Hiccup gathered Helena into his arms and
cuddled her; Toothless rested his chin on Hiccup’s shoulder and they talked quietly about who
Helena might take after when she grew up.

When Astrid came back, she was carrying the red tail-fin. “You should go flying” she smiled at
them, nodding at Helena and setting the fin down. Hiccup kissed Helena on the tip of her nose and
placed her in Astrid’s arms; then he switched Toothless’ tail-fins, and hooked it back up to the
saddle.

Toothless hadn't realised how much he'd missed it until he and Hiccup were in the air together once
more. They flew for hours, and apologised and talked, and figured out how the four of them could be
a family together, not Hiccup, Astrid and Helena with Toothless out in the cold.

He slept that night, for the first time in weeks. He slept and dreamed of himself and Hiccup taking
Helena on a ride, alongside Astrid, and showing the little girl the sky.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Thanks for reading! If you’ve come this far, then you won't mind reading a bit
more ;)

Helena is a legit Old Norse name, the Nordic spelling of the Greek name ‘Helene’,
meaning 'torch', from the Greek ‘Helios’, meaning ‘sun’. I wanted her to have a fire or
light related name. Freya is the Anglicised spelling of Freyja, which in turn is both the
Old Norse Goddess of Love (not Fire, like in the show), and a name meaning ‘Lady’.
So her names would translate roughly to ‘Sun Lady’ or ‘Lady of the Sun’. ITThe
surname Haddockson is a compromise because I couldn't decide which surname to give
her.
Astrid adored her daughter. Though she'd had her doubts, since she usually wasn't keen on infants, they had vanished the moment she laid eyes on the little life she'd nourished in her womb. Helena was perfect, precious and full of potential. It was hard work, taking care of a baby, but Astrid sustained herself through the sleepless nights by imagining.

She imagined the future, when Helena was grown and they could teach her all they knew. How to swim, how to read and write, how to throw an axe…Astrid didn't mention this last potential lesson to her husband, who tended to panic slightly – or a lot - whenever he saw a sharp object anywhere near his baby girl.

Hiccup loved his daughter. He’d fuzzed over Astrid and their unborn child during the pregnancy, and he continued to fuss over Helena when she arrived. Hiccup had inherited his father’s protective streak, which had really only manifested when he had a child of his own. Granted, he didn't have to worry about a dragon carting his wife or daughter off in the middle of the night…but that didn't stop him.

He just loved Helena so much, she was his little sunbeam, and whenever he saw her snuggling with Toothless or Astrid – the other two people in his life he loved with all his heart – he could never resist dropping everything he was doing to go and cuddle with them.

Toothless treasured his niece. She was a part of Hiccup, and he would have loved her for that reason alone, even if he wasn't considered her uncle. Yes, at first it hadn't been easy. He had thought the only way he could help look after her was to stay out of the way, but in doing so he'd denied himself and Helena the chance to bond. It wasn't long before Helena too was growing attached to the black dragon; she'd burble in response to his croons, and when she was fussing, he'd smile at her and amuse…or quite possibly confuse…her into quieting.

Stoick had, admittedly, been hoping for a boy…but when he saw Helena, and got to hold her in his large but careful hands, he'd loved her straightaway. Hiccup worried he'd want to give her a miniature weapon, but instead Stoick put his whittling hobby to use making a mobile. A star, flame, crescent moon, lightning bolt and bird circled around a sun, and all of it hung above Helena’s crib, where she’d lay and look up at it with wide, wondering eyes.

Valka didn't care about the gender, so long as her grand baby was healthy. Helena inherited her father’s soft toy dragon, and Valka couldn't resist making a stuffed Night Fury…and Nadder, Stormcutter and Rumblehorn as well. She was determined to make up for missing Hiccup’s childhood by making sure Helena had a wonderful one. If Valka had her way, her granddaughter would want for nothing; not for friendship, not for joy and definitely not for love.

As soon as word reached them that Astrid’s child had been born, Dagur and Heather took the first opportunity to come to Berk and see their new honorary niece. The moment she laid eyes on Helena, Heather all but squealed with delight. “Oh my gods! Oh, Astrid, Hiccup, she's beautiful! Hello, Helena, I'm your Auntie Heather” she cooed at the bewildered infant. “You are precious, yes you are, oh yes you are…”

“Let me see her!” Dagur insisted, crowding in and leaning over his sister’s shoulder. “Hey, little niece. Here's your Uncle Dagur! Who’s the cutest widdle Hooligan?” he talked nonsense at her for a little bit, and then said, “Hey, Hiccup, I can't believe you helped make her.”
“Gee, thanks” Hiccup said flatly. Dagur missed the sarcasm.

“Our anytime. Aww, look at her tiny fists!”

Their friends all gave Helena presents. Fishlegs dug out books he'd owned as a small boy – “Yes, I know she can't read yet, but you can keep them for later...oh, oh, can I teach her?” he asked eagerly.

Snotlout took some scrap metal from the forge and made an ‘H’ to put on her crib...as well as an ‘S’. “Everyone loves the S!” he protested.

Tuffnut bribed Snotlout into forging a teeny little mace, with rounded spikes and a hollow core half filled with little pebbles. ‘Mini Macey’, as he dubbed it, would be an excellent first weapon for the little one...plus, it doubled as a rattle. “The really surprising thing is that Snotlout actually did a decent job” he drawled.

“Hey!”

Ruffnut...she'd punch the lights out of anyone who brought it up, but she secretly liked to knit. She made the baby a soft woolly coat...sure, she'd dropped a lot of stitches and the wool smelled somewhat musty, like it had been left to gather dust and mothballs for a while, but it was still a nice gesture. “Yeah, yeah...just remember, if anyone asks, I didn't make this!” she denied.

Gobber offered to help Hiccup build whatever contraption he came up with for Helena. Already, he was working on a harness to carry the baby in, and sketching plans for a self-rocking cot. Stoick might have carved the pieces for her mobile, but it was Hiccup and Gobber who figured out between them how to make it turn, and Agatha found an old music box which Hiccup fixed and hooked up to the mobile, so it played a tinkling melody as it spun.

The birth of a child, especially one of a chief or his heir, was a cause of celebration in the village. A huge party was thrown both on the day of Helena's birth, and when she was welcomed into the tribe at large, and declared the future heir. Agatha and Fredrick couldn't be more proud, and boasted eagerly to anyone who would listen (or even those that wouldn't) about their granddaughter.

Some of the older generation were balking at all the changes happening on Berk. They were happy for the young couple, of course, but... “It is sort of a shame the babe couldn't have been a boy.”

“I've got nothing against Astrid, but ought we really have a woman being the Chief?”

“What were wrong wi' the way things were before?”

They'd never say any of this to Hiccup and Astrid’s face, of course...but they forgot that the dragons could understand them. The Terrible Terrors were also terrible gossips, so word quickly spread and reached the Alphas. Toothless told Hiccup, who told Astrid, who called everyone to a Thing. There she declared that Helena was perfect the way she was, and Astrid was going to be Chief whether they liked it or not. Then Hiccup had to reassure the villagers that no, he had not deliberately set the dragons to spy on them...but they'd probably keep eavesdropping anyway, so just keep that in mind.

Funnily enough, they never heard about anyone complaining, either about Astrid or Helena, after that.

The dragons had no qualms whatsoever about Helena’s gender; all that mattered was that she was healthy, and they were happy for their human Alpha. Especially the dragons of Helena’s immediate family, who were pretty much considered family themselves. Astrid and Hiccup were very happy to
introduce their baby girl to her Aunt Stormfly, Great Uncle Cloud Jumper, and Great Uncle Skull Crusher.

*Congratulations, Astrid!* Stormfly purred at her rider, who beamed. *Look at her, she's so small and cute I could just eat her up – kidding! I'm kidding. No! Lightning, don't get so close – Rain, stop jumping on Thunder!* she growled warningly, knocking the blue green scaled young Nadder off of her purplish scaled brother. The noise upset Helena, and she began to cry. *I'm sorry, Astrid* Stormfly cringed apologetically. Her triplets swiftly made themselves scarce.

“No, no, Stormfly, it's not your fault!” Astrid reassured her dragon partner, over the sound of Helena’s wails. “Shh, shh baby, shh, shh, shh” she whispered to the baby a little desperately, rocking her back and forth. Hiccup hurried to her side and said, “Here, let me.” He curled a finger under her chin and tickled her lightly. Helena giggled involuntarily, her cries turning into a tearful gurgle…then she screwed her little red face up and bawled even more. He winced. “Err…that worked last time.”

“She's a baby, Hiccup, not a dragon! She could have choked!”

*You know, maybe I should go and find my own hatchlings…goodbye Astrid, Alphas!* Stormfly chittered awkwardly, and fled.

“What set her off?”

“Stormfly growled at Rain and it scared her!” Astrid explained, moaning, “I just wish she'd stop.”

All the while, Helena cried her little lungs out, and even the ear plugs they were all wearing weren't enough to block the sound. “I know it's hard, love, but you just have to let her cry herself out” Agatha advised; she had come over to chat to Valka. “She just wants attention, that's all. This'll pass, you'll see.”

“It's easy for you to say, mum. You're not the one who has to carry her” Astrid protested, gritting her teeth as Helena sobbed her little heart out.

“Why don't we lay her down and see if she settles?” Hiccup suggested.

“Okay – but Hiccup, what if this happens again? What if the dragons scare her too much? How will we cope?”

“We'll manage. Helena’s just a baby, everything seems scary to her. She'll get used to them”.

Toothless decided they were doing too much talking and not enough calming Helena down. He padded right up to Astrid, ignoring her exclamation of “Toothless? What are-?” He licked Helena’s cheek. She was so surprised by this that she stopped crying, and stared at him with wide, tear filled eyes. He purred kindly at her. She burbled at him and calmed. Her parents gave sighs of relief.

“Good job, bud” Hiccup praised, giving his dragon an affectionate, grateful scratch under the chin. “At least we know there's one dragon she isn't afraid of.”

“Yeah…thanks, Toothless. I think I will lay her down for a while. Can you two help me find Stormfly? I don't want her to beat herself up over this, y'know.”

“Sure we can” Hiccup replied, as Toothless purred agreeably.

They now knew that keeping Helena away from the dragons completely wouldn't help her get used
to them. At first they'd frighten her a little, being so large and strange…but she gradually got used to
them, making noises in response to their purrs and croons, the same way she would when her parents
talked to her.

One night, Shadow arrived on Berk, wanting to introduce his new mate Asha to Toothless-Hiccup.
Selena had tagged along as well, along with Skylancer and Nocte whom her mother had tasked with
‘keeping an eye on her’. Hiccup was pleased to see them, and eager to introduce them to his
daughter. *She’s so cute!* Selena cooed, giving the baby a gummy smile. Helena wasn't quite sure
what to make of all these creatures that looked like her uncle Toothless, but at least their arrival had
interrupted a crying session when she couldn't get to sleep.

Like any baby, Helena was about four months old when she started babbling, happily saying “buh-
buh-buh-buh-buh” as she sat propped up in her cot with her toys. A couple of months later, she was
babbling strings of nonsense syllables and ‘talking’, in her own babyish way, to anyone and
everyone in the vicinity.

Becoming parents had changed a lot for Hiccup and Astrid, but it hadn’t changed how competitive
they could be. As soon as their baby started babbling in earnest, they each wanted ‘Mama’ or ‘Dada’
to be the first word she said. It would be a while before she said real words, but her parents figured it
would help to encourage her early on.

“Hey, lil’ Lena” Hiccup cooed at his daughter, kneeling down beside where she was sitting with
Toothless, rolling a ball which he'd nudge back towards her with his tail. It rolled out of her reach
and Hiccup gave it back to her, saying “Can you say ‘Dada’? Helena, can you say ‘Dada’?”

“Abba. Ababa.”

“No, no, Da-Da. You can do it. You’re my clever little girl.”

“Abah! Ababoo…”

“Hey, sweetie!” Astrid joined in, “Can you say Mama? Like this, Ma-Ma. Can you do that?”

“Muh, bah! Abababa gagoo....” Helena blew a raspberry.

Astrid grinned triumphantly. “She almost said it!”

“What? No she didn’t.”

“Yes, she did. Weren’t you listening? She got the first syllable.”

“It's a two syllable word.”

“It still counts.”

“No, it doesn’t.”

“Yes it does!”

Hiccup and Astrid continued to bicker. Helena blew another raspberry.

*My thoughts exactly, Helena* Toothless agreed, purring at her. She looked over at him, her now
green eyes bright and happy. She blew a raspberry at him. They went back and forth for a bit, him
purring and her gurgling, until…
They stopped bickering and looked at the dragon. Toothless gestured to Helena with his snout and purred at her. She purred back.

Astrid’s jaw dropped. “Did she just…?”

Helena made the same noise, mimicking Toothless. It really did sound like she was purring. Suddenly, a lot of the noises she’d been making around the dragons were thrown into a whole new light. Toothless gave her stunned parents a smug smirk and remarked, *I think I win.*

Months later, Hiccup was playing with his daughter, sitting in a chair with Toothless dozing at his feet and holding her up on his knees, bouncing her up and down. “Who loves you? Who loves you, Helly-Belly?” He blew a raspberry on her tummy and she squealed with laughter, eyes alight with joy. He nuzzled noses with her. “Daddy loves you, that's who!”

Helena giggled. “Da!”

Surprised, Hiccup stopped bouncing her on his knees and asked, “What did you just say?”

“Da!” she repeated, “Dada!” She reached her little hands out towards him, so she wasn’t just babbling, she was really…she'd actually…

“Oh my gods…ha, ha! You brilliant girl!” Hiccup beamed like the sun his daughter was named after, kissed her forehead and cuddled her. He left her in Toothless’ care, and the black dragon gave her a congratulatory nuzzle as Hiccup rushed to find his wife. “Astrid! Mum, dad, come quick! Helena said Dada! She said her first word!!”

As she learned to speak human words, so too did Helena pick up on dragon noises. She’d somehow learned to purr, making a trill in the back of her throat that the adults couldn't mimic. Valka got close, having had two decades of practice at smiling the dragon way. Yet even her purring didn't sound as natural as Helena’s. “This is incredible” she marvelled, “I knew babies were like little sponges, but to think she's mimicking the dragons, and copying them so well!”

“I know, right!” Hiccup grinned, “She's living proof that you can learn to do almost anything if you start young enough. Helena, you are amazing” he sing-songed, tickling her pudgy little belly. She giggled and reached out to grab at him, saying “Dada! Up!”

Hiccup obligingly scooped her up in his arms for a cuddle; she snuggled against him, nuzzling at his neck the way a dragon would and purred. He felt his heart melt, and pressed a fond kiss to her light blonde curls. “I love you so much, darling.”

Between the proposal and the wedding, the villagers started building a house for Hiccup and Astrid to live in. The work was somewhat delayed by one thing or another – lack of supplies, a long falling out between the builders, Drago’s imminent arrival, the winter…but when Helena was just a few months old, the house was complete. It wasn't a hard decision to move out; with himself, Toothless, his parents, his wife and daughter, and all their dragons living in or around Hiccup’s childhood home, it was getting rather crowded there.

The house had two storeys. On the ground floor there was the dining area and kitchen, with two narrow corridors branching off at right angles. One led to the outhouse, and the other separated the kitchen from Hiccup and Astrid’s bedroom, and Helena’s nursery. They had decided to build their bedroom on the ground floor so as to be close at hand if their daughter needed them, when she slept in her nursery/bedroom and not at the foot of their bed.
Upstairs was Hiccup’s study, where he kept all his sketches, blueprints, scale models and assorted projects in various states of completion. The end result was a room that looked like a storm had blown through it, but Hiccup insisted there was a method to the madness and no, he didn’t need to tidy up, he knew exactly where everything was! He and Astrid had several arguments over whether Hiccup actually needed the room – she finally relented, but made him promise he wouldn’t hole himself up in there for days on end like he usually did.

At the left hand side of the house was a pen for Stormfly to sleep in, and the roof doubled as a platform which extended out along the side of the house, and attached to a ramp that ran down to the back of the house and a hatch at the back of the main bedroom. The hatch, ramp and walkway would allow Toothless to go in and out of Hiccup’s study as he pleased, with a sloping canopy above it to keep off the rain.

Stormfly was perfectly content with her nest at the side of the house, but Toothless had been sleeping in Hiccup’s room for eight years and he wasn't about to change his habits now. Fearing that Helena might hurt herself if she tried to crawl on or off of Toothless’ sleeping stone, Hiccup had instead sunk the smooth, flat piece of rock into the foundations of the house itself. It was at the back of the house, and covered the whole of the floor (he’d insisted on building the back wall in a curve, to let Toothless turn comfortably when he settled down for the night).

The end result was that their house was one of the biggest on Berk, and with all the additions and embellishments they had added to it, it wound up being one of the strangest looking too. Not that neither Hiccup nor Astrid cared. There was a space for everyone, and it was all just the right size for them. Toothless was slightly suspicious though – his nesting area was large enough for two, and he wasn't complaining about the extra room, but he felt like his little brother and Astrid were trying to hint at something. They denied any such thing.

The next big milestone after learning to talk was, of course, her first steps. It seemed to her parents that one day she was crawling about on the grass outside their house, and the next she was pulling herself up and standing, holding onto furniture, or to their hands, or to Toothless. The last was adorable; the Night Fury would crouch and slink slowly, as if stalking prey, letting Helena cling onto his tail and stumble along behind him. Toothless wasn't usually so patient with younglings, but with Helena, he was as patient and gentle as a lamb.

Hiccup made a rolling support for her to hold onto as she learned to walk, but Helena didn't like to use it. She preferred holding onto her “Unca Too’ess!”

He didn't mind; it was nice to be needed. Besides, he pointed out once, he helped Hiccup to walk all the time, so it only made sense to help his daughter….this made Hiccup pout, and insist that he could walk just fine, thank you very much…and then he tripped. Toothless broke his fall, naturally. “Not a word” he warned, as the dragon chuckled.

Crawling turned to cruising turned to Astrid crouching and holding her hands out, as Helena tottered forward on unsteady feet, one step, two steps, three then four…She fell into Astrid’s arms, and her mother swept her up and spun her around. Hiccup cheered, Toothless spun in excited circles, grinning, her grandparents applauded. They all gushed over Helena and told her how proud they were of her, she'd done it, she'd taken her first steps!

The days, weeks, months passed. In her meagre spare time, Astrid continued her training to succeed Stoick as Chief; like her husband, she was a natural leader, and able to read people. She could tell when they needed encouragement, and when they needed a good kick up the ass. As with anything she did, Astrid put her heart and soul into proving she would be an exemplary chieftain; everyone
knew of her prowess as a warrior, and that did much to earn her the respect of her elders and the awe of the younger generation she would one day lead.

Hiccup, too, had proven himself an excellent leader, but the stubborn Berkians were drawn to Astrid’s more... *familiar* way of dealing with problems. Whilst she’d gladly take her husband’s advice, Astrid was more willing than he to do things ‘the Viking way’. When all else failed, giving the offending party a blistering dressing down worked wonders. Astrid could deal better with the myriad of problems that the villagers came to her with; she expected them to not bother figuring out a solution on their own, whereas Hiccup tended to get frustrated by the sheer stupidity of some of the complaints.

Besides, Hiccup had his hands full with the dragons. They could be as boneheaded and ornery as the Vikings, only they could breathe fire. He had earned their trust and respect, except for a few whom he could tell were being difficult for the sake of difficulty. Ferocious, for one, never broke any of the rules – starting fights in the village, setting stuff alight on purpose (at least he *said* he didn’t), or chasing the livestock – but he’d make himself a nuisance wherever possible. Eventually Hiccup put his foot down and forbade the Monstrous Nightmare from coming into the village unless he promised to stop hogging the food at the feeding stations and napping in the middle of the street.

Despite what some might think, he was doing a lot more than ‘flying around playing with dragons’. Hiccup had proposed opening a proper Academy, with dormitories and teachers, for not only the young riders of Berk, but those of their allies as well. As one of the best riders in the archipelago he was in high demand to teach the more difficult and risky flight manoeuvres... but he also wanted to teach the younger teens, who weren’t old enough to ride, about dragons as well.

The first time he gathered the youngsters in the training ring, after explaining what was going on he asked if they had any questions. Most were harmlessly mundane, and he had to gently let down a few hopefuls asking if they could ride one of the Night Furies he'd found, explaining that they didn't want to live amongst humans permanently. Then one boy raised his hand and asked, “Sir, why do the dragons let us ride them when they can fly on their own?”

"You know, when I first got to talk to Toothless, I asked him the same question. He said that he and the other dragons let us ride them, because we’re part of their pack, and packs stick together. Being a rider means you give your dragon direction and encouragement; you help them, and they help you. It's a give and take, you see?"

"Yeah…but, um, can I ask another question?"

“Of course.”

“How come you and Chief Astrid and your mum and dad get to understand dragons but nobody else does?”

That was trickier. “Well, all of the adult dragons are part of a sort of…mind web, if you like, that lets Toothless and I talk to them and tell them what to do all at the same time. It's like... if you could think of everyone you know, all your family and friends at the same time, and talk to them all at once in your mind…” he trailed off, realising from their expressions that they were getting confused.

“Uh, anyway, the web helps us keep the pack together, but the hatchlings aren't in on it. They're too young, their minds are too... well, flighty, if you'll pardon the pun. The same goes for you guys – no, no, I don't mean it like that!” he said hurriedly, as the children began to protest that they weren't flighty, they could be part of this ‘mind web’ thingy… “It’s just how things are. Hatchlings can’t hear the Alpha, and I don't think you'd be able to either.
“The other reason is, having all the dragons in the web is easy, because dragons talk with their minds anyway, but bringing humans into it is hard. Every time I did it, I got a terrible headache, and it lasted a bit longer each time. I think if I tried to get everyone in on the web, I'd have a headache all the time – and we all know how awful headaches are, right?”

A few of the children nodded in sympathy. Headaches were awful. “Besides, you don't actually need to be in the web to understand dragons. I didn't get to talk to Toothless until years after we met, but I could still figure out what he was trying to say. That's what I'm gonna teach you guys – how to tell from the dragon's body language and the sounds they make, how they're feeling or what they're trying to tell you. Any more questions? No? Let's get started then, shall we?”

strid would make herself heard over Vikings shouting their lungs out, and get them to not only apologise, but work out whatever it was that started the argument. Hiccup would fearlessly step between bickering dragons, who would back down submissively at once, instinctively deferring to his higher rank. Between them they kept the peace on Berk, Hiccup supporting Astrid and Toothless supporting Hiccup.

Through it all, Helena flourished. She got over her infant fear of dragons, and eagerly clambered over the incredibly patient adults, talking to them as much as to any human. The adults sometimes feared she'd be hurt, but the dragons never harmed her. Hookfang never flamed up, Stormfly kept her tail spikes down…thanks to the harness Hiccup had designed for her, they could carefully pick her up and deposit her elsewhere if they grew tired of her using them as a living, scaly playground.

Even as a baby, when her personality hadn't fully formed, Helena proved to have a lot of it. She was so contrary. Whatever it was, eating her mushed veggies, settling down for the night, getting washed…Helena would stubbornly resist, even to the point of throwing a tantrum, but once she did it, she was fine. She’d eat her food, splash about in the tub, slumber peacefully sucking her thumb as her exhausted parents looked at one another in relief, and amused despair that of course their daughter would inherit their stubbornness. Oddly enough, both of them swore she had inherited her contrary nature from the other.

As a baby, she wanted to put everything she could get her little hands on in her mouth, just to see what it tasted like. More than once had Hiccup, Astrid or Toothless snatched her away from something she shouldn't be touching. Some of the things she'd attempted to gnaw on included the edge of a bowl, her grandma Valka’s sleeve, and on one occasion, Toothless’ ear-flap. It only got worse when she was teething and wanted to chew on something, anything, to relieve the painful pressure of her first pearly whites poking through.

As a toddler, going through the terrible twos, her loud tantrums earned her the nickname ‘Helena the Howler’. Her grandparents always said it was important to not give into her demands, no matter how loudly she screamed them, and to resist the urge to cuddle her and make it better. “If she knows you’ll comfort her when she's throwing a fit, she’ll just do it more often” explained Agatha, “And it just makes it worse if you get worked up as well. You just have to ride it out.”

Yet despite the teething and tantrums and tiresome nights, Helena was still so loved and lovable. When she wasn't getting frustrated, she was cheerful and a chatterbox, talking to anyone nearby about all sorts of things, even if they only made sense to her. She'd beam and purr when she was happy, or just to show off what the grown-ups seemed to think was a very clever trick. When she saw someone get hurt, even just a little bit, she'd tear up in sympathy for them. Except for the twins, because she was a clever girl, and she soon realised that the two strange look alike big people didn't mind getting hurt.

She was also completely adorable, although her parents admittedly might have been biased. It was so
cute when she said some names, especially when she couldn’t quite pronounce ‘thuh’ and ‘luh’ sounds. So ‘Uncle Toothless’ and ‘Auntie Heather’ came out as “Uncle Too’wess!” and “Aunty Hea’wer!”

All was well on the island of Berk…until, mere days after Helena’s third birthday, the Hooligans had to deter an attack.

Drago Bludvist’s army had returned.
The night was dark, the sun still hours from rising. In the village of Berk, the inhabitants slumbered peacefully even through the sounds of the still awake dragons. In the largest house on the hill, the twenty six year old Chief slept with her blonde hair splayed out on the pillow, snoring lightly. Beside her lay her husband, and in the next room along, their three year old daughter dreamed in her own bed.

In the four years since their marriage, Hiccup and Astrid had changed a little in appearance. Astrid was more rounded and full bodied, with the weight she'd acquired from pregnancy. Hiccup had grown a beard, of sorts – he was never going to pull off the facial rug his father had, obviously, but now his cheeks, chin and lip had a covering of auburn hairs, that he kept just long enough to not be scratchy, because then it itched and was extremely annoying.

Toothless’ looks had changed as well. He was now a Titan-Wing Night Fury; bigger, stronger, with longer wings. The tips and edges of his spines now had a permanent electric blue tinge; the scales beneath his mottling and on his scutes glittered with iridescence in the light. It was as if the gods had carved him from the night sky itself, and finally embellished him with pieces of the stars.

That night, he slept as peacefully as his other half, but with one ear always open for danger. Thus did he hear the scratch of claws, and a quietly roared alarm sound, and as his consciousness swam up through the thick clogging mud of sleep, a low, urgent voice saying *Alpha-Toothless? Are you awake? It's important!*

If I wasn't awake, how would I answer? Toothless thought, but didn't say. Resisting the urge to tell the dragon to go away and returning to the land of nod, he heaved himself to his feet with a wide yawn. In his teeth he grasped the rope that would open the hatch leading outside, and gave it a yank. The pulleys lifted the wood, and he heard a squawk of surprise and fluttering wings as the dragon on the other side leapt back. Really, they ought to remember not to stand too close.

When he emerged, Spirika was waiting. She dropped into a bow, wings outstretched, but his tail tip flicked impatiently as he demanded, *Never mind that - what's so important?*

*I was out on patrol to the southwest, with a few others, and we saw a fleet of strange ships approaching our territory. I went for a closer look, and I couldn't see much, but they were hunting ships. They had metal on them and traps…like the ones the enslaver had, that Alpha-Hiccup defeated* she explained immediately.

Toothless’ pupils slitted further, and his ear flaps went back anxiously. *Were any of you captured? Did they see you?*

*No, Alpha-Toothless.*

*I was out on patrol to the southwest, with a few others, and we saw a fleet of strange ships approaching our territory. I went for a closer look, and I couldn't see much, but they were hunting ships. They had metal on them and traps…like the ones the enslaver had, that Alpha-Hiccup defeated* she explained immediately.

Toothless retreated back into the house and turned to wake Hiccup. He pawed at the man gently, licked him – he groaned – and said *Hiccup, wake up. Hiccup!*
Another lick, and his brother was spluttering into wakefulness. Sort of. “Ugh…Toothless? I don’t wanna go flying, it’s the middle o’ the night…” he mumbled. Toothless stopped him from rolling over and going back to sleep, and insisted *Well, tough, because we’ve got a problem. There are hunter ships approaching.*

That woke him up. “Hunters?” he hissed, “How do you…?”

*Spirika saw them on patrol. She said they had the same kind of traps as Drago* Toothless revealed. Hiccup’s eyes widened; he sat bolt upright and turned to Astrid, shaking her shoulder urgently. “Astrid, pssst! Astrid!” he hissed; she batted him away with a sleepy moan and rolled over, tugging the covers over her head. “Astrid, we might be under attack.”

Straightaway she sat up and stared at him. “What do you mean, might be?”

*Drago’s army is back* Toothless announced bluntly, from where he was trying to pick up Hiccup’s clothes. Astrid threw back the covers and got moving, even as she asked, “How do you know?”

*Spirika warned me. She saw them when she was on patrol, they’re coming from the southwest.*

“They’re coming now? It’s been five years!”

“I’ve no idea” Hiccup shrugged on a shirt and added, “but if they’ve got traps, I doubt they’re here to take me up on my offer to teach them how to live in peace with dragons. Toothless and I are going to fly out and see what’s going on. We’ll be back as soon as we can” he said, starting to put on his armour. Astrid came to help him fasten everything properly.

Then it was simply a matter of getting Toothless tacked up. Hiccup had actually tried to invent something that would let Toothless put his own gear on. Then it became apparent that a, there was no room to put such a contraption, and b, whatever he invented was more likely to hinder Toothless than help him. Before he left, Astrid pulled him into a kiss. “Be careful” she murmured as they broke apart. He nodded solemnly, and made to leave.

Toothless met him at the front of the house. A side effect of the heart bind had developed – night vision. Well, better night vision, at least. On a cloudless night like this, Hiccup could see almost as clearly as in the day, although the colours were washed out. He mounted up and they set off. He and Toothless flew out on a southwestern heading. They paced themselves, so as to not wear out when they needed to return to Berk swiftly with news.

Astrid sent up a prayer to the gods of war that they would be victorious, and went to Helena’s room. Her baby girl looked so peaceful, snuggled up with her toys…Astrid woke her gently, and she blinked her big green eyes sleepily. “Mummy?” she asked sleepily, rubbing her eyes.

“You need to wake up, sweetheart. I’m sorry, Helena, I know it’s late, but we’re gonna go see Grandma and Grandpa, okay?”

Helena was confused, and pouted. “Why?” she asked.

As patiently as possible, Astrid answered “The grown-ups are going to be very busy soon, so you and the other kids need to wait in the Great Hall for a while. Like…like a sleepover, won’t that be fun?”

“Why?”

“Because we can’t leave you home alone.”
“Why?”

“Because it’s not safe” Astrid replied. She resisted the urge to grit her teeth; Hiccup was so much better at this than her. She wasn’t cut out to be a parent…but right now, she was all Helena had.

“Why?”

“Because you might get hurt. You don’t want to get hurt, do you?”

Helena considered this, and finally shook her head. “…No…”

“Good girl. I need you to trust me, sweetie. Everything’s going to be okay. Come on, up you get. You can go back to sleep soon, I promise. Yes, you can bring your toy” she nodded, as Helena clutched the stuffed Night Fury to her chest. ‘Blackie’ was her favourite out of all her stuffed dragons. Astrid wrapped her up in a warm cloak, and was about to carry her out of the house when there was a knock on the door.

Caught off guard, Astrid immediately tensed and demanded to know, “Who’s there?”

“It’s okay, Astrid. It’s only me” a familiar voice called through the wood. Helena brightened, squirming in her mother’s arms to reach out to the person behind the door. “Grandma!”

Holding Helena somewhat awkwardly in one arm, Astrid pulled the door open and found her mother in law waiting outside. She smiled kindly at Helena and Astrid, looking tired but determined. “Hello, Astrid, Helena. Bit early, isn’t it?”

Astrid pulled the door to as she stepped out. “Where’s Stoick?”

“Rousing the villagers. Cloud woke us and warned us what was going on. I came to give you a hand with this little cutie” Valka explained, tickling Helena under the chin with a fond smile on her face. Helena giggled, and asked “Where’re we going?”

“To have a sleepover, remember?”

“Oh…why?”

“Because the grown-ups are gonna be busy, sweetheart”.

“Why?”

Her mother sighed in exasperation, and looked at Valka helplessly. “I already tried to explain it to her…I just don’t know how to tell her what’s going on. She’s only three.”

“I’m afraid she’s going to be asking ‘why’ quite a lot for a while” Valka warned.

“What, for a few weeks? Months?”

“A few years.” Valka bit back a laugh at Astrid’s expression. Then Helena tugged at her mothers’ clothes and asked, again, “Where’re we going?”

Before Astrid could answer, Valka jumped in and suggested, “Try and guess, dear.”

To her mother’s surprise, Helena actually paused to think about it, scrunching her little nose up. “Um…to have a sleepover?” Astrid couldn’t help but think, I just told you that a minute ago!

“That’s right! You’re going to have a sleepover with all the other kids and the hatchlings whilst we
grown-ups are busy. Come here, precious” said Valka, reaching out to take her granddaughter from Astrid’s arms. She gave the young mother a reassuring smile and said “I’ve got her, Astrid. Go help Stoick.”

Astrid nodded, kissed Helena on the cheek, and hurried down the path towards the village, her dragon right behind her. Helena whimpered and reached out a hand for her mother; Valka cuddled her and murmured, “Don’t worry, dear. Your mummy and daddy will come back soon.”

They flew a long way, but finally Hiccup and Toothless spotted movement on the horizon. They dropped lower to investigate, gliding at speed towards a mass that resolved itself into a multitude of ships. Toothless’ colours were only on his top side; his underbelly was still pitch black, and with Hiccup’s coal coloured armour the pair were all but invisible in the dark.

The good news was that although the ships were numerous, there weren't nearly as many as in Drago’s army at full strength. Clearly, not all of his previous followers had crawled out of whatever den they'd limped back to after the Battle of the Ice Nest. The bad news was that the armada, a fleet about thirty ships strong, was armed to the teeth with catapults, net cannons, and other anti-dragon artillery. There were also three or four domed traps on each deck, all shut.

Even from up in the air, they could hear the angry screams of trapped dragons within, but not what they were saying.

*Let’s get a closer look – I can't make out the insignia from here.*

*Does the picture on the sails really matter?*

*I’d like to have a better idea of who we’re dealing with, so yes.*

*If you insist* Toothless sighed. They circled the ships, as close as they dared get without being spotted, and Hiccup peered through his spyglass at the sail of the flagship. He memorised the design embossed on it; a red wolf’s head, snarling.

He didn’t recognise it, but it was the least of their worries. Toothless’ sharp hearing picked up the tell-tale whizz of arrows being shot up into the sky, and twirled. Hiccup heard it as well – his eyesight wasn't the only thing that had improved in the last few years – but even if he hadn't, they knew he would have adjusted the tail fin as easily as breathing. *Let’s go back* he suggested, once they were safely out of range.

*Good idea!* Toothless shook his wings out and flew with all speed back towards Berk. No more pacing himself; now he was going all out. They had to return and help prepare their pack.

When they reached Berk, the previously dark village was filled with firelight, and dragons milled about in the skies. Toothless landed in the centre of the village square, where Astrid was directing the villagers. As soon as they came down, the dragons nearby bowed, and the Vikings started clamouring.

“How many ships are there?”

“Are they well armed?”

“Do we have a chance?”

“Why are they here?”
These four questions were the only ones Hiccup picked out of the tumult before Astrid yelled for attention. “All of you, keep your heads! This is no time to panic” she ordered, before turning to her husband and commanding, “Report.”

“There are about thirty ships; they’ll be here just before daybreak, if the winds don’t change. They’re armed with every piece of anti-dragon equipment you can name and then some, but I have ideas on how we can counteract them. So we do have a fighting chance”, here he addressed the crowd at large, “And we don’t back down from anything, and the Hooligans of Berk are going to show this so-called army what happens when they try to take our dragons!” The crowd roared in agreement, eager for battle.

Astrid gave a few more orders and sent everyone off, as Hiccup dismounted and came to her side. The first thing he asked her was “Is Helena safe?”

“She's fine; your mum's looking after her, and your dad’s flown out to Outcast Island. Cloud’s gone to warn our pack-mates on Dragon Island as well.”

Hiccup’s eyebrows raised. “Dad’s gone to wake up Alvin at this hour? I’d be more scared of that than of the army” he quipped. Seeing her less than impressed expression, he cleared his throat and added, “We’d better get to work.”

Between them, they figured out an aerial plan of attack and conveyed it to the villagers. Valka left Helena with Fredrick and came to offer her own solutions. They were conscious that every second counted, but not long after Toothless-Hiccup’s return, the sky filled with more dragons, as Skull Crusher and Cloud Jumper returned with their subjects from Dragon and Outcast Island in tow. Alvin and the few Outcasts who dared to ride dragons were there as well, and their armada was heading to Berk.

Astrid immediately strode over to the former Chief when his dragon landed, and began briefing him on the battle plans. Hiccup kissed his mother on the cheek and said “Help Astrid and dad, will you? We’re going to prepare the flock.”

He got back in the saddle, and they flew up to the top of the largest chunk of the island. The plateau had been stripped of nearly all its pines, which were cut down to build new houses, including Hiccup’s own. It was an excellent place to give announcements to the pack from; the Thunderclaws already up there galloped over to greet their Alphas. Hiccup and Toothless acknowledged them, before setting to gathering the rest of their flock.

They reached out through the pack web to their subjects, judging just from the faintest touch of their minds whether they could be summoned, and imbued their thought-speak with pure force of will. As one they roared out a command: *COME!*

All over the island, dragons heard their Alphas call and hastened to obey. Not all of them; the hatchlings and fledglings could not hear the Alphas, and likely wouldn't listen even if they could. Still, the majority of the flock gathered atop the cliffs. The larger dragons settled at the back, the smaller ones at the front, and the Biters perched on top of everyone else. There were so many that some had to hover. Every single one of them fixed their attention on the Swift-Wing and human in their midst.

*There are dragon hunters approaching our nest, but we have a little time to prepare. These hunters were part of Drago’s army* – This was as far as Hiccup managed to get, before many of the dragons recoiled and shrieked in anger or fear. *Quiet!* Toothless roared above the tumult, *Let him finish!*
They whined submissively, apologetically. Hiccup let his body say he wasn't upset as he reassured them *It’s not the whole army; just a couple of tribes worth, I'd say, and I'm pretty sure they didn't have a Sea-Giant with them. Toothless and I will do everything in our power to prevent you getting captured, and if you are, I swear we will rescue you.

*Now, here’s the plan: Toothless and I will lead the Core Riders in freeing the dragons these hunters have already captured, whilst the auxiliary riders provide back-up and a distraction. We’ll assign you all to teams led by a dragon-rider pair. Some of you will be defending the young, injured and elderly. If we give the word, gather everyone who’s vulnerable and retreat up here, it's the most defensible position. Is everyone clear?*

There was a chorus of *We understand, Alpha-Hiccup.*

*Twin-Heads, Fire-Scales, Biters, you're our first line of defence. Create a barrier of smog around the fleet; block their view, throw off their aim, and your fires will burn the arrows they shoot. They'll be catapulting boulders too, most likely, and so will we; watch your backs, keep your ears open and try not to get knocked down. Biters, you guys are small enough to fly under the range of the arrows, so you're gonna distract the archers*.

*Use your fire sparingly* Toothless instructed, *Work together to set off each other's flames and save on your shots. If you run out of fire, retreat. Immediately. Get out of range as fast as you can and watch your pack-mates backs whilst your fires renew themselves.*

*Rock-Tails, Sail-Backs, Spike-Tails, you're the second defence. Aim for the heavy artillery, the catapults and traps; wait for the others to burn away the arrows and ram the ships, knock the suckers off balance. Be careful; you'll have to get in close, and the Boulder class dragons are immune to dragon-root arrows but the rest of you aren't.

*If someone gets hit and you have a chance of catching them, fly in and drag them out of range – put them on one of Berk’s ships. Catch any rider who falls off as well, if you can, and reunite them with their dragon partner. If you can't get them away without being captured yourself, don't risk it. We will come back for anyone who gets captured, no matter how long it takes, I promise* Hiccup declared passionately.

*We know, Alpha-Hiccup* Stormfly purred at him trustingly. There was a chorus of agreement and understanding. In the five years of being Alphas, Toothless-Hiccup had never let them down before.

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Berk’s ships were outfitted with catapults and sailed out to form a barrier to the harbour. Alvin’s armada was preparing to sail to the aid of their allies on Berk, the Outcasts itching for a proper fight. Every rider was outfitted with dragon bombs, small metal spheres or discs filled with Fire-Scale saliva or Twin-Head gas, and triggered on impact or by being stepped on.

The hatchlings, small children and the elderly gathered in the Great Hall. The massive oaken doors could withstand a battering ram, and they had put in a door behind the throne through which the children and hatchlings could be herded out and taken to safety. When they had done all they could to prepare for the battle, Hiccup and Astrid went to the Hall to see their daughter.

She was with her Papa Fredrick, who had broken his arm and couldn't fight, and her Nana Agatha, who was there to make sure her husband didn't forget about his broken arm and try to fight. “Hey, sweetie!” Astrid cooed, “How come you’re still awake?”

“Not tired” the little girl pouted, even though she clearly was. Astrid reached out and hugged her close, and told her they'd be back soon. Hiccup hugged her as well, and Toothless gave her a nuzzle.
They purred at each other.

“You be our big brave girl, okay sweetheart?”

Helena was too young to understand what was really going on, but she’d still picked up on the tension in the air. She pouted and clung to her parents, who gently disengaged her and left her in Agatha’s arms. She and Fredrick wished their daughter and son-in-law luck.

Everything was as prepared as they could be; now it was only a matter of time. They waited, rested as much as they could, checked and rechecked their weapons. At last, the dragons Hiccup and Toothless sent out to keep watch for the ships returned, roaring a warning of Intruders! Everyone not on watch was woken by it.

“Showtime” Hiccup murmured, slipping his helmet on. He ignited Inferno and raised it high, signalling to Astrid that the ships were arriving. They waited until the ships were in view of the island; the captains of the Berkian ships gave the order to pull forward.

Toothless gathered himself and leapt into the air, hovering above the island, and roared out to the pack. *TO WING!*

The dragons, with riders or without, leapt into the air and flew out to meet the enemy daring to invade their territory. Clad in metal, with black and scarlet sails, the approaching armada looked threatening…but the massive swarm of dragons gathering in the sky before the island was more terrifying still.

As the Alphas, it was Toothless and Hiccup’s responsibility and honour to launch the first attack. Down they dived, aiming for the leading vessel. The four metallic traps lining the deck suddenly flung wide open, and armour clad dragons leapt out of all three of them, screams of bloodthirsty rage tearing at their throats.

“What the-?” Caught by surprise, as the maddened dragons rushed blindly at them, Toothless released his blast too early. It exploded in the midst of the wing (a party of dragons in flight) and they scattered. The Alphas barely dodged the net catapulted at them; Toothless barrel rolled, folded his wings and dropped like a stone, before swerving out of range, putting his split fins to good use.

Furious at the attack against their Alphas, many of the flock broke formation and leapt upon this new threat, howling warnings of *Trespassers!* and *How dare you?!* and *Fight!*

More trapdoors were opened; more dragons surged out of the ships, with metal strapped over their throats and underbellies. They snarled nonsense - *Mine! Mine! This is mine! All mine!* Dragon root Hiccup realised, as Toothless wheeled around to rejoin Astrid and the other riders. He flicked the faceplate of his helmet up and cupped a hand around his mouth. “Dragon root! They're drugged on it! We need to get them away from those ships!” he shouted to Astrid. The intoxicating odour of the root could drive even the most laid back dragons to fits of uncontrolled aggression, but it was only effective at close range.

“Got it!” she yelled back. The message was passed on – “Dragon root!”

*Change of plan! Chin-Spikes, Rock-Tails, destroy the dragon root inside the traps! Fire-Scales and Twin-Heads, cover them. The rest of you engage the drugged wings – knock them into the ocean if you have to!* Toothless ordered the flock. Wave upon wave of dragons swooped down upon the armada – Fishlegs acted as the wing leader for several wings of Rock-Tails and Chin-Spikes, his beard billowing in the wind as he roared a battle cry.
The Boulder Class dragons, immune to the root, spat lava and bright flames into the domes to burn it and the traps alike. The Stoker Class dragons harried the hunters manning the net launchers and crossbows – more than one found themselves being mobbed by Biters, who lived up to their names as they snapped and flamed. The Spike-Tails and Sail-Backs battled the root-drugged dragons, tearing at the straps of their amour and pushing them down into the waves – the shock of the cold water would help snap them out of their insanity.

The dragon hunters gave as good as they got. Harassed by dragons on all sides, they remained focused and disciplined. They catapulted boulders to knock the fire breathing beasts out of the sky, aimed and timed to throw them onto the deck of another vessel. Nets were catapulted from within the traps, engulfing the Gronckles and Shovelhelms that came to burn the dragon root. Arrows brought down Nightmares and Nadders alike.

Of course, the Berkians weren't idle either. The riders kept watch for their dragons, signalling for danger through touch and tugs on the saddle. They lobbed dragon bombs down at the hunters, and some even leapt down to the decks to fight head on. The Berkian fleet was attacking the hunters from the front and left, and the dragons rained fire down from above – yet, strangely, the Outcast ships were nowhere to be seen.

Toothless and Hiccup were streaking back and forth, firing at catapults and net launchers, blowing up the trap mechanisms so they couldn’t snap closed upon their subjects. Toothless was furious at this attack on his pack, his territory…he could dig deep within and release his Fury’s Fire, that would double his shot limit, and power, but it would also make them more of a target in the dark sky, and it took longer to recharge.

The hunters seemed relentless, and as they circled the fleet waiting for Toothless’ fires to build up to full potency once more, Hiccup scanned the battle and tried to make sense of the chaos. At least twelve of the ships were ablaze, and a few had been sunk by boulders punching through their hulls. Suddenly he realised that one such vessel still had a dragon trapped on board, thrashing beneath a net and screaming for help. The ship was tilting into the ocean, but the net was still attached by a long chain to the launcher.

Toothless sensed his thoughts and swerved at once, rushing to the Fire-Scales aid. Toothless landed on the edge of the ship, balancing precariously as Hiccup vaulted out of the saddle. “Hold on!” he shouted to Bestrin, skidding down the deck between two traps. He started unlocking the hooked clasps that kept the links of the chains wrapped around her and attached to the chain.

He released them, and Bestrin flung her wings out, throwing the net off. *Thank you, Alpha-Hiccup!*

“You're” - Hiccup felt a jolt of alarm stab through him, heard a shriek and a splash – “Toothless!”

His dragon had been snagged by another net from behind. He scrambled back up the deck, heaving himself up the chain, but quickly let go when he felt claws wrap around his torso. Bestrin carried him up over the edge of the sinking ship, flaming furiously at the hunters, and dropped him into the water.

Hiccup had taken a deep breath before plunging beneath the waves; he swam determinedly to where Toothless was wrapped in chains, and tugged from his belt an emergency vial of Changewing acid. It melted through the chains, letting him tear them away. They had discovered that the acid, for some reason, could only corrode the dragon proof metal when wet. It explained why their team had rescued Changewings who hadn't tried to melt though their cages – because the cages were dry.

He pulled himself back into the saddle as Toothless began to glow, and they burst out of the water
shining with an unholy electric shine. Such was the heat radiating from his scales that the water steamed off of him, and he dived back upon the hunters with a scream of power and blue-lavender fire in his jaws.

Burning with Fury’s Fire, they were a bright and irresistible target in the sky – but they were faster, and fiercer, and the hunters could not get a clear shot. Toothless fired blast after blast, as Hiccup directed him expertly to where they were needed most. As the sun began rising, the hunters ships started to pull away, tacking to their port side to avoid the barrage from the Hooligans.

The pack continued trying to rescue those of their flock mates still imprisoned – but Toothless could not keep the Fury’s Fire burning indefinitely. When they ran out of shots, Hiccup knew they wouldn't be able to keep protecting their subjects. They had to retreat, regroup and then mount a rescue. He conveyed all this to Toothless through the heart bind alone, and the black dragon roared out *FALL BACK!*

Astrid had seen them run out of shots, and by herself come to the same conclusion as her husband. Besides, the hunters had been driven off – trying to pursue them would be foolish right now. “Fall back! Everyone fall back!” she yelled at the top of her lungs, even as Stormfly obeyed her Alphas and turned back towards Berk.

The dragons retreated back to the island, landing amongst the village. Toothless called Stormfly over to him, and Hiccup said to Astrid, “Go to the Great Hall and tell one of the Spike-Tails to track the hunters fleet. Even if no-ones missing, we need to know where they're based.”

“On it” Astrid agreed. Stormfly left, and Toothless flew down to the Berkian ships, where the Vikings were trying their best to pacify the armoured dragons who had been left on their decks. As soon as they saw the Swift-Wing they recognised as the Alpha of this pack, they cringed submissively and whined in apology.

“Hiccup! Thank goodness – I don't know what to do, we haven't got near them but we had to tie them up”- the captain of the flagship began.

“It's okay, Starkard, we've got this.”

*We’re sorry, Alpha! We’re so sorry, we would never have attacked your flock if we had been in our right minds. Please, have mercy and save us from these hunters!* begged a Spike-Tail who must have been a wing-leader, as Toothless approached her.

Hiccup hurried over to Toothless' side, and the Spike-Tail flinched, growling defensively at him.

*No, no, it's okay, we’re not gonna hurt you* Hiccup reassured her as Toothless crooned comfortingly.

Her spikes twitched in surprise, and her eyes widened. She stared at him. *But you are human!*

*Ah, yes, about that* -

*This is Hiccup; he is my brother, and we are heart bound* Toothless said bluntly, if formally. *We lead this pack together, and we did rescue you from the hunters. I'm sorry we did it so roughly.*

The Nadder’s eyes flickered over to the other Vikings. *Oh, they're not hunters* Hiccup assured her, *
They’re just Hooligans. They're friends to dragons, they just – well, they had to muzzle you or you might have attacked them. But I'm going to take this off you now, okay?* He came forward slowly and crouched down to remove the hastily strapped on muzzle.

Over his shoulder he said aloud, “Toothless, go and explain things to the other dragons, would you?”
The black dragon purred agreeably and padded away.

“When they've settled, remove their muzzles, carefully. And send word to have some dragon nip brought down, it'll help them stay calm” he advised Starkard, who nodded.

“Yes, sir!”

The Spike-Tail chittered curiously at him as he fiddled with the muzzle. *Hiccup and…Toothless? Forgive me, but those are rather…strange names.*

*Welcome to Berk* he quipped, pulling away the muzzle and unlocking the chain someone had wrapped around her left hind leg. His own, she noticed, was partly missing. *What’s your name?* he asked as he stood back, and let her heave herself to her feet.

*Lyse. It means ‘bright’, in the human tongue of my homeland* she explained as she stretched her wings.

*It’s nice to meet you, Lyse. You and your fellows can stay here on Berk until you're ready to return home.*

Hiccup and Toothless reassured the newcomers and their subjects alike, as the crude armour was removed and wounds were treated. There *were* some dragons missing, and Hiccup began organising a rescue team. His mother had to convince them to have a rest, and something to eat – but there was just so much to do. They would rescue their captured flock-mates. They would find ways to defend themselves against the threat of the hunters. They would defeat the hunters once and for all.

The first battle was over…but the war had just begun.
“What do we do?!”

“They took our dragons! When are we gonna get them back?!”

“Are these new dragons gonna be staying?”

“Why are they here? Why now?!”

Toothless fired a small blast, that exploded over the heads of the shouting Vikings. It shut them up very effectively. “Thank you, Toothless” Astrid said gratefully, standing up on the throne to be better seen and heard. “The hunters are here for our dragons and our island – neither of which they are getting. As for why they’ve only come back now – we don’t know, but Hiccup and I think that these hunters bought or stole the traps from Drago’s men. That, or they’ve been fighting amongst themselves the last five years, trying to fill a power vacuum after Drago was killed.”

“But what about the dragons?” somebody demanded.

Astrid gestured for Hiccup to take the floor, and he stepped forwards from his place on her left. “Nobody wants to rescue our dragons more than I do, Hoark” he declared, “and I am going to lead a wing on a rescue mission. Snotlout, the twins, the A-Team are coming – are there any other volunteers?”

Almost everyone in the hall raised their hands – or hooks, as the case may be. Hiccup stood on Toothless’ saddle for a better view, and picked several out. Of course, the ones who were passed over almost immediately began to complain; Hiccup much preferred dealing with the dragons, who tended to defer to his judgement without much fuss. “Have your dragons ready; we’ll leave as soon as I get word of the hunters’ location” he ordered the group of riders, as they stood aside from the rest.

“Yes, sir!” Gustav saluted smartly. The auxiliary teams’ leader had come a long way.

“As for the new dragons, they’ll remain on Berk until they have the strength to return to their own territories. If they’re unable to, and they accept Toothless and I as their new Alphas, then we’ll integrate them into the pack. And they told me that they’re very sorry for attacking us, and they’re more afraid of us Vikings than we are of them. Just give them some space and I assure you, everything is under control.”

He stepped back and nodded for Astrid to take over. “Everyone, listen up! Hopefully, when we rescue our dragons, these hunters will see that Berk is not to be trifled with. If they don’t – well, we’ve done this before and we can do it again! We will gather our allies and make a stand against these cowards. In the meantime, we keep calm and carry on. This so-called army has no idea what it’s messing with – we don’t back down, and we never give up! We are Vikings!”

“YEAH!”

“We are Hooligans!”

“YEAH!!”

“We are dragon riders!”
Hiccup approached the rescue party to discuss tactics and flight manoeuvres, whilst Astrid continued giving orders and encouragement to the rest of the tribe. Gobber limped his way over to Hiccup. At sixty one years old, he was getting on a bit...his knees weren't what they used to be. “Alpha?” he called.

His former apprentice sighed and turned to face him. “Just because the dragons call me that, doesn't mean you have to” he insisted. He'd much rather be addressed simply as ‘Sir’ by the villagers, even if he'd grown used to the dragons greeting him as ‘Alpha-Hiccup’. “What is it, Gobber?”

“I've got summin’ to show yer, sir” Gobber said with a crooked smile. Puzzled, Hiccup and Toothless followed him out of the Great Hall. Grump was dozing nearby, along with a dark grey and blue dappled Sail-Back, who heaved himself to his paws at their approach, and bowed respectfully to his Alphas. Then he thumped the Hotburple, who jerked awake with a snort.

The Sail-Backs preferred more open space where they could herd and run together; a mountainous island like Berk wasn't really a suitable habitat for them. Still, some of them remained here, including Bosaal. He had been one of the last of the war dragons to have his armour removed. The day he came to the forge, he'd found Gobber frustratedly trying to wake the ever lazy Grump, and decided to help. His roar had startled both the blacksmith and the Hotburple, but Gobber found the whole thing hilarious and took a liking to Bosaal. The two of them bonded over shared exasperations, and Bosaal was now Gobbers’ unofficial secondary dragon partner.

Gobber, Grump and Bosaal led the way to the training ring. Arranged in somewhat haphazard piles in the centre, was the armour they'd removed from the root-drugged dragons. In fact there was more – some of it was armour that had once been worn by the army dragons. “Gobber, what is all this?” Hiccup frowned.

“Armour, o’ course” he replied, as if it weren't obvious. “Took it off the newbies. It was all jus’ strapped on; I figger yer can put it on ya own dragons n’ give yerselves an edge against them hunters yer going after” he explained, picking at his teeth – the ones he had left, at any rate – with his hook.

Some of the riders nodded and murmured with interest; others looked uncomfortable. The dragons, for their part, shifted uneasily, eyeing the armour as if it could bite them. Hiccup’s frown only deepened. “You want me to put my dragons in armour, like Drago did, like these hunters have done?”

“Well, it’s not like ya putting ‘em in chains” Gobber pointed out, “They’ll still be able to fly n’ everything.” He stomped over and placed a hand on Hiccup’s shoulder, and said “Look, lad, being in a war means havin’ t’ make hard choices. Sometimes the only way to beat yer enemies is t’ use their own tricks against ‘em.”

“Oh!” Gobber exclaimed suddenly, hobbling back to the pile of armour, “And there’s summin’ else – argh, me back! Gustav, little help over here?”

*Alphas, do we have to wear this armour?* asked Fanghook, tilting his head curiously but whining softly with reluctance.

*It isn't that bad* Bosaal insisted, *We’ve all gotten used to our saddles, haven't we? Wearing armour won't be that different. We're strong. We can take a bit of extra weight.*

*You would say that. You're not even coming on this mission!* the Fire-Scale retorted, growling
irritably.

*Watch your words, youngling* Bosaal warned, lowering his head defensively. Toothless stepped between them and bared his fangs at both. *Stop it, both of you!*

“What's wrong with 'em?” asked Spitelout.

“Oh, Fanghook and Bosaal were just having a…disagreement…” Hiccup cleared his throat and went on, “Now about this armour”-

“Och, aye! I think it's a great idea!” Spitelout interrupted, “Those hunters will never see it coming!”

“Ah-ha!” Gobber exclaimed, over a clatter of metal. He and Gustav had dragged out, and were propping upright, a piece of armour that was long, flat, and curved up slightly at the sides. “I even found a bit that’ll fit Toothless!” he declared, grinning crookedly at Hiccup.

The black dragon backed away a few paces. *That's not gonna happen, right Hiccup?...Hiccup?*

His other half winced. “Actually…”

Toothless made a disbelieving sound, and whined. *Seriously?*

“Oh, look – Gobber, I can't believe I'm saying this, but you have a point. Our dragons need protection, and it would give us an advantage…and Toothless, I know you don't like wearing armour, but it would help keep us safe and I – well, I'd feel better if you had some. Will you do it for me, please?”

Toothless slumped a bit, and sighed resignedly. How was he supposed to say no to that? *Fine. I'll wear it, but I won't like it* he grumbled.

*Thank you* Hiccup smiled at him gratefully, before turning and declaring, “Okay, dragons! Normally I wouldn't ask this of you, but desperate times call for desperate measures. Every dragon who's coming on this rescue mission has to wear protective gear – so if you really don't want to wear the armour, then I'm afraid you can't come on the mission. Do you all understand?”

The dragons looked at one another…they weren't sure about this - wouldn't the metal-skin slow them down? - but they supposed it would stop arrows hitting them, and if Alpha-Toothless was willing to wear it then it couldn't be that bad…

At last, they nodded. Hiccup relaxed, for a moment, and then pulled himself together. “Alright…let’s get this sorted out.”

Bosaal approached Alpha-Toothless, who had already been fitted with metal-skins on his chest and stomach, and was waiting for his other half to finish helping Gobber. *Alpha-Toothless, I want to join the rescue party* he announced as he raised his head from a bow.

*Is this about what Fanghook said?* Toothless inquired. He was trying to resist the urge to shake and scratch at the piece of armour and dislodge it. He hated it when his scales started itching beneath the metal, and they always did.

*No…not entirely. I just want to come. I hate to say it, but these hunters might use our pack-mates against us, and I have experience with fighting dragons* Bosaal pointed out.

*I see your point…but Hiccup only wants riding dragons to come, so the humans can defend and
free them if they're captured. When he comes over, we'll ask him to ask Gobber if he wants to come.*

So when Hiccup and Gobber made their way back over, Bosaal made the same request. “Hm… Gobber? Bosaal wants to join us, but he'd need a rider. I mean, you couldn’t ride him, but you could ride Grump and keep an eye on him. Fancy coming along?”

“Ah, well, I would, but y’know, lots t’ do n’ all…”

“Oh, right. I suppose if you're busy, I could ask someone el”-

“Ha, ha! Oh, you’re too easy! Nah, course I'll come. Oh, the look on your…eh…” Gobber trailed off, seeing Hiccup, Toothless and even Bosaal staring at him flatly. He cleared his throat awkwardly. “Err…sorry.”

Hiccup bit back an exasperated groan. “Just get ready to leave” he ordered wearily.

“Aye, sir!”

Just then, Astrid swooped in on Stormfly. “Hiccup! I just got word from the Outcasts. The reason their fleet never made it to Berk, is because they were attacked – and so were the Berserkers. All at the same time, almost” she revealed.

“So the army’s bigger than we thought…we’ll keep that in mind, Astrid. Thank you for telling me. Are you going to be okay?”

“I'll be fine…kind of wish I could come with you though.”

“Yeah, me too” he agreed, leaning in…

*This is not the time to start mating* Toothless said bluntly, without looking round. Hiccup and Astrid jerked apart. Hiccup glared at the back of his brother's head, and Astrid giggled.

Gobber got Bosaal’s armour sorted in the nick of time. A Spike-Tail flew down and bowed to his Alphas, wings drooping. “Scorch Spike, did you find the fleet?” Hiccup asked urgently.

*Yes, Alpha-Hiccup. Follow the winds south, they are heading towards the Scale-Shifters territory* the tired Spike-Tail explained. Hiccup smiled gratefully and pet him, saying “Thank you, Scorch. Go and rest.” The Nadder chirped affectionately at him, and made for his nest for a well-deserved nap.

He turned to the rescue team and declared, “Everyone, mount up! It's time.”

They flew out due south from Berk, gliding on fast winds. That meant the ships would be going fast as well, even if the dragons were faster. In his minds eye, Hiccup looked over an imaginary map of the archipelago. He'd looked at his own maps so many times they were practically burned into his memory.

Given that ships were slower, and Scorch Spike obviously hadn't followed the fleet all the way (just long enough to catch up and be sure of their heading), and that Outcast Island was a long way from Changewing Isle even on dragonback…Hiccup felt reasonably sure that when they caught up with the ships, the fleet (or half of the fleet, perhaps) that had ambushed the Outcasts wouldn't have had time to catch up with the rest.

At least, he hoped they wouldn't have. If there were more ships...well, the plan didn't change. They
would just have to keep their wits about them – perhaps bringing the twins along hadn't been such a good idea, but it was either that or leave them to help repair the ships that had been hit with rocks or accidentally set on fire. Better to give them something that needed blowing up, rather than let them entertain themselves.

The dragons flew as fast as they could without overexerting themselves, but the fleet had too much of a head start. By the time they caught up… “Mother of Thor, that's a lot of ships” Snotlout observed. Rather than the thirty-strong fleet they were expecting, there were an extra ten, that had come seemingly out of nowhere and had a different sail insignia.

“Indeed – it seems our enemy has been doubled” Tuffnut declared grandly. It would have been a better proclamation if he could actually count.

“But that's impossible – they shouldn't have caught up yet” said Hiccup, bewildered. “How can they have gotten here from Outcast Island so fast?”

“They didn’t” said Gobber, “Look at the turn of the other fleet’s sails – they've come up from the south, to meet the first fleet halfway” he explained. Hiccup looked, and saw what he meant.

“So, err, what do we…?” Gustav asked uncertainly.

“Look, the plan doesn't change. It's now or never, guys. We're going in!” Hiccup called to the rest of the team. The plan, in its basics, was that he and Toothless would use the pack’s mental web to narrow down which ships had their captured subjects aboard. They would mark a ship that held their subjects captive, and the rest of the team would distract the hunters whilst they broke in and freed the dragons.

They circled above the fleet, trying to pinpoint which vessels their flock-mates were aboard. *There* said Hiccup, and in his peripheral vision, Toothless saw him point at a ship just off to their right. At the prow of the ship there was a dome that was, for some reason, partly open. It was also surrounded by arrow launchers. He swept around to find a better angle and dived, the whistling shriek and brightening shine of his signature fire blast building in his throat.

They got very close – a split second after Hiccup realised that the hunters had let them get too close, fire burst out of the trap. Caught off guard, Toothless was forced to pull up out of the dive to avoid the unprecedented attack. The flames and many of the arrows struck the plate of metal strapped to his more vulnerable underside, and the draft from his wings knocked away the rest. Still, it was an extremely close call.

*See? I told you the armour would come in handy!* Before Toothless could agree, or make some snarky retort (the latter was more likely, really), they were suddenly – and inexplicably – doused with cold water. “What the-?”

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The rest of the team had set upon the ship they had tried to mark, driving back the hunters on it and the surrounding vessels. Or at least they were trying to, but the dragon in the trap kept flaming at them and snarling furiously. They weren't saying anything, just shrieking, and everyone could hear the scraping of claws against metal. It was hard to tell if the dragons inside the cages were chained down or not.

In one way, the strategy of the hunters was obvious – to use the captured dragons as bait, lure in the others and take them down. Yet for some reason, their catapults weren't firing boulders at the rescue party. Instead, they were throwing lightweight leather sacs that burst and soaked the dragon – sometimes also the rider – with water.
“Not that I don't appreciate a good splash fight, but why are they just throwing water at us?” Tuffnut wondered, after he and Belch – but not Ruffnut and Barf, much to his sisters amusement – had gotten soaked. Belch sneezed water out of his snout and hissed irritably at his brother-head when Barf laughed.

“Hiccup!” called Gustav, “Is it just me, or do the dragons in the traps have glowing spit?!”

“Glowing-?” They risked a closer look and sure enough, when the muzzle of a Fire-Scale appeared in the gap of one cage, their fangs were dripping with saliva that glowed an eerie orange hue. Suddenly he realised what was wrong with them, and why the hunters were trying to spray them with water.

“They're Grim!” he yelled, “They're infected with grimora!”

“With wh”-

“It's a parasite! If you've been splashed, get out of range and dive into the ocean! Now!” Even as he said it, he shifted the tail fin and then sucked in a breath and held it.

Toothless dived, and as soon as they plunged underwater, Hiccup saw tiny shapes wriggle out from under his dragons scales – eww – and leap away out of the salt water. They swam until they were sure the disgusting leeches were nowhere near them, and burst out of the water again.

“We need to soak the trapped dragons in seawater!” Hiccup announced, “That'll cure them, and then we can free them!” He directed the team to grab anything that could hold water and dump it all over the infected dragons.

It was risky, and difficult when they were beset on all sides by hunters – but the dragon riders worked together, and one by one, the captives were freed and escaped into the sky. When the last of the traps had been broken into, and a couple more sails set alight for good measure, the dragons all gathered out to sea. They had one last dip in the ocean to be sure that all the grimora were gone, and Hiccup made a head count.

To his intense relief, nobody was missing. “Okay, it looks like everyone's accounted for” he declared, and they all cheered. “Good job, everyone. Let's head home – we’ve earned a rest.”

Hiccup felt terrible, and when the dragons they'd rescued thanked him and Toothless for coming, he only felt worse. Turning as much as he could in the saddle, he looked over his shoulder at them all. “Everyone, I'm sorry. The dragons should have been rescued from the beginning – by pulling back and waiting, I gave the hunters a chance to put our dragons and ourselves at risk. That was my mistake, and I apologise.”

“You should be sorry” Snotlout agreed, “You realise we could have been killed, right?”

“Yes, Snotlout, I'm well aware of that.”

“When did that ever stop the likes of us?” Gobber demanded, “We’re Vikings! It's an occupational hazard!” he declared. To Hiccup, he said more gently, “Don't be so hard on yourself, lad. You did what you thought was best for yer pack and yer tribe. As a leader, you have to consider the needs of the many, not just the few. Yer father would tell ya the same thing.”

“Yes, but the few are part of the many” Hiccup pointed out, “And that battle was twice as dangerous – if Gustav hadn't made me realise the dragons were Grim, then our dragons might have been infected for longer. We could have been hurt. Besides, if we can capture some of their ships, it would
put them at a disadvantage. Odin knows the fewer ships they have, the better” he reasoned.

“Aye, fair point” Gobber agreed, “but if we hadn't waited, we wouldn't have found out they were using grimora in the first place. We can prepare for that now.”

“I suppose…” Hiccup knew Gobber meant well, and he did appreciate it…but it did little to assuage his guilt. The other dragons might not blame him, but he blamed himself. As far as he was concerned, his mistake in waiting had betrayed the trust they placed in him as their Alpha.

*We betrayed their trust, you mean. We’re in this together.*

*I didn't say anything.*

*We don't need to be heart bound for me to know how you feel. I just know you. Hiccup, you know Gobber is right. We did what was right for the pack at the time – we couldn't have kept protecting our subjects in the battle, we had to fall back and recover.*

*I know…things will be different next time, though.*

Astrid threw a feast to celebrate their first victory and the safe return of the rescue team. That night the mead flowed well, and the Great Halls rafters rang with the boisterous sounds of loudly singing Vikings, many of whom were horribly off key and didn't care a jot. Nor did they care that several songs were being sung all at the same time, creating a discordant mess.

“Oh I've got my axe, an’ I've got my mace, an’ I love me wife with the ug – argh! – I mean pretty face. I'm a Viking through an’ through! Oh, a Viking through an’ throooooough!”

“Hooligan tribe won't you come out tonight, come out tonight, come out tonight! Hooligan tribe won't you come out tonight, and fight by the light of the moooon!”

“That night of fury one did dare to set aside his dread, and place his hand upon a winged villains gentle head! Now time has past and what was once our cursed enemy, carries us to battle ‘gainst our threat across the seeeeeeeaa!”

Hiccup cringed a bit when he overheard that. How did they even know about that song? Then he remembered that he'd gotten horribly drunk last year, after Johann brought some particularly potent wine to the island, and started singing the stupid ballad at the top of his lungs. Then the rest of them picked up on it! Toothless had considered his mortification to be just punishment for giving himself – and by extension, his dragon – a hangover. He and Toothless sneaked out of the hall and went to enjoy the rest of the celebration flying with the other dragons. It was no quieter, but it was a lot more fun.

The next day, Astrid gathered Hiccup, Snotlout, Fishlegs, the twins, Dagur, and Heather for a war council. The eight of them were gathered around the table, with a map of the archipelago spread out before them. “Okay – we know that we, the Outcasts, and the Berserkers were all attacked on the same night, at almost the same time” she began.

“By different fleets” added Hiccup, “The ships that rendezvoused with the fleet that attacked Berk had a different insignia. I didn't recognise it, but I think I saw it on some of the ships in Drago’s army. Alvin said the fleet that ambushed him had a similar design – the skull of a dragon, impaled on a sword. Cheery, these people” he said sarcastically.

“Yeah, and the Berserkers were attacked by a fleet that had ships with a very familiar insignia”
Dagur announced. He held up a piece of parchment – sketched on it in charcoal was a rough, but still recognisable image of a stylised clenched fist. The design was indeed familiar – it was the insignia of the dragon hunters, led by Viggo Grimborn.

“I could draw it better than that” Tuffnut scoffed, “And why did they use charcoal? Black so does not capture the menace of it – that symbol is supposed to be portrayed in red.” He sniffed and turned his nose up in a haughty manner.

“Yeah, blood red” Ruffnut grinned manically, “A blood red fist!”

“Wait – blood fist?” Fishlegs realised, “You don't think…?”

“No, Fishlegs. I don't think Drago belonged to the same tribe as Viggo and Ryker; his clothes, his accent, they were too different. They both came from beyond the archipelago, but not from the same place. The insignia is probably just a coincidence” Hiccup reasoned. Besides, he'd gotten the impression that Viggo was the Chief of his tribe, and if Drago was also part of said tribe then he probably would have made himself Chief.

Fishlegs looked relieved. Astrid snapped her fingers and prompted, “Let’s not lose focus here. The hunters that attacked Berk came in from the south-west, and headed south, and the fleet that rendezvoused with them must have come from the Isle of Frigga…so that part of the army is probably basing their operations around this area.” She drew a circle on the map around Changewing Island and the Isle of Frigga.

“Maybe we should rename it ‘The Isle of Insanity’ – since, y’know, that's what happens to the dragons who go there” Tuffnut suggested. Everyone ignored him.

“I can't believe they infected the dragons with grimora, on purpose!” Fishlegs fumed. “That's…that’s monstrous!”

“Not to mention stupid” Tuffnut interjected. “I mean, even I thought it was stupid. Our islands are surrounded by saltwater. Grimora hate salt. Am I the only one who thought it was dumb?” he asked, “No, seriously, I'm really asking.”

“It’s strange that they used grimora this time, and not dragon root like last time” Heather remarked thoughtfully, “That would have had the same effect, if they wanted the dragons to be irrationally aggressive. And surely just having them in the traps would be enough of a bait?”

“It did make things more difficult” Hiccup admitted, “As for why they're using dragon root and grimora…I guess since they don't seem to have a Sea-Giant to control the dragons they capture, they have to find…other means” he reasoned, lips pursing in disgust. No hunters would be enslaving any of his dragons, if he had anything to say about it.

“Oh, yeah, that reminds me” said Snotlout, “Can someone tell me why we’re even discussing this? These guys might not have a giant super-dragon on their side, but we do. Why doesn't Hiccup just fly up north and ask his giant Alpha pal to come down here and ice the suckers to smithereens?”

“You know, I'm sitting right here” Hiccup pointed out, from his seat opposite Snotlout, “and yeah, I could ask the King to destroy this army. So what happens afterwards? These hunters were part of Drago’s army – at least some of them. They know about the King. If the thought of going up against a Bewilderbeast didn't make them think twice about coming back, then who's to say they’ll keep away the second time? Besides, we can't just ask the King to bail us out whenever some big threat turns up. He has his own subjects and territory to defend” Hiccup explained.
“But it would give us a huge advantage” Astrid reasoned, “Especially if this army is attacking us and our allies at the same time. We need all the help we can get. Speaking of which…do you think, y’know…the Night Furies would help us?”

“Hey, yeah!” Dagur exclaimed, “Those hunters would never see that coming. Ooh! Do you suppose there’s any chance I could ride one of them, Hiccup? Then we could have a race!”

“They’re wild dragons, Dagur, not horses” Hiccup replied, “And I really can't ask them to risk it. I still can't believe Selena convinced even some of them to come help us last time. If the hunters managed to capture any of them, or track down their nest, their Queen would kill me.”

“No, she wouldn’t” Astrid rolled her eyes, “If they get captured, we’ll rescue them. What do you think, Toothless?” she asked the black dragon, who was lying on the cool flagstones nearby. He was so quiet that she might have thought he was asleep, if not for the fact that his eyes were open and bright.

*I don’t think it would hurt to ask* Toothless answered reasonably. Astrid turned to her husband with a triumphant smirk on her face. “Told you so.”

“Mind clueing the rest of us in?” Snotlout asked impatiently.

“ Toothless doesn’t think there’s any harm in asking the King and the Night Furies to come help” Astrid translated airily.

Hiccup sighed and relented. “Okay, fine. I'll see if mom and Cloud Jumper will go to ask the King if he can spare any of his subjects. I’m sure they’d like to visit their old nest.”

“She’s got you trained, hasn’t she?” Snotlout teased, and Hiccup blushed. “Well, I didn’t promise to let you do it. I promised to let her say it.”

“No, you promised to listen to me” Astrid told him. “You promised to respect the new chain of command. And it’s not like we can only ask the King. We can ask anyone who’s willing to help.”

Hiccup sighed. “I guess you’re right.”

“Are you ordering me to go?”

“Yes, I am” she challenged, “And you had better listen. You promised, if I became Chief, that you’d respect the new chain of command. You can't do whatever you want just because you're at the top of the hierarchy as far as the dragons are concerned.”

She is so hot when she does that thought Hiccup. “You're right” he said aloud, “I did promise.” It had been part of their agreement; in exchange for abdicating his heirdom to be the Alpha alongside Toothless, Hiccup had sworn to respect Astrid as his chief and follow her orders. “We’ll go to the King. As for the Night Furies…I’m sorry, Astrid, but I can’t. They’ve risked enough for us already – breaking centuries of secrecy to fight an enemy that might never have gotten to them, if it wasn’t for that. I wouldn't be able to live with myself if they were put in danger because of me.”

“But they won’t be in danger, because we’d rescue them. Hiccup, these hunters have a lot of ships – you and Toothless alone can't counter them all. What about Alvin, and Dagur? Don't their tribes deserve to have a Night Fury or two protecting their dragons as well?” Astrid reasoned.
She knew he meant well; but they had to think of the safety of Berk first, and having more Night Furies on their side would be a great advantage. The benefits, as far as she was concerned, outweighed the risks. “Promise me you’ll think about it” she asked; they didn't have time to argue.

“Yes, dear, whatever you like.” She glared at him. “Sorry. Yes, chief. Of course I will.”

“Good. I'll send word to our other allies and the tribes in the archipelago. Oh, and I’ll try to get word to Eret as well. How are we doing for supplies?”

“Well, we’ve got no shortage of Fire-Scale gel and Twin-Head gas, obviously – but we’re running low on Scale-Shifter acid” Fishlegs reported dutifully, “not to mention, the Isle of Frigga was our best source of sandstone to make Gronckle Iron with. If the hunters have taken over it, then we're gonna be in trouble.”

“Then we need a plan to recapture that island. In the meantime, Snotlout, I want you to take a team to Changewing Island and harvest more acid. If the hunters are there, do not engage them. Understand?”

“We could take ‘em”-

“Snotlout.”

“What? I'm kidding. Besides, why would the hunters go ashore on that island? Unless you want to get melted alive, it isn't exactly one of the top ten destinations in the archipelago.”

“We don't know what these hunters are capable of, or how well equipped they are to handle different kinds of dragon” Fishlegs said firmly, ignoring Snotlout’s mocking silent “Meh, meh, meh.”

“Question – why is Snotlout going to Changewing Island?” asked Tuffnut. Everyone stared at him.

“I just said, to gather more Changewing acid” Astrid pointed out. “We need it to melt the dragon proof chains with.”

Tuffnut blinked, and pointed at Fishlegs. “He said we were running out of Scale-Shifter acid. Follow up question – what is a Scale-Shifter?”

Everybody bit back a groan, but it didn't stop them rolling their eyes. “Scale-Shifters are Changewings” Astrid replied, resisting the urge to face-palm. “You know what? Just for that, you two are going on that mission as well. Snotlout, make sure they don't get killed. That's an order.”

“…Now, when you say ’get killed’, do you mean just that specifically…”?

“Or injured.”

“Fine.”

“Good. Whilst you're there, try and find out exactly where the army is based. Scouting only, don't go stirring up trouble.”

“I know. First you dump the twins on me – thanks for that, by the way – and now you're telling me the obvious? Sheesh, it's no wonder Stoick and Hiccup let you take over. You're all control freaks” Snotlout declared. Astrid and Hiccup both gave him extremely unimpressed glares. “What?”

The following morning, Astrid, Hiccup and Toothless woke early. Hiccup dressed and saddled Toothless, who then waited for him outside. He took his wife in his arms and kissed her, and
promised they'd be back home in a week, if they weren't then by all means come looking for them, he loved her, etc.

Before he left the house, Hiccup crept into his daughter’s bedroom. She was fast asleep, sucking her thumb, her wavy blonde hair splashed upon the pillow. He smiled fondly, and crouched down to press a feather light kiss to her temple. “See you soon, darling” he whispered to her, before he stood up and stole out of the room.

Moments after the door had softly clicked shut, Helena stirred.

“Daddy?”
Toothless and Hiccup were already deep into the Kings territory when they were intercepted by a few of his dragons, a Windstriker, two Fire-Scales and a Hobblegrunt. *No threat!* Hiccup declared automatically, as Toothless slowed to a hover in midair. The other four dragons surrounded them, eyes wary, but did not bare their fangs more than they already were.

A moment later, the Windstriker recognised him, spiked head pulling back in surprise. *You are the heart bound human!* he exclaimed. His friends crowed with delight, recognising the heart bound pairs scent. It had been years since they'd returned to this nest!

*Yes, he is* Toothless agreed with some impatience, *and we need to speak to the King at once. It's important* he said urgently. The small scouting wing escorted them back to the Ice Nest; in what felt like no time at all, the familiar yet imposing natural fortress of ice and volcanic stone emerged into view beyond a massive iceberg, almost an island in and of itself. The dragons perched upon its icy spires or soaring in the sky above it saw the newcomers – a Swift-Wing stood out amongst this eclectic mix of colourful scales, and a Swift-Wing with a rider stood out even more so.

They were led to the heart of the nest, the green and lush sanctum at the centre of which rested the mighty Bewilderbeast. Before Usurper had emerged from the ocean, his subjects believed him to be the very last of his kind…he was truly a king of kings, ancient beyond imagining. The King of the North was a figure of legend amongst dragons, and even humans, believed by most to be only a myth. Hiccup would never cease to be humbled and awed by the great, benevolent, majestic Alpha, or the idea that the King considered him worthy to be a leader of dragons – the fiercest, most magnificent creatures in Midgard – himself. Their escorts introduced them, and retreated; Hiccup and Toothless walked side by side to the edge of the cliff and crouched, bowing their heads submissively.

With a rumble of displaced water, the King rose from his resting place and gazed down at the travellers. *WELCOME* he greeted them; he was pleased to see them.

*Hello, your majesty* Toothless answered for both of them.

*CURIOUSITY. CONCERN. BOTH-OF-YOU. FAMILY. FLOCK* Were they well? Were their loved ones and subjects okay?

*That’s actually why we’re here, your Majesty* said Hiccup. He explained, *Our Nest was recently attacked, by dragon hunters. Some of them, we think, are from the same army that attacked your own nest under Drago’s command, five years ago. We defeated them in battle, and rescued our subjects from their clutches, but they are attacking my tribes allies as well. We can’t go to each other’s aid without leaving our own islands undefended.*

*I know it’s a lot to ask, and I don’t want you to have to put your subjects at risk for our sake…* Hiccup admitted, but before he could continue, Toothless rather bluntly revealed, *His mate made him do this.*

Hiccup shot his dragon-brother a deadpan stare. *Thank you for summing that up.*

The King let out a rumbling purr. It sounded like a small thunderclap, but it was still recognisable as the sound that indicated mild amusement. Hiccup tried very hard not to feel embarrassed.

*YOUR MATE AND OFFSPRING?* the King asked him. Hiccup pictured Astrid and Helena – his girls – in his mind and projected the mental image to the King, who crooned in approval. Valka
and Cloud Jumper visited their old nest now and again, and his former human subject had told him of her granddaughter. He hoped to meet her in person someday.

*What we’re trying to say is that we need help from our allies* Toothless declared, *human and dragon alike. Only my brother*, here he curled his tail around Hiccup, *didn’t want to trouble you, your majesty. Did you?* he asked Hiccup, cocking his head inquisitively.

The young alpha sighed and nodded. *I just feel like we should be able to stand against the threat with our own fire and claws - metaphorically speaking. It hardly says much of our reign if we have to turn to a more powerful alpha, like yourself, for help every time danger rears its head* he explained. He knew he sounded prideful and stubborn…but he was. It was his territory, his island and his people the hunters had attacked – could anyone blame him for wanting the satisfaction of he and Toothless and their subjects defeating them?

*BE AT EASE* the King advised him gently; there was no shame in needing to seek aid. It did not make them weak, or their reign any less impressive. In a mixture of emotions and mental images, he conveyed to them that their nest and the nests of their allies should have protection. They could ask of his own subjects who would be willing to fly with them and join them in battle…although, he himself would need to remain behind to guard and lead his own pack.

*UNDERSTANDING* he asked of them. Hiccup and Toothless understood very well. They thanked him; he breathed frost over them like a frozen benediction, and raised his mighty head and called out to his subjects. *COME* he asked of them, and all who heard obeyed. When they had gathered, he bade them *LISTEN* and turned his piercing ice blue eyes upon his guests.

Taking a deep breath, Hiccup stepped forward and addressed the surrounding dragons. He explained that hunters from distant lands had come to attack his island, and were undoubtedly planning to attack this nest once they had finished with his. He asked if any of them would be willing to return with him and Toothless to their own nest, and help defend them and their allies.

The dragons looked at one another; their wings flexed uncertainly, they talked and bickered amongst themselves. After a bit of heated debate (literally, in some cases), many of them came forwards and agreed to come and help. Toothless purred and Hiccup smiled gratefully at them. In unison they said, *Thank you.*

They rested for a while after their long journey, but they were both eager to be back in their own territory. Toothless and Hiccup returned to Berk with at least three hundred dragons in tow, flying in neatly ordered wings of ten. It was a good number – now the Hooligans, Outcasts and Berserkers would all have another hundred dragons fighting alongside them.

They made it back to their island in the early evening, with the vibrant orange-gold glow of the sunset splashed across the horizon to the west. It was a beautiful sight, to see their home in one piece, fires burning in the sentry statues and torches alight in the village. Their dragons rose up and called out to them in greeting, welcoming their Alphas home.

The dragons landed on the grassy ledges and rough cliffs that tumbled haphazardly down the side of the mountain, the steep sides of which were dotted with cave nests. Toothless hovered above them all and looked down at the volunteers. *Welcome to Berk; our own dragons know you’re here, so don’t worry about being accused of trespassing. Not all of you will be staying here anyway* he explained.

With barely a pause, Hiccup continued *We’ll figure out who is going to which island in the morning; for now, we’ve had a long day. Settle down where you can, help yourself to the fish in the
feeding stations, and please try not to set too much alight. Our dragons all know how to put out fires, but the humans here prefer it when things don't catch fire in the first place. If you need Toothless and I, we'll be in that large wood cave at the top of the village*, here he pointed at the Great Hall, and many reptilian heads followed his finger, *from which all that loud noise is coming from.*

*What is that noise?* one dragon whistled curiously, *Are your human pack-mates fighting, or celebrating?*

*Neither; that's just dinner* Hiccup chuckled. *Will you all be okay? I don't mean to be rude and fly off, but I have to let my mate know I've come back before she sends out a search party* he explained. There was a rumble of draconic laughter, and a series of reassurances that yes, they could manage for now. So Toothless winged his way over the village to the Great Hall, the doors of which were open to let the light inside spill out onto the stone steps.

There were a few drunken Vikings already sprawled out on the steps, in various states of inebriation. Hiccup and Toothless ignored them. Walking into the Great Hall subtly was near impossible with a Night Fury at his side and every dragon there trying to greet them all at once. Hiccup didn't particularly care. He weaved his way through the crowd, which drew apart – actually, the dragons tugged the Vikings out of his path, much to their chagrin – until he could see his wife and daughter.

“Daddy!” Helena squealed when she spotted him, wriggling on her mother’s hip until Astrid could put her down. Hiccup grinned and ran forwards to scoop her up off the stone floor. “Hey, sweetheart! Oh, I missed you so much” he said, hugging her tight. Helena happily nuzzled her cheek against his, thrumming the purring noise she’d learned to make as an infant by trying to copy the dragons she’d grown up with.

Hiccup kissed her on the forehead and set her down again so Toothless could nuzzle her, and he could greet Astrid. “Welcome home” she murmured as they came apart from a kiss, before immediately pulling him into another. They both ignored the sounds of certain immature people making exaggerated gagging noises in the background.

“Have you guys been okay?” he asked her.

“For the most part. There was another attack - don't worry, they didn't get any of the dragons” she reassured him hastily. “It was weird. Just a few ships – they came, chucked a few flaming boulders at us, one of them brought down a couple of the dragons, but we captured that ship. We drove them off pretty quickly…it's like they weren't even trying.”

That was unusual, and a little suspicious. However, they decided to be glad of the reprieve. If anything, the hunters were probably just trying to test what the Hooligans would do.

After grabbing a bite to eat before all the food was gone, Hiccup went up on the dais to address all the Vikings. He straightened his back, cleared his throat, and motioned for Toothless to roar. That got everyone’s attention, leaving his voice free announce, “Yes, uh, hello everyone. We’re back – obviously – but err, we didn't exactly come back alone.

“As I'm sure you remember” - he actually doubted they remembered, which was why he was bringing it up. “The chief asked Toothless and I to fly out to the Ice Nest – y’know, the giant ice covered mountain in the north where we first fought Drago’s army – and ask the dragons there if they'd come and help us fight the army now. Not all of them came, but about three hundred did, give or take. That means we, the Outcasts and the Berserkers are all gonna have a hundred new dragons fighting alongside.
“But I need you all to keep in mind – this is really important, pay attention, Tuffnut – these are wild dragons. And that doesn't just mean they don't have riders – even our dragons that don't have riding partners are still ‘tame’, for lack of a better word” he said, making air quotes with his fingers.

“They're all familiar with us, with humans, by now. These, uh…volunteers, they don't mean us any harm, obviously, but they won't really know how to deal with humans.

“Which means” he raised his voice over the growing clamour of dissatisfaction rippling through the crowd, “That you can't just march up to them and give them a friendly slap on the side or shove them the way you can with our dragons. You'll either startle them, or they'll push right back, and someone could get hurt. And yes”, he called in exasperation above the protests, “I did warn them all to be careful with you, Toothless and I will handle any problems, but I just wanted to warn you guys in advance. It's gonna be a little more crowded around here with a hundred extra dragons, and I don't know how long they'll be staying, so for now just…try to cut our, uh, guests a bit of slack.”

The muttering continued, and then someone called out, “Did that giant dragon come back with you?”

“No, the uh, the King couldn’t – I mean, he didn't, um…” Hiccup faltered; he knew why he had been reluctant to ask the King to come, but he hadn't figured out how to sell it to the rest of his village. “He couldn't come” he burst out, “He wanted to, but he couldn't because, uh, he had to stay and defend his own nest.”

The discontented mutters rose in volume as everyone started to protest. Astrid began to push her way forward to the front of the crowd, but as she did so, Toothless said *Just tell them what you told yourself*. Then he fired a small blast of fire above their heads, swiftly and effectively shutting them all up (but for a few manly screams as they ducked from the bright, hot burst).

Now they were staring at Hiccup, and looking none too happy. He cleared his throat and hastily said, “Err…sorry about that.” Toothless snorted dismissively; he wasn't sorry at all. “Okay, look. You're right. The King could help us, and he said he would, if we really needed him - but do we? I mean, come on, we’re Vikings! Do you want other tribes, or really anyone, to say that when the going got tough, we just asked someone stronger to come along and fix it all for us?”

The murmurs resumed, but this time he picked out thoughtful “He's got a point”, and “Just imagine what they'd think.”

“Sure, it’s useful having a giant ice spitting dragon on our side; but we didn't need the King back when Alvin and Dagur were still our enemies. My friends and I didn't need the King when we took down Viggo Grimborn and his dragon hunters…”

“That's cos we didn't know about him then!”

Hiccup bit back an exasperated groan. “I know, Tuff, that's not the – okay, the point is, we wouldn't have needed him. We handled it all fine on our own! If this army had its own Bewilderbeast with it – and I really doubt that, because if they did they would have used him to, y’know, ice our island – then I would want the King to be here. Right now, though, he’s just sort of overkill.”

Hiccup prayed that the King would never find out what he was saying about the mighty creature...although, given how long the King had lived and how much wisdom he must have accrued, he might have already suspected he would be overkill in this battle. The Hooligans were muttering and nodding, and seemed to be coming around. If anything could convince them, it was appealing to their pride.

“We can do this. It's just like Astrid said – our tribe stuck it out on Berk, in the face of dragon raids, for three hundred years. If we can face that, we can stand up to these hunters – and I'm pretty sure
that this war is not going to last another three hundred years” he declared. There were some scattered chuckles.

Astrid took the opportunity to come up on the dais beside him and declare, “Hiccup’s right. We defeated this army before, and I swear by Odin, we are going to defeat them again. For Berk!” she cried, punching her fist in the air, and the crowd followed her lead, cheering.

“For freedom!” Hiccup yelled, igniting his dragon blade and holding it aloft. The villagers cheered louder and raised their own weapons, or tankards, or whatever happened to be in their hands (in one case, a rather disgruntled Terror).

“Alright! That's enough of that. Go back to your meals, everyone – and remember what Hiccup said about being careful around the newcomer dragons!” Astrid warned them.

There was a chorus of “Yes, Chief!” Then the people of Berk returned to the far more important business of feasting on pork and trying to drink more ale and mead than the person next to them. Hiccup had a short conversation with his mother about anything that had happened with the dragons whilst he and Toothless were gone. She assured him that everything was fine, and that some of the rescued dragons had asked if it would be alright for them to stay on Berk.

“As new pack members?” Hiccup clarified, and Valka nodded, smiling. “Yeah, that's fine. You're okay with that, right, Toothless?”

*Of course. By the way, I think Helena is tired* he said, looking over his shoulder at his niece, who was sprawled out on his saddle with her eyes closed, and all but fast asleep. Hiccup chuckled and lifted her up into his arms, saying to Astrid “I’ll put her to bed.”

“No, no, I'm coming home too” she said, because by now everyone was drifting out of the doors and heading back to their own houses. Hiccup and Astrid walked home, their dragons padding patiently behind them, and Helena cradled in her father's arms. They put her to bed, and then went to bed themselves.

The next morning, after their usual patrol of the island, Hiccup and Toothless went to the training ring. Lyse and the other rescues had been sleeping in the pens there, until room could be found for them in the stables or the mountain. They were already awake, and Valka had arranged for fish to be delivered to them in the morning. Apparently there had almost been an incident when one of them tried to hunt the sheep, but Lake&Weed had turned the Spike-Tail away and explained that the fluffy white prey was for the humans to eat (and for the dragons to sometimes play with, but carefully).

There weren't many of the rescues there; most of them had already gotten their bearings from the stars and descriptions from the local dragons of nearby islands. They had already headed away from Berk to return to their own territories and Nests. However, about ten or so had taken a liking to Berk, and been curious about how dragons could live alongside humans when the two species were so vastly different. They pledged to Toothless-Hiccup as their new Alphas, and were welcomed into the pack. There was even a chance some of them might become partners for the students of the dragon academy, several of whom were nearly old enough to ride a dragon properly.

After that, they led a hundred of the newcomer dragons to Outcast Island, and took the opportunity to check in with Liekki and the other dragons living there. In a way, the dragons living on the three islands of their territory had formed their own ‘tribes’. The dragons of Berk were playful and not as careless as they once had been. The dragons of Outcast Island were rough as the bleak and barren island they called home. Those living on Dragon Island were…not hostile, but they were wary, and the only human they really trusted was Hiccup.
Another hundred of the volunteers were led by Heather and Windshear back to Berserker Island. Although her brother was the Chief of their tribe, and she his second-in-command, her Razorwhip was the Queen of their islands dragons. The former Queen had attacked them once, trying to drive Windshear out of her territory. Instead, Windshear had defeated her in a challenge to protect Heather, and being such a powerful, exotic dragon, soon earned the respect of the suddenly leaderless pack.

A couple of weeks after all the newcomers had been led to their temporary new homes (they could, of course, fly back to their own Nest whenever they wished), the army (or at least, some of the army) attacked Berk again. This time, the ships that captured dragons were captured themselves, and once the fleet was finally driven back, the Berkians had five new vessels in their possession – six, if one counted the ship that had been captured about a week ago.

Much to her people’s delight, Astrid declared the ships spoils of war, and ordered them looted. They were promptly stripped of anything valuable that wasn't nailed down, and searched deck to bilges for anything that might provide a clue as to the army’s tactics or their commanders. Alas, there was not much in the way of information on board these ships…there was, however, a great deal of fish. The fish was packed in salt filled barrels, presumably to stop it from rotting on long voyages. It must have been meant to feed captured dragons with.

Since they were packed with salt, it was impossible that the fish had any grimora mixed in. There was enough fish to fill up every feeding station, and the dragons feasted well that night. Not all of them ate the saltier-than-usual fish; the Boulder Class dragons for one. Toothless had one mouthful, immediately decided it was too salty, and spat it out again. *That’s disgusting!* he complained, trying to clean his tongue.

They knew something was wrong the very next morning. So many of the dragons began sneezing, setting unintentional small fires all over the place. Their flight became erratic and weak, as they struggled to keep themselves up in the air. All the signs were there, but their riders could hardly believe it. “It doesn’t make any sense” Fishlegs said at the council meeting Astrid called, “There isn't any blue oleander on Berk! There couldn't be!”

“But the dragons are showing all the signs of oleander poisoning” Astrid pointed out, “and they couldn't have just gotten sick out of nowhere. We need to scour the island and dig up any oleander we”-

"The flowers aren't on the island” Hiccup interrupted, spreading out his map of the Archipelago on the table. He traced his finger across it and frowned. Astrid, seeing his frustrated expression, said “Talk to us.”

He showed her the map. “We know the fleet that's been attacking Berk has a base on the Isle of Frigga, but the fleet that's been attacking Outcast Island is only a few hours away from Botany Blight” he explained, stabbing his finger onto the innocuous little drawing of a blue island. It was covered in oleander flowers, with only a few clear patches of grass where a dragon could safely land.

“But how did they get the oleander to Berk?”

“In the fish – all of it we looted from those ships. They must have covered it in oleander pollen, knowing we’d feed it to our dragons.”

“Wait…but we ate some of that fish” said Ruffnut, gesturing between herself and her brother. “Are we gonna die? Quick, somebody check my pulse!”

“I'll do it” Snotlout volunteered immediately. Ruffnut snatched her wrist away.
“It's only poisonous to reptiles, you two” Fishlegs reminded them with a long suffering sigh.

“How do you know we're not reptiles?” Tuffnut asked randomly, “For all you know, we could be snake people”. He hissed.

“Wouldn't the dragons have noticed if their food was, y'know, poisoned? They should've smelled it, at least” Snotlout pointed out.

Fishlegs suggested, “Maybe the salt covered up the scent?”

“But the Tracker Class dragons should have been able to smell it even through the salt” Astrid frowned. She was worried for Stormfly, who had fallen sick. Suddenly, a horrible thought occurred to her, and she looked up at her husband with an alarmed expression. “Hiccup, are you and Toothless…?”

“He didn't eat it” Hiccup said quickly, “It was too salty. He spat it out.”

“But he still had some of the fish in his mouth” Fishlegs said ominously.

At that moment, the doors to the hall were pushed aside as Toothless himself shouldered his way in. He bounded over to the table and announced "The dragons on Outcast Island are sick too*.

Hiccup relayed Toothless’ message for the benefit of the four that couldn't understand the dragon, and then said to Toothless, “The fish we got from those captured ships, it was poisoned with oleander pollen.” Toothless’ pupils narrowed, and his ear flaps went back in alarm. He'd almost devoured some of that foul stuff!

“How did they know which ships we were gonna steal?” Tuffnut asked.

“They didn't. That ‘hit and run’ attack, that was them testing our battle tactics. Once they knew we were going to capture the ships that caught our dragons, only the ships with the poisoned fish on board would try to capture dragons. The rest of the ships were just a distraction” Hiccup explained. He dragged his fingers through his hair and pulled at it in frustration. “I should've realised!”

“Hiccup, none of us could have known” Astrid said straightaway, not about to let him go on a self-deprecating spree. “The important thing is that we get the cure. We need to”-

At that moment, Toothless sneezed. It scorched the stone floor.

“Gesundheit” said Tuffnut.

“Uh oh…sneezing is the first symptom” Fishlegs said worriedly.

Hiccup tried to say something…but then he sneezed as well. There followed an awkward, worried silence as they all looked at one another in alarm. Hiccup swallowed. “This…isn't good.”

The heart bind meant that Toothless was less affected, but it also meant Hiccup’s energy would be drained to keep Toothless fit. Their first priority had to be to find a Scauldron, or better yet several, and recover some of the much needed venom that would act as an antidote to the oleander poisoning.

As soon as they realised they were sick, the dragons threw up the tainted fish, but the damage was already done. It was obvious that Berk would be a prime target with their dragons in such a weakened state; Stoick and Astrid began preparing a land based battle plan to defend the island, especially the children and elderly, the fledglings and the sick dragons in their stables.
Hiccup and Toothless set out as soon as they could to find the Scauldrons – they could use their Alpha status to convince the water dragons to help them, or so Hiccup hoped. It was difficult, dealing with water dragons. They had little contact with the dragons of the air, had their own customs and territorial boundaries…Scauldrons in particular were aggressive and, in Toothless’ opinion, not very helpful.

But they needed to be.

Not all the dragons were sick; before they left to retrieve the cure, the Alphas had tasked the healthy ones to fly out and see if the fleet was approaching. It was clear that with the hunters would soon return to finish what they'd started. Astrid was anxious; Stormfly had eaten some of the poisoned fish, so she had to fly her dragons mate into battle instead. “Don't worry, girl” she reassured the poor Spike-Tail, “I'm not gonna let them get you. Hiccup will be back soon with the cure, you just save your strength.”

*Don’t worry about Astrid; I'll protect her* Stormfly’s mate promised. It was very important to do so, because Astrid was not only dear to his mate, but also Alpha-Hiccup. She was his mate, and the mother of their offspring. He hadn't flown a human, not like Stormfly did, he hadn't found his partner yet. He would still do his best not to let her, Astrid or Alpha-Hiccup down.

It wasn’t long before the horn was blown – three long blasts, the warning for intruders. The alarm calls from the dragons rushing back to Berk was a huge giveaway as well. Astrid mounted up and flew out to face the enemy ships. So many of their dragons were incapacitated, but hopefully there would be enough to…oh no. The fleet approaching Berk was twice as large as the one that had attacked them three times now. Astrid spotted the insignia of the ships that had been attacking Outcast Island. They had joined forces, and there wasn't time to call on their allies for aid!

They had sent word to Dagur – if their dragons had not been poisoned, to fly with all haste to Berk and help them. They hadn't arrived, and Astrid feared they never would. Inwardly she cursed and kicked herself – how could she have let Hiccup leave?! He and Toothless were their best defence, and surely someone else – like Valka – could have found the Scauldrons and retrieved the cure!

The Hooligans, both those on unfamiliar dragon steeds and those in the longboats defending the harbour, defended the island as best as they could – yet in doing so, they fell for yet another one of the hunters traps. For whilst the main fleet engaged the Berkians in fierce battle, a smaller force dropped anchor off of Berk’s northern coast, and rowed to the island. They had been lying in wait, but all the dragons had kept their attention on the south, where the ships normally came from, and so had missed the ones lurking amongst the sea stacks.

These warriors didn’t run into the fray screaming battle cries; the first the Vikings knew of their attack was when darts whistled through the air and struck many of their brothers in arms down where they stood. Once they realised what was happening, of course, fierce war screams rose in their own throats as they rushed to defend their dragons and their home against these cowards!

The horn was blown once more – even out at sea, Astrid heard it, and yelled at the top of her lungs, “Fall back! Back to Berk!”

The battle raged on.

“You good for nothing lowlifes want my dragon? Then you're gonna have to go through me!”

Clashing swords, swinging hatchets.
“Is that all ya got?”

Enemies on every side.

“Look out!”

Death lurking in every corner.

“NO!”

Echoing shrieks and screams.

“Argh! I'm gonna kill you!”

Blood running in scarlet rivers across the ground.

“No, no, no, no! Dad? Dad! Come on, stay with me – help! Someone help!”

“…Can't…be helped…”

“Don't you dare say that old man. Jorgensons don't give up!”

“Until…their dying…breaths. Listen, boy…”

“These aren't your last words. They can't be!”

“Listen. I'm off…t' Valhalla. Tell yer mother…goodbye from me, an' tell Stoick...it's been an honour…”

“I will, dad, I promise. I'll make you proud.”

“…Already…am…”

“Dad!”

Toothless and Hiccup knew something was wrong as soon as Berk came into view – there were fires burning, and they were not just torches. The Night Fury flew faster, aiming like an arrow right for the town square. As they approached, dragons cried out to them, and humans too, angry and grieving. They landed in the square and were immediately surrounded on all sides by desperate or even accusing stares. Astrid sprinted up to them, her hair and clothes dishevelled, blood dribbling freely from a cut on her cheek.

“Hiccup!” she exclaimed, almost the same time as he cried “Astrid!”

“Please tell me you have the cure!” she begged, clutching at his arm, her other hand gripping the handle of her axe.

“A pod of Scauldrons agreed to help us and followed us back” Hiccup assured her. He looked around, spotted a Thunderdrum who had come from Dragon Island and swiftly ordered, “Depra, go and make sure the Scauldrons are still there and guide them into the harbour.”

The Bellower hesitated. *Now!* Toothless snarled at them, and they took off, the gust from their ray like wings sending eddies of dust swirling around everyone's ankles. Hiccup looked at his wife once more and begged “Please tell me Helena is okay.”
“Yes, but your mom’s injured” –

“What?!"

“They tricked us - more of them snuck onto the island and and climbed up to the village whilst we were fighting off twice as many ships. Then the rest of them stormed us when we fell back to defend the island. They captured some of the dragons, Hiccup, and people have died” Astrid revealed. She was only telling him what she felt he needed to know, but Hiccup felt a stab of guilt like ice in his heart. *You should have been here*, he heard the unspoken words.

He wanted so badly to go to his mother’s side, see for himself that she was still alive and breathing. He couldn't. He and Toothless went down to the harbour and brought the Scauldrons to the pier, so their venom could be harvested for the cure to the oleander poisoning. He helped distribute it to all of the dragons. To his great distress, a few of the dragons had already died from the illness. He could barely look the ones who had survived in the eye.

In the end it was hard for him to go to the triage in the Great Hall. Seeing the injured people he’d failed only made the thorns of shame and guilt constrict even tighter around his chest. His mother wasn't hard to find, given that his father was kneeling by her side. Helena was there too, holding her grandmother’s hand. Hiccup picked his way to their side and held his mother's other hand. She was unconscious, with bloody bandages wrapped around her stomach.

“I'm sorry, mom” he murmured. It was so inadequate, but what else could he say? Helena shuffled to his side; he pulled her into his arms and held her close. What sort of a father was he, to abandon his little girl when she needed him?

“It's not your fault, son” Stoick told him gently. His father’s arm was also bandaged, as was his temple.

"I should have been here" Hiccup replied, unable to take his eyes off his mother’s pale face. “I should have asked mom to find the Scauldrons. She could have done it, she's so good with dragons – then she wouldn't be injured and….” He couldn't bring himself to say it.

“Where’s Uncle Toothless?” asked Helena.

“He’s talking to the other dragons” Hiccup told her. Toothless was apologising on his behalf, and he was being selfish, but he had to see his mother. Well, he'd seen her, so it was time to take responsibility.

He disengaged Helena’s arms from his neck and handed her to his father, before getting to his feet and leaving the Hall. When he emerged outside, he'd only gotten down a few steps when a figure stepped out of the shadows and sent him flying. Sprawled out on the stone after falling down the steps, he reached for his blade, only to find Snotlout standing over him, fists clenched.

“Snotlout?! What was that for?” he demanded, struggling to his feet and wincing.

“Oh, I'm sorry your highness, did I hurt you?”

“What are you – is that blood?” Hiccup asked, alarmed, noticing his torso, “You're hurt, you need to”-

“It's not mine. It's my dad’s and the bastard who killed him.”

“Your dad? Oh, gods – Snotlout, I'm so”-
“Save it! Your apologies won't bring my dad back. If it weren't for you he'd still be alive!”

“What – Snotlout, I'm sorry. I really am, I should have been here, I know that; but I never wanted this, I didn't want these hunters to attack us”-

“You didn't want us to have help, either! I said right from the start that we could wipe our enemies off of Midgard, but no. You don’t want to ask one of the most powerful dragons there is to come and help us crush that wretched lot, and nobody bats an eyelid because the great Hiccup Haddock is always right!”

“Snotlout, you're not thinking straight”-

“Yes, I am!” he shouted, “I'm thinking you're still the same useless screw-up you've always been. I'm gonna avenge my dad and fix your mistake, and I'm gonna save us all!” Snotlout turned on his heel and stormed away to where Hookfang was crouched nearby.

“You can't go off on your own-!”

“I'm not on my own, I have Hookfang” he retorted, swinging himself into the saddle. “Come on, Hooky.” The Fire-Scale hesitated, eyeing Hiccup, torn between obeying his rider and his Alpha. “Come on, Hookfang!” Snotlout screamed at him.

“You can't just leave – we need you, and what about your mother?”

Snotlout wavered a bit, but then he shook his head. “Mom'll be fine. Hookfang, I swear, if you don't take off right now” –

“Just go” Hiccup prompted, “And Hookfang? Take care of him. That's an order.” The Fire-Scale dipped his long muzzle in a nod, before rearing back and taking off. Hiccup watched them wheel through the sky and head north. Then he heard the scratch of claws against stone and a worried yelp of *Hiccup!*

Toothless bounded up the hill, beating his wings to boost himself, and came to his brother's side. *What happened?* he asked. He'd felt Hiccup’s pain from all the way down at the harbour, and ran up through the village as fast as he could.

Hiccup tore his gaze away from the sky, sighed, and said “C'mon. There's something I need to do.”
Hiccup and Toothless made their way to the stables, which were full of dragons recovering from the poisoning. Hiccup picked his way through the stables until he reached a Spike-Tail who had been Spitelout’s dragon partner.

*Kingstail? Are you okay?* Hiccup asked uncertainly.

The Spike-Tail, who was preening, looked at Hiccup and replied, *I’ve been better, but I think I’ve recovered. Have you seen my rider?* he asked, tilting his head curiously and whistling hopefully.

Hiccup winced.

*I…I’m sorry. Spitelout…* He took a deep breath to steel himself, *I’m afraid he’s dead.*

The Nadder’s spines drooped sadly. *I sort of suspected…but thank you for telling me, Alpha-Hiccup.*

*I don't deserve that title* Hiccup cringed inside. He hesitantly reached out, all of the confidence he normally displayed when interacting with the dragons gone from his body. Kingstail stretched his neck forward and pressed his scaly snout against Hiccup’s calloused hand, and the man looked relieved. *Kingstail…I hate having to ask this, now of all times, but I…I need a favour.*

*What is it?*

*Snotlout – Spitelout’s son – he and Hookfang have left Berk. They went north. Do you think you can catch up and go with them? Don't make him come back, not just yet, but help Hookfang keep an eye on him, please* Hiccup explained.

Kingstail stretched his wings and shook himself. *I can do that* he agreed, following the Alphas out of the stables. Once he was on his way, Hiccup directed Toothless back towards the village. Now for the second, and most difficult thing he had to do.

“Mrs Jorgenson?” Hiccup said uncertainly, hovering outside the circle of commiserating women surrounding their widowed friend. “I just wanted to say I'm so sorry. I wish…” he trailed off, for what could he say? Nothing would make this right.

The former Mrs Jorgenson gathered herself and looked Hiccup right in the eye. “My husband died in battle, defending our son, and when we give him his send-off he will dine with the gods in Valhalla. I couldn’t ask for more” she declared. Then she paused, as if remembering something, and added, “Though I did mean to ask you something.”

“Yes?”

“Where is Snotlout? He told me he was going to talk to you, but he hasn't been back since. You have seen him, haven't you?”

Hiccup tried not to cringe. “Yes, I've seen him…he went for a flight.”

“Where?”

“Uh, I don't…it's okay. I asked Kingstail to follow them – he and Hookfang will keep an eye on Snotlout” Hiccup tried to reassure her, but it backfired.
Mrs Jorgenson stared at him incredulously and demanded “Are you telling me he's gone? He's left Berk?”

“I…I'm sure he just needs some space…”

“And you let him leave? His father died to defend him and you just let him fly off to Thor knows where?”

Hiccup floundered. “I – he was upset. I couldn't make him stay, he wouldn't have listened, and I'm sure he'll be back. He went north, he's not going near the hunters” –

“The hunters who killed Spitelout came from the north!” Snotlout’s mother shouted hysterically. “First you fly off, then you let my only son fly off - it's a good thing you're not the Chief, because Stoick would never have been so selfish!”

That hurt, and he stumbled backwards in shock. “I'm sorry” he said again, helplessly, hurrying to mount up and fly away. *Coward* his mind whispered viciously. *Selfish coward!*

*Stop that right now* Toothless chided as they banked and glided down towards the coast. *Snotlout and his mother are grieving. They don't mean what they're saying, they're just lashing out because they're hurt. Like dragons.*

*It’s a good thing they aren't dragons, or I'd have been roasted. Toothless, what are we going to do?* *

*One thing at a time* the dragon replied, landing at the edge of the lowest cliff overlooking the ocean. From there they could see the docks, where the funeral ships were being prepared. Toothless let out a low, reverberating roar towards the water. They waited, and then the waves parted, and three blue green scaly heads raised out of it and looked up at them questioningly.

Hiccup dismounted and stood at the edge of the cliff so as to see the Scauldrons better, and vice versa. *Thank you for* - he began.

“Scauldy!” A familiar, slightly nasally female voice cried from somewhere above him. Barf&Belch had perched on the next outcrop up, and Ruffnut was hanging onto Barf’s horn as she all but fell out of the saddle to grin at the centre Scauldron. “It's me, Ruffnut! You remember? We saved you from Changewings and splinted your wing!”

The Scauldron stared at her, reared up further to sniff at her dangling braids, and gurgled. Ruffnut looked at Hiccup upside down, her legs hooked around Barf’s thin neck, and demanded “Does he remember me or what?”

“Uh, yes; that's why they came, actually. He recognised me. He does remember you…um…he called you Fishhair” Hiccup admitted. The twins were immune to the concept of embarrassment, and immediately decided that this was a perfectly acceptable nickname.

“My name’s Ruffnut, but I like the name Fishhair. I might call me and Eret’s future child that. What's your name?”

*My real name is Sagugulugulargulam* the Scauldron replied – his name sounded like someone trying to speak and gargle water at the same time. *Sagu for short* he added after a pause. He looked at the Scauldron on his right and said, *This is Ablo*, then the Scauldron on his left, *And this is Calas.*

Hiccup made the introductions, glad that he wouldn't have to try and pronounce Sagu’s bewildering
full name. Then he asked the twins, “How come you guys are down here?”

“Oh, we were just passing by” Ruffnut shrugged. Her brother added “We offered to help with the funeral preparations, but they said no. Something about not wanting us to set the ships on fire before they were sent off…”

Hiccup remembered himself, and felt another needle of guilt stab his heart. “Did you…did you two lose anyone? You're not hurt, are you?”

“Nah – we got lucky. And those hunters got Loki’d!” Ruffnut grinned, “You shoulda seen it – we were tripping 'em and sending 'em in circles and chucking bombs at their ships to make ‘em go kaboom!” She mimed an explosion with her hands.

"I'm sorry” Hiccup apologised, “I should have been here to help.”

“Well, someone had to get Scauldy – sorry, I mean Sagu – and his friends to come here. Otherwise all the dragons would stay sick and die, and then we'd really be in trouble. Don't beat yourself up.”

Tuffnut said “Heck, we screw up all the time, and nobody cares.” This wasn't strictly true, but that wasn't the point. “Do you want us to do something really outrageous, so everyone focuses on that and not you?” he offered.

Hiccup was genuinely touched. “No, thanks…but there is something you can do for me, if it's alright.”

“Shoot.”

“Tell everyone where you're going first, and then lead the Scauldrons to Outcast Island. The dragons there need the cure as well. I'd go myself, but…”

“We get it. You can count on us!” Ruffnut saluted.

*Can we leave after that?* Calas questioned a bit bluntly.

*No – we need you* Toothless insisted, *Those hunters aren't going to stop using oleander, and we're bound to need the cure again.*

*Please; we'd really appreciate your help* Hiccup pleaded. Sagu promised they'd think about it – which was a start, at the very least.

They held the funerals that night. Hiccup stood solemnly at Astrid’s shoulder, as she made speeches honouring the dead, and fired flaming arrows into the ships upon which the bodies, both human and dragon, lay. Some of the dragons of the Outcasts had resisted the poison long enough for the cure to be administered, but the fact that any of his subjects had died tore at Hiccup’s heart.

The people of Berk were angry and frightened – they wanted to take up arms, demanded justice, they were baying for blood. Stoick tended to his wife and her parents kept an eye on Helena, leaving Astrid and Hiccup to deal with the mob of Hooligans that filled the Great Hall. Gobber, who was nursing a sprained knee, shouted himself hoarse trying to get them all to shut up long enough for Astrid to speak.

She did her best to rally them, telling them that this wasn’t the end, they could still pull together and fight. She would draw up a battle plan, to recapture the Isle of Frigga and prevent the hunters from using grimora or oleander, and rescue the dragons they’d caught. She reassured them that every
person and/or dragon who had left the island (Snotlout was not the only one) would return once they’d had a chance to calm down and think things over.

“When are you gonna get the Bewilderbeast to come here?!”

“Yeah! And the Night Furies!”

“You said we wouldn't need them!” someone pointed accusingly at Hiccup, “And now look what's happened!”

“If we had them here to begin with, no one might have died!”

“Where are they?!”

Astrid looked at Hiccup helplessly. He gulped and tried to explain, “Even if they did come, they couldn't stay here. They couldn't always protect us, we need to be able to protect ourselves!”

“How can we do that when they can kill our dragons?” a different person demanded.

“If we’d had another Night Fury here, it wouldn't have mattered that you abandoned us last night!”

Hiccup flinched. Furious, Astrid singled out the speaker and declared in a cold voice, “He did not abandon us. He was trying to save our dragons. If you want to blame anyone, blame me for ordering him to go instead of someone else.”

“No, Astrid, it is my fault. I know I let all of you down. A minute doesn't go by that I don't hate myself for this…please”, he begged, “Please just give me a chance to make it up to you.”

The villagers looked at each other and muttered, but they'd grown tied of shouting. An uneasy peace was restored, finally, but things would clearly take a long time to settle down.

With Snotlout gone, his usual duties as Astrid’s second in command and Gobber’s apprentice fell to Hiccup instead. Fortunately, he remembered enough from his days of chieftain training to take on some of Astrid's burden. He was, of course, already perfectly familiar with the forge.

The bad news was that between helping Astrid and Gobber, he didn't have time to perform his duties as Alpha. It meant that Toothless had to wear his auto-tail. It meant they barely got a chance to fly together, because Hiccup was working himself to the bone trying to make up for his mistake. It meant their hearts were breaking.

Astrid held another war council. Their main priorities were forming a battle plan to drive the hunters from the Isle of Frigga, and finding a way to stop them from using the blue oleander. Sagu had decided to stay and help, at least until the hunters had been driven away for good, but it would be better to not need the antidote at all. “We’ll burn the island” the Chief declared, “They can't harvest the pollen then.”

"But the flowers are bound to grow back – and the ash will probably make them grow back even more” Fishlegs pointed out.

“Fishlegs is right” said Hiccup, “We need to destroy the entire island, not just the flowers.”

“And do you have any idea how we’re supposed to do that?”

“As a matter of fact” –
“It's obvious, isn't it?” a familiar voice interrupted. Every pair of eyes turned towards the end of the table, where Snotlout was standing, looking somewhat dishevelled. He was glaring, mostly at Hiccup.

“You came back” Astrid observed.

“Didn't have much choice, did I?” he scoffed. “I was going to get the Bewilderbeast to come down here and help us, but I barely get anywhere near his ice nest when my dad’s dragon goes and plucks me right out of the saddle. Thanks for that, by the way, setting one of your 'loyal subjects' to tail us” he said sarcastically to Hiccup.

Hiccup frowned. “I asked Kingstail to keep an eye on you, to keep you safe. He wasn't supposed to make you come back before you were ready; I'll talk to him, I'm sure it was just a misunderstanding.”

“It always is, isn't it?”

“…What's that supposed to mean?”

“It doesn't matter” Astrid interrupted, “The important thing is that you're back safe. Your mother's been worried sick.”

For the first time, Snotlout seemed to falter. “I'll make it up to her” he defended, “But you can't blame me for wanting to actually do something, since the Dragon Master himself can't be bothered.”

He'd given the other man leeway before, in light of his father’s death, but now Hiccup was growing annoyed. “What exactly was your plan, Snotlout? Were you just going to march up to the King of all dragons and demand that he come here and fix all our problems for us? If that's the case, then maybe it's for the best that Kingstail brought you back.”

“I was gonna be polite about it.”

“Alright, then let me ask you this” Hiccup challenged, “How were you going to hear his reply? You can't understand thought-speak!”

Snotlout opened his mouth to make a retort, but hesitated. “You didn't think this plan of yours through, did you? You just flew off, thinking you had everything figured out” –

“I do! More than you, that's for sure. I'm the one who wants us to get the help we need, to avenge everyone those bastards have killed. You're the one who keeps refusing to do what it takes to win this war.”

“It isn’t my place to make demands of the King. I can't ask him to risk himself for our sake – if the hunters found a way to bring him down” –

“Like that could ever happen. We all know that Bewilderbeast could destroy all of the hunters in one go and then swim off home, so what’s your fucking problem?”

“My problem? Snotlout, if seeing we had a Bewilderbeast on our side the last time didn't faze these hunters, there's no reason they won't just keep coming back unless we defeat them ourselves” -

“The only reason they're even here is because of you!” Snotlout shouted back, “Because you were so soft-hearted, you let our enemies sail away and told them they could come back at any time. That you'd show them how to be all chummy with dragons – oh, they came back alright, but I somehow don't think they came for a friendly chat!”
Keeping a straight face, so as not to show how much Snotlout was getting to him, Hiccup demanded, “You think I don’t know that? If these hunters are here because of me, then I will defeat them, but I have a responsibility to my pack, and the packs we are allied with.”

“Face it, Hiccup. You're just finally showing your true self after all these years. As a selfish, cowardly traitor” Snotlout sneered at him.

Everyone gasped. Furious, Hiccup strode right up to the other man and retorted, “I am not a traitor!”

“Not yet, you're not.”

“Are you kidding me? Snotlout, when have I ever acted like I might betray us? I care about Berk, I care about everyone living on Berk, and whether you like it or not, that includes you!”

“Oh, really? Well, then let me ask you this” Snotlout repeated his earlier words mockingly, “If you had to choose between your precious dragons and the people of Berk, who would it be?”

That was a low blow. “How...why would I have to choose? The dragons are part of our tribe, we’re all in this together. How can you even ask me something like that?”

“Seems like a fair question, given you gave up being Chief to take care of all the poor dragons. So, go on then. Your tribe or your dragons, who would it be?” Snotlout pressed, stepping into Hiccup’s personal space.

Fishlegs tried to protest, but Hiccup held up a hand to stop him. “I don't have to play your game” he told his...he told Snotlout calmly, “but if you're so desperate for an answer, I'd do everything I could to protect our tribe and our dragons.”

“Liar” the other man spat, “You’d betray us all for one dragon. Him” Snotlout challenged, pointing at Toothless, who had risen to his paws and was watching the exchange with wary eyes. “You go on and on about bringing peace between humans and dragons, and you can kid yourself all you want, but one day you're gonna have to choose. And sure, you might be able to bring yourself to sacrifice the other dragons, but if someone so much as scratched Toothless, you'd cave.”

Hiccup’s fists clenched. Toothless tensed. “Do you really think I'm so weak minded?”

“Hey, we can always test it”. Snotlout’s hand fell on the hilt of his sword – then he staggered backwards after Hiccup’s fist connected with his jaw. He'd forgotten that despite being slim and unprepossessing, Hiccup was actually a lot stronger than he looked. Now Hiccup was glaring at him, furious, flaming sword ablaze, standing protectively between Snotlout and his defensively growling Night Fury. Everyone else was on their feet as well.

“Enough!” Astrid shouted, “Hiccup is not a traitor, Snotlout. Now stop antagonising him and get out before I make you. As of this moment, you are suspended from this council until further notice” she ordered.

Snotlout was brash, but he wasn't stupid – not as much as it seemed sometimes, at least. He knew he was outnumbered. He stormed out of the hall, slamming the heavy door behind him. The hinges were creaky and the door only shut properly when pushed from inside, so the effect was lost somewhat. Hiccup retracted Inferno back into its hilt, glaring at where his friend...former friend had been.

Gradually, everyone except Hiccup returned to their seats. “If we’re not going to have any other interruptions” Astrid huffed, brushing her hair out of her eyes, “Hiccup, you were telling us about your plan to deal with the oleander situation. Hiccup!”
Her husband started out of his reverie. “Sorry. Yes. We need to destroy the oleander. It would take too long, even with our dragons – we need a dragon that we know is capable of destroying islands, that can destroy the island without having to touch the oleander, and that doesn't have a pack to lead or anything else to risk” he explained cryptically.

Everyone stared at him in bewilderment – except for the twins, who wore expressions of glee. “Ooh, ooh! Can we say it, Hiccup? Please!” Ruffnut begged, practically bouncing in her seat, braids flying.

He decided to indulge them. “Go ahead.”

“On the count of three, sister – you ready? One, two, three…

“SCREAMING DEATH!”

To say that everyone was surprised would be an understatement. Now the stares were ones of disbelief. “You cannot be serious” Astrid said bluntly, giving him a look of wifely disapproval.

Suppressing the urge to gulp nervously, Hiccup gingerly answered, “Err, actually, the twins are right. The dragon we need is the Screaming Death – what other dragon do we know of who can break up entire islands?” he asked rhetorically.

Fishlegs missed the rhetorical part. “Um…”

“Apart from the Bewilderbeast, Fishlegs.”

Astrid was not impressed. “I can't believe you. We’re not exactly on good terms with the Screaming Death, Hiccup. Who's to say it won't turn on us as soon as it's finished with Botany Blight, and decide to undermine Berk? Literally. What's next, are you going to suggest we try and make a truce with the Changewings?”

“Well, that would give us more access to Changewing acid…”

She glared at him. “Not funny. How are you even planning to get the Screaming Death on our side? You haven't left the island since…well…”

“We could always send Snotlout” Hiccup shrugged, “Since he wants to do something to help destroy the hunters so badly.”

“Well, he's doomed. The Screaming Death would eat him for sure” Tuffnut declared, although he didn't sound too broken up about the prospect. His sister leaned over and said in a stage whisper, “I think that's what Hiccup wants.”

“I want nothing of the sort.”

“Uh, I'm with Astrid on this one” Fishlegs admitted hesitantly, “The Screaming Death is a big risk when we already have a really large and powerful dragon on our side. Maybe…” he hesitated and gulped, “Don't take this the wrong way, I'm not saying how he acted was right, but…maybe Snotlout sort of had a point?”

Now it was Hiccup staring at the others in disbelief. “Seriously? Do you guys really think I'd betray Berk for the sake of the dragons?”

Fishlegs cringed. Ruff and Tuff looked at each other awkwardly. Astrid declared, “We know you're not a traitor, Hiccup...look, I understand why you're reluctant to call on the King and the Night Furies for help. But as Chief, I have to put the needs of our people first – and if we had powerful
allies fighting alongside us, it would save our dragons too.”

She reached over and put a hand on his shoulder. “I'm not asking you to choose between them – but I need you to do what's best for all of us, Hiccup. The tribe *and* the pack.”

Hiccup sighed, and lowered his head in defeat. “I'll send word to the Night Furies as soon as we’re finished here…but…the only dragon I trust to go to the King is Cloud Jumper, and I don't want to ask him to leave my mom whilst she's injured” he admitted. *Selfish* his mind whispered at him, and he did his best to ignore it.

Fortunately, Astrid took pity on him. “We still need time to prepare, we can wait a couple more days. Your mom’s bound to wake up soon.”

“I hope so.”
AHiccup asked Lyse, who had come from Myrkr originally, to fly out to the Night Furies and present the request on her new Alpha’s behalf. From what Selena had told him, it would take Lyse a couple of weeks or so to fly far enough inland to reach the nest, and the same time to fly back, hopefully with one or two Night Furies alongside her.

Hiccup didn't want to have to ask Queen Phoebe to risk her subjects, after all they'd done to keep themselves safe from hunters just like the ones he was asking them to fight. Yet a small part of him hoped they would be willing, if only to pacify the villagers. Nobody had said anything to him directly, but they seemed to think he couldn’t hear the whispers behind his back, or the doubting glances.

After the…incident at the meeting, everyone had sworn (on pain of facing Astrid’s wrath) not to speak of what had transpired. Which meant that the only person who could have sown the seeds of doubt amongst the tribe of Berk was Snotlout himself.

“What is your problem?” Hiccup demanded, after cornering him outside the forge one day. “I mean, you've always had a problem with me, but why turn on me now? After everything we've been through?”

“I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“Oh, don't play games, Snotlout. I know it's you who’s been spreading rumours about me all over Berk.”

“I have not! Did it ever occur to you that maybe they figured out for themselves that your loyalties might lie somewhere else?”

“They wouldn't be thinking that unless someone had put the idea in their heads.”

“Oh, what, so you're saying the people of Berk are dumb?” Snotlout asked, just a little too loudly. People in the vicinity turned to stare.

“What? No! I didn't mean it like that” Hiccup replied hastily. He quickly changed the subject – after a fashion – and demanded “Snotlout, what if you had to choose between Berk and Hookfang? Do you think your choice would be easy?”

“Of course not; but if I did have to choose, I'd choose Berk. I'd feel terrible, and if I lost Hookfang I'd probably never ride another dragon for the rest of my life – but I know it would be the right choice, because the needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few” Snotlout declared. The watching villagers nodded and murmured about how noble he was being.

“Well, what makes you think I wouldn't choose Berk?”

“If it were Berk or Toothless? I'm not an idiot, Hiccup. You've got that heart bind thing – you have
to stop Toothless getting hurt or you get hurt too. And you’re the Alphas – if you two kick the bucket, what happens to the dragons? You wouldn't have a choice but to betray us if someone threatened your precious ‘other half’” Snotlout reasoned.

Before Hiccup could say anything, retort or otherwise, a gruff voice barked out “Oh for the love of my Great Aunt Gerta, would you two give it a rest? Hiccup ain't gonna betray us, Snotlout – now why don'tcha do summat useful wi' your time, like yer actual job, an’ let Hiccup get on wi’ his.”

Gobber jabbed his hammer hand at the pair of them. He'd been listening to them bicker outside his forge and he was frankly getting sick of it. Hiccup took the opportunity to escape whilst Snotlout was distracted arguing with the old blacksmith.

High above Berk, he ranted to Toothless about how the other man was a “rude, insensitive, arrogant…he takes after his father, but at least Spitelout never accused me of turning against all of Berk! After everything I’ve done for him, I can't believe he's turned on me like this. No, actually, I can believe it. He's always had it out for me, ever since we were kids, probably just been biding his time until he could make everyone want to run me off the fricking island…”

*You know Astrid wouldn't let that happen* Toothless pointed out, after patiently letting his brother run out of steam. After a while, he crooned reassuringly and said *I would understand, you know.*

Hiccup came out of his sulk and asked, “Understand what?”

*If you chose Berk. If you had to. You'd be saving the dragons as well.*

“Can we not talk about it? I hate to think of someone…” he trailed off uneasily. Toothless shuddered a little, as disturbed by the thought as his other half, and leaned into the wind, taking them out across the ocean. Hiccup realised his flight was becoming more purposeful, that he was no longer just gliding. “What are you doing?” he asked in alarm.

*I thought we could fly out and check on Dragon Island.*

“But…no, but we can't…if the hunters come back, then” –

*Hiccup, we have dragons patrolling everywhere, and the hunters would have to come past Dragon Island to get to Berk. I'll even fly over their likely path, if it makes you feel better* Toothless offered, correcting his direction. *Besides, do you really want to be on Berk right now?*

Hiccup hesitated. Coward his subconscious spat poisonously. He pushed the thought away and settled more firmly into the saddle. “Astrid's going to be furious, you know” he pointed out, “And I'll tell her this was all your idea.”

*You do that.*

When they reached the island, on a slightly out of the way course, they had seen no sign of any approaching ships, and everything seemed settled. The dragons there were happy to see them, and nothing major was going on. Toothless made a circuit of the island, and on the far side, they decided to land and drink from a stream before going back.

Kneeling at the side of the fast flowing water, Hiccup scooped it up in his hands and drank as Toothless lapped it up beside him. It was a nice day, and he did feel a bit better. Perhaps it had been good, to get away from Berk and come somewhere a bit more peaceful and quiet…
It was too quiet. *Toothless, we need to leave. Now* he insisted suddenly. Trusting him, and coming to the same realisation, Toothless tensed to leap. Hiccup jumped up from a crouch and swung himself into the saddle in one fluid motion, clicking the tail fin open with a *snap*. No sooner had he done so, than he heard a hissing noise behind him, and a moment later, felt a sharp point pierce the back of his neck.

“No…” he gasped out, slumping in the saddle. *Hiccup!* Toothless shrieked; he spun around, trying not to dislodge his rider, and fired a blast at the bushes right behind them. The greenery vanished in a burst of smoke and fire, but he couldn't smell a body.

*GET HELP!* he roared out to any dragon nearby, anyone listening, firing another blast at some rustling plants and only nearly roasting a squirrel. Frightened and surrounded by enemies he couldn't even spot, Toothless raised his wings to shield Hiccup, who was sprawled unconscious on his back, and snarled anywhere he could – but he couldn't look everywhere.

A dart came from nowhere and struck him in the thigh, another in his shoulder – Toothless yelped, and struggled to twist round to blast whoever had fired it…he nearly toppled over and crushed Hiccup, and flopped unceremoniously onto his stomach, a front leg pinned beneath him. A third dart flew through the air and sank into his neck…and he found himself sinking into darkness.

*…Hiccup! Hiccup!*

He groaned...he was standing – no, he was upright, but he was manacled to what felt like an upright wooden board. His wrists and ankles were manacled, not tied with rope, to judge by the sensation of cold biting metal. There was leather wrapped tightly over his mouth. With a tremendous effort, given that his brain felt as if someone had mashed it up with a mortar and pestle, Hiccup opened his eyes.

He was indeed strapped to a board, in the belly of a moving ship if the steady rise and fall and creaking wood was any indication. Toothless was opposite him, muzzled and with his wings not pinned, but painfully clamped, which explained why Hiccup’s own shoulder blades felt like someone was forcing them together. He was also, inexplicably, standing in a trough filled with water up to his belly.

*It’s okay - it's seawater. No grimora* Toothless reassured him quickly, before whining guiltily.

*I’m so sorry-*

*Don’t* Hiccup cut him off quickly, *Don’t blame yourself. It's not your fault. We just…we’ve been really unlucky lately* he sighed.

There came the scraping sound of a door being opened. Hiccup looked past Toothless to see three men striding down the length of the passageway towards them. The first he didn't recognise…the second two, unfortunately, he did. They were two of the hunters who had been working for Hauke.

“You comfy, dragon boy?” the nearest one sneered at him. “What's the matter, Terror got your tongue?”

“Ha! Yeah, since ya like dragons so much, we’re gonna treat you like a dragon and muzzle yer” the other guffawed.

The stranger barked “Did I say you two could speak?” When they hastily shut up, he cleared his throat and turned back to Hiccup. “Don't mind them. They're idiots.”
Not arguing there Hiccup thought, looking the stranger over. He was a man almost his own age, with black hair, grey eyes and a scar across the right side of his face. He wore dark brown clothes with an incongruous scarlet cloak hanging from his shoulders.

The man reached out and unclasped the leather band from around his jaw. As soon as his mouth was uncovered, Hiccup said calmly, “I'm guessing you're the one behind this war.”

“As a matter of fact, yes” the man nodded, “And do you know why?” When Hiccup didn’t deign to answer, the man set his mouth in a hard line and announced, “Well, part of the reason is that you killed my father.”

I don't even know you or your father Hiccup was about to protest; but then he put the pieces together, and his eyes widened. “That's right. I am Adulfr, son of Hauke, Chief of the Wolf Fang Tribe” the other man declared grandly.

“You're Hauke’s son?!” Hiccup exclaimed, disbelieving. Toothless was equally incredulous. 

*Someone wanted to breed with that jerk?!*

“Wait – I thought your tribe was called” –

“I changed the name” Adulfr said shortly. “I do so love wolves. They're such graceful creatures, don't you think?”

Hiccup ignored the question. “Are you trying to tell me that all of this – the attacks, the war – it’s all a revenge plan you’ve concocted?”

Adulfr regarded him with an unreadable expression for a few moments, before beginning to talk. “When I was young, I was…the runt of the litter, so to speak, but I always wanted to be more. To overcome my weakness and command the respect of my peers; for I was the heir, was I not? I deserved it. I trained for days, weeks, months, to be stronger, to do whatever it took to prove my worth lest my tribe think me…unfit to rule.

“Then one day, as my father and his men were preparing to set out on a hunting trip, I overheard some of them talking about someone who rode a Night Fury, destroyed a Red Death…two dragons of legend, conquered by the same person. At first I assumed that they were talking about my father’s employer, Drago Bludvist. I asked my father to let me come with him to meet this so-called ‘Dragon Master’; but he told me they were not the same, that the Dragon Master was a ‘runt’ like me.

“I was inspired. After all, if someone like me could conquer dragons, then what could I do? I set out to prove myself, to slay a dragon and bring its head back to my father to show him I was ready…I succeeded. I’ll spare you the details, but I did it.

“And then my father’s men returned from their voyage, with his corpse aboard his flagship – and what do they tell me but that they encountered the Dragon Master on a mission for Bludvist, that he escaped and had his Night Fury slay my father in revenge for his capture. That…that changed everything.

“I realised then that this man, this Dragon Master…you don't master dragons, you use dragons to master people. You ride them into battle, turn their fangs and flame and claws against your enemies as easily as a blade, and then have the audacity to call for peace between dragon and man, claim that the beasts are just ‘misunderstood’ even as you have them get rid of any threats to you.

“And as if having your dragon kill my father wasn't enough, then you kill the true Master of Dragons, the one man who really could have brought peace to the world! Then it was certain – you
don't care about your fellow men, only for the dragons, and anyone who believed your lies about them. So I took it upon myself to take on Bludvist’s mantle, to gather as much of his scattered army as I could and finish what he began…and if his or my father's murderers were hurt or even killed in the process, well…that is simply how war is, is it not?"

If Hiccup’s jaw was not attached to his skull, it would be on the floor by now. “Are you kidding me?! Apart from the myriad things you've gotten completely wrong about me and what I do - don't you realise we could have settled this years ago? If you had come to Berk and challenged me to holmgang – heck, if you'd just tried to get revenge against me and Toothless, I would have understood. But instead you go after my tribe, and my dragons, and our allies –

“Did your father's men tell you that he tried to murder me first? That he stabbed me? That he was coming to my home to finish the job? For Thor’s sake, I didn't even know you existed!”

“And would it change anything, if you had?”

“At the time? Maybe. I was a lot more naïve back then. Now? Not so much. You're right about one thing, though. I don't master dragons. I've never wanted to be the master of anything, and I am nothing like that warmongering, cruel, twisted sadist Drago Bludvist!!”

After his outburst, silence hung in the air. Hiccup glared at Adulfr through narrowed eyes. “You didn't go to all the trouble of capturing us just to tell me your life story. You obviously want something, so hurry up and tell me what it is” he demanded.

“I want to know three things. One, how did you survive being stabbed? Two, what are Berk’s plans for a counter attack, and three, where are the Night Furies? I know you know what I'm talking about, and I know they're somewhere on Myrkr, but I need an exact location. Just answer my questions, and then I'll let you and your dragon go.”

Hiccup didn't believe that for a second. “Well, the first one’s easy. He missed my heart. Not by much, but enough that I didn't die straightaway. Toothless licked the wound until it closed over – dragon saliva can do that, it's a little known fact – and we managed to escape into the forest. We found a series of abandoned Whispering Death tunnels in the mountains and hid there whilst I recovered.

“As for the other two questions…I don’t know anything about the third one, and the second? The answer is no” Hiccup said bluntly. “Just, no.”

Adulfr shrugged. “Disappointing. Well, on your own head be it” he said dismissively, before turning to the thugs. “You know what to do. Don't do too much damage – at least not at first”. With that, he made his leave.

*Hiccup, listen to me. Don't tell them anything. Whatever they do to me, however much it hurts, do not tell them anything.*

*What do you…?* Then Hiccup remembered that these two hunters were the same ones who had talked of torturing Toothless to get to him, and a cold fist of dread clenched shut around his heart.

Oh gods, please, no, not him!

“You know what we heard?” asked Goon One, walking around behind Toothless and accidentally-on-purpose stepping on his tail. “We heard yer dragon cursed ya to keep ya alive, and y’can read his mind now. So what's he thinking?” he questioned, rapping his knuckles on top of Toothless’ head, who snarled and jerked away.
“I don’t know what he’s thinking, because I can’t read his mind” Hiccup lied, “but I guess he’s probably thinking that when we get out of here, he’s going to rip you limb from limb” he growled.

Goon Two demanded, “So, ya gonna tell us what the chief wants to know, or are we gonna have to persuade ya?”

*Don’t do it. Don't you dare. I'm not more important than our pack!*\n
Hiccup desperately wanted to give in, to confess everything in the hopes of sparing his dearest one such torment. “Look, I'm the one you want. Torture me if you have to, but leave Toothless out of this!”

“Nah. We should've done this right from the start” Goon Two smirked, stepping back and aiming a kick over the side of the trough at Toothless’ ribs. Hiccup felt the painful blow in his own side, and gritted his teeth to keep from crying out in pain.

*Hiccup, don't tell them! I can cope with the pain. Don't tell them!*\n
He wanted to. He had to. His instincts screamed at him to protect his other half in any way he could…but to do so would mean betraying his tribe, and their pack; and he had no doubt that even if he answered their questions, they would take twisted pleasure in humiliating him and Toothless as much as they possibly could.

So he looked the first goon right in the eye, and forced the three hardest words he'd ever spoken past his lips. “I. Said. No.”

The goons scowled. “Well then, this oughta change your mind” Goon One decided, taking a rolled up strip of leather from his belt. He grasped a worn handle, and cracked it once – the whip lashed through the air like a lunging cobra, complete with a hiss and a biting snap. “Last chance” he told Hiccup, brandishing the whip threateningly.

Holding his tongue was one of the hardest things Hiccup had ever had to do. *I'm so sorry, Toothless. I wish – I want to…*

*I know. It's okay.*\n
It was anything but okay.

When their prisoner still refused to speak, Goon One cracked the whip against the dragon's wings. It left no mark, but the beast still cried out in pain, the sound muffled by the leather band that pinned its deadly jaws shut. “What are you planning?!?”

“You mean apart from how I'm gonna kill you?!!”

Hisssss-snap!

“Tell us what Berk is planning!”

“To rescue us, for a start!”

Then Goon Two demanded, “Where are the Night Furies hiding?! Tell us!” He punctuated the command with a hard punch to the side of Toothless’ neck that nearly made the dragon choke.

“Are you deaf?! I told your psycho Chief that I don't know! How the heck would I know where they were?!!”
“You must know what Berk is planning” Goon One insisted, “So why don’t you make life easy for yerself an’ your precious dragon and tell us what we want to know!”

Hisssss-snap!

“I’d have thought it was obvious. We’re planning to wipe you and the rest of this scum off the face of Midgard!” Hiccup shouted, struggling in his bonds. “Stop this! Hurt me, do what you want to me, but leave him alone! He has nothing to do with this!”

It might have seemed a strange plea, given that they could both feel the others pain – but that wasn’t the point. Toothless could not beg for mercy or give into the hunter’s demands himself; he had no way of making it stop, and Hiccup needed it to stop, because it was agony just to see him suffering, let alone feel the echoes of his pain.

The goons didn’t stop hurting Toothless. They punched him, kicked him, yanked his ear-flaps, whipped his wings until the scales cracked and bled. The poor, miserable dragon shut his eyes tight, clenched his jaw and dug his claws into the slippery surface beneath them. He just had to hold out a little longer, just a little longer….

“Stop it! Leave him alone! Please! Stop hurting him!!” Hiccup begged over and over, struggling, absolutely horrified.

They did stop – but it was only to add insult to injury. They picked up two buckets they’d carried in earlier, prised the lids off and dumped eels, live, foul eels all over the dragon and into the trough. Toothless shuddered and choked with revulsion. He could feel them slithering across his back, writhing against his belly, coiling around his limbs…it was disgusting, not to mention mortifying, but it didn’t actually hurt.

What happened next, however, hurt a lot. “Stubborn, aren’t ya? How about this, then – tell us what we want to know, or we’ll break yer dragons wings” Goon Two threatened.

“You’re…bluffing. Adulfri told you not to do too much damage!”

“Hmm, see, I saw that as more of a suggestion, really. I’m pretty sure he meant, don’t do too much damage that can’t be fixed” Goon Two said mock thoughtfully. He grasped the edge of Toothless’ wing in both hands, right on the bone, and began to bend it. Toothless shrieked, trying futilely to knock the man away. Burning pain shot through his wing and side as the tendons and bone were stretched, and he felt like he was going to be sick.

That was the last straw for Hiccup. “The Night Furies went inland!” he cried out, “They're in a valley, there’s a mountain with two peaks, the left one is shorter – it's about two weeks there by dragon, I don't know how long on foot – but that's all I know! I swear! Just stop hurting him, please!” he begged.

“Was that so hard?” Goon One asked mockingly. He turned to Goon Two and ordered “Quick, go straight to the chief and tell him what we know.” The other man ceased putting painful pressure on Toothless’ wing and ran out of the torture chamber. Goon One turned back to Hiccup and demanded, “Now, be a good boy and tell us what Berk is planning, or else.”

Hiccup resisted the urge to ask, ‘or else what?’ Instead, he glared at the hunter, with hatred burning in his eyes, and said bluntly, “I’d sooner die.”

“What about your precious dragon?” The man questioned, drawing his sword. He put it to Toothless’ neck, and Hiccup’s eyes widened in horror. “That’s right. Tell me what Berk is planning,
or else I'll slit the Night Fury’s throat.”

He had to tell them. Heart bound or not, he couldn’t let Toothless die, let himself die. There were too many people counting on them. He couldn’t leave Astrid and Helena…and the Night Furies! If he didn’t live long enough to escape, or be rescued, then he couldn’t warn them what was coming. He’d just given them away and now he had to stop Adulfr from getting to them. *I have to* he thought desperately; he took a deep breath and was about to speak, when…

*BANG!*

The unexpected crash caught them all off guard. The goon jumped and dropped the sword, much to Toothless and Hiccup’s considerable relief. *Please be a rescue, please be a rescue, please be a rescue* Hiccup prayed over and over.

Goon One grabbed his sword, and then ran to the door. As soon as he yanked it open, he found himself being attacked by a huge red bearded Viking with a furious expression and a very sharp axe. The Viking forced him back and to the side, giving room for a blonde woman to run past him.

“Astrid! Dad!” Hiccup cried out. He had never been so relieved to see them in his entire life.

His wife, axe in hand, ran past his father, who was duelling fiercely with Goon One. She sprinted up to the enchained pair. “Hiccup! I'm so, so sorry – oh my gods!” she cried, staring in horror at the lashes and bruises and the eel filled trough. *They didn’t!*

“Never mind that! Just get us out of here! There's a lock-pick in my right pocket, hurry!”

She found it and undid the manacles as quickly as she could. As soon as he was free, Hiccup threw himself down and yanked off the muzzle, whilst Astrid picked up her axe and chopped through the chain holding Toothless’ wings up. They fell open, stretching the whip marks even more, and he howled in pain. “Oh gods. Oh, *Toothless!*”

“Help me!” Hiccup shouted, furious, as he worked to release Toothless from the rest of his bonds. She hurried to help, to get it done faster.

As soon as he could, the dragon leapt out of the trough. He pressed himself against Hiccup, shaking all over. “I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry!” his other half said endlessly, getting his hands coated in Night Fury saliva just to smooth it over the painful cuts in an attempt to soothe them.

Stoick made short work of the goon – nobody hurt his sons and lived. “We need to get out of here!” he ordered urgently. They fought their way out of the ship – the hunters on the upper decks were not prepared to face a Night Fury in the full throes of Fury’s Fire – and as soon as they were out in the air, Stoick bellowed out an order of “Retreat!”

Toothless roared out the same command, and everyone regrouped high out of range of the arrows. Hiccup protested, “Their leader, he's on board that ship, we have to get him! We can't let him escape!”

“Hiccup, it's too risky, we just got you out” Astrid tried to reason with him.

Both halves of Toothless-Hiccup screamed in anguished rage, turned their tail and fled.
As soon as they got back to Berk, exhausted and in pain, Toothless and Hiccup went straight home. Nobody was there; Astrid had left Helena in the care of her parents.

Toothless stayed on his feet just long enough for Hiccup to take off the saddle; as soon as he was free of it, he collapsed to the floor and whimpered. “I’m sorry. Oh gods, Toothless, I’m so sorry!” Hiccup cried. Tears ran down his face as he stroked the dragon soothingly, apologising over and over.

He set about tending to the wounds, cleaning them and stitching closed the worst cuts. Hiccup gritted his teeth through the pain and thought-spoke comforting nonsense to distract them both. Then he heated some water over the fire, and gave Toothless a rub down, getting rid of the horrible scent of eel and replacing it with the familiar scent of them.

He didn’t know who he hated more; Adulfr, or himself. *I’m so sorry* he moaned for the hundredth time, as he lay on his back with Toothless’ head tucked under his arm, and the dragons’ snout resting in the hollow of his shoulder.

*It’s not your fault* Toothless crooned softly, with an affectionate slow blink. He craned his neck forward and gently licked at Hiccup’s exposed throat, signalling that all was forgiven. It was intimate, even by dragon standards, and spoke volumes of the trust between them.

A trust that Hiccup was sure he had broken. *How can you say that?* he asked, tears in his eyes. *I really am a traitor. I try not to betray Berk and I end up betraying you instead. I let those bastards hurt you. Part of me wishes I’d just given in...*

*I sort of got the feeling they would have tortured us anyway* Toothless admitted. *But for no reason.*

Hiccup knew he was right, and he hated it. *If Lyse returns with any Night Furies, I'll have to tell them that I gave them away. They're gonna kill me* he declared morosely.

*They wouldn't do that.* Toothless rolled his eyes. *Okay, but they'll probably maul me, at the very least.*

*They won't hurt you, Hiccup. I won't let them. What else were you supposed to do? Let him break my wing? You did nothing wrong* Toothless told him, before admitting with a guilty whine. *I shouldn't have taken us to Dragon Island. If I hadn't, we wouldn't have been captured in the first place. All of this was my fault, not yours. I'm sorry* he apologised.

Hiccup ran a hand over his head, fingers playing with the soft spikes, and Toothless hummed contentedly. *It’s not your fault. It’s theirs. It’s his fault. I promise, Toothless, I'm never going to let that happen to you again. If anyone tries, I'll kill them* Hiccup declared, face darkening. Toothless licked him distractingly. “Eugh!”

Hiccup briefly moved away and dragged a pile of furs from the nest he shared with Astrid, spreading them out on the floor beside Toothless so he’d be more comfortable. The two of them soon fell asleep, exhausted as they were. They were too tired to even dream; which was for the best, as their dreams would surely have turned to nightmares.
When they awoke, there was a plate of food – bread, some cheese and chicken – and a tankard of water besides Hiccup, and two large bowls of fish and water close to Toothless. Only then did they realise they were absolutely starving, and set to the meal eagerly.

They felt much better afterwards. The bruises and cuts were still sore, but they were healing. Toothless’ ear-flaps and wing no longer hurt so badly from being painfully twisted and tugged. The torture was one of the most frightening, painful ordeals he had ever been through…but a small part of him was glad it was him, and not Hiccup. True, he would have felt his brother's pain, but to have to watch Hiccup suffer when he had no way of making it stop –

Toothless wished he had thought to summon his Fury’s Fire right from the beginning. He'd certainly felt angered enough to; but he had felt entrapped as well, and he didn't know if it would be powerful enough to let him break free of metal chains. *I should have tried it anyway* he thought, a little bitterly.

They both looked up and over as the door opened. Astrid peeked in; when she saw they were awake, she carried Helena inside and sat down on the bed beside Hiccup. He reached out to hug them both. He loved them so much. Toothless was his shadow, part of him and ever present; Astrid and Helena were his stars, his lights in the dark; especially right now. He could never have left them behind.

Helena stuck her tongue out when her parents started kissing – *yuck* – and slid off her mother's lap to go and pet Toothless. Hiccup broke the kiss and rested his forehead against Astrid's. “Thank you” he murmured, “For everything. If you and my dad hadn’t come when you did…”

“IT wouldn’t matter anyway” she insisted, “You didn’t have a choice. Hiccup, we need you. You and Toothless don't need to…to leave to protect us. You'd do a better job if you were here.”

He sighed and smiled. “I know. We're not going anywhere, right bud?”

*No way* Toothless purred, nuzzling Helena. She giggled and pressed a kiss to his muzzle.

“Mwah!”

“Helena, sweetheart, c’mere” her father beckoned to her. She toddled over to him and asked innocently, “Daddy, are you sad?”

“Not anymore” he smiled broadly at her, reaching out to pull her into his arms and cuddle her. His daughter was sweet and innocent and Hiccup was unutterably grateful that he had not lost his chance to raise her, to see her grow and thrive.

She snuggled against him, purring, before wriggling out of his hold and between her parents, forcing Astrid to shift aside. Crouched on the bed, she bared her baby teeth and curled her fingers up like claws. “I'm a dragon! Rawr!”

Hiccup suppressed a laugh, and pretended to look very scared. “Oh no, a big scary dragon!” he squealed in jest, as Helena enthusiastically scrabbled against his chest and stomach with her ‘claws’, growling. “Toothless, help!”

Astrid stood up; the dragon rose to his paws, came over and promptly started licking him enthusiastically. “Agh! Help me, not her!” Astrid laughed at his misfortune. *Great.*

"Gonna breathe fire!” Helena warned, blowing exaggeratedly and going “Eeeeeeeee-whoosh!” mimicking Toothless’ blasts.

“That's right! Dragons breathe fire. D’you know what else dragons do?” Hiccup asked rhetorically, “Dragons fly!”
He scooped her up and balanced her on his knees, holding her up in the air. “Whee!” She cheered, “Flying! Mummy, look, I'm flying!” She held her arms out and flapped them like wings.

“I can see! Clever girl” Astrid praised her. Then she added, “Mummy has to go do chief stuff, so you stay here and keep an eye on daddy for me, okay darling?”

“Okay!”

“She's keeping an eye on me?” Hiccup raised an eyebrow, “Shouldn't it be the other way around?” Astrid smirked at him. “Nope. I'll be at the Hall or in the village if you need me.”

“Alright, see you later. I love you” he said meaningfully.

“Love you too, babe.” She winked at him, in a way that didn't leave much to the imagination, before stepping out the door.

Hiccup played at flying with Helena until his arms got tired. Then she went back to pretending to ferociously attack him, whilst Toothless nudged and licked at her playfully (and occasionally Hiccup, just for good measure). Between his dragon and his daughter, Hiccup was pretty much stuck: so he sat there with his back against the headboard and watched them ‘battle’ over him.

Helena scrabbled her way down his stomach to his legs, and that was how she came across his stump. He'd taken the prosthetic off to be more comfortable. The little girl paused, and looked at the end of her father’s left leg in puzzlement. She reached out and patted his right shin, then the furs beneath the stump. He could all but see the wheels turning in her head.

Curious, she gave his stump an experimental prod. “Ow. No, don’t poke daddy there” he instructed. Toothless nudged her away from it, but not far.

Helena patted his left leg again, the furs beneath it, and the whole shin beside them, and his right foot. He was about to ask her what was wrong, but then she looked at him with surprised eyes and announced, “It's gone!”

“So it is” he agreed, as if he'd never noticed before.

She looked around the room as if the rest of his limb might be just lying around. “Where…where’s your clinky foot?”

Hiccup wasn’t sure what she meant, at first, but Toothless caught on quicker. *She must mean this* he realised, picking up Hiccup’s prosthetic in his mouth.

“Yay! Uncle Toothless found it!”

“Yeah, he did!” Hiccup tried very hard not to laugh at the fact that his daughter had apparently been calling his peg leg a ‘clinky foot’. *That's a new one* he thought wryly.

Helena sat down and grabbed her own ankle, and pulled at it. She only made herself tumble backwards. Hiccup chuckled. “No, yours don’t come off” he told her, and then he realised something. “Wait, did you think…? Oh, no, sweetheart, this isn't part of me” he told her, waving the prosthetic lightly. “It's a pretend foot I have to wear cos my real one is missing.”

Was this really the first time she’d seen him without the prosthetic on? Well, it must have been, if she was so surprised by its absence. All her short life, she’d only ever seen him with two mismatched
feet, but two nonetheless, and she was a baby, she might not have understood that his ‘clinky foot’ wasn't a separate part of him. That was…strangely cute.

“Where did it go?” Helena asked curiously.

“I dunno. That's why it's missing.”

Helena pulled a face at the bad joke. Even Toothless rolled his eyes and groaned, mimicking human exasperation.

“Why is it missing?”

“Uh…” Quick, think of something, quick! “A troll stole it.

Helena blinked at him. “A troll?” she repeated, uncertainly.

“A troll?” he nodded, “They’re um…about this high…and they look like mud and rocks…and they can turn invisible…and they steal your socks. Well, the left ones, anyway.”

“Oh.” Helena took a few moments to digest this utter nonsense, before inquiring, “Why?”

Hiccup shrugged. “Nobody knows. One of them tried to steal mine, but it got stuck, so he took my whole foot instead.”

Now she looked a bit alarmed, so he quickly added “Oh, but don't worry. No trolls are gonna steal your feet. Especially if you eat your veggies. That scares them off”. Well, if he was going to make up a story, he might as well use it to impart a few words of wisdom. No harm in that, right?

Helena gave him as dubious a look as a three year old could muster. Sure, you believe me about little troll people, but not when I try to get you to eat your greens?

“Tell you what, I don't fancy being cooped up inside. Why don't we go and visit Granddad and Grandma?” he suggested. She beamed and jumped up and down on the bed, cheering.

He put the prosthetic back on, stood up, and scooped her into his arms. Toothless followed him out of the bedroom, across the front room and out of the door. It was late afternoon by now, and the shadows had lengthened. “Now remember, Grandma isn't feeling well, so you have to be quiet” Hiccup reminded his daughter as he carried her on his shoulders.

“Shh” she replied obediently. It was a very short walk to his former home – it was, after all, only a few yards away. Cloud Jumper was lying in the shade beside the house, seemingly asleep; but his golden eyes opened at their approach. *Hello, Alphas. It's good to see you're awake. Are you both okay?* he rumbled, concerned, even as he blinked affectionately at Helena, who waved to him from her father's shoulders.

“We’re fine. Well, better” Hiccup decided. “Is my dad home?” he asked. There was no sign of Skull Crusher, but the Rumblehorn might have simply gone for a flight by himself.

Cloud reared up slightly to stretch his great wingspan, and replied *Yes, he is. He's looking after Valka.* The Stormcutter gave a soft, almost inaudible whimper as he said his riders’ name. He did worry for her so. If he ever got his claws on the hunters who injured her…

“I just brought Helena to visit, if that's alright?” Hiccup asked. He didn't want to disturb his mother's recovery. Cloud Jumper’s gaze sidled over to the house in a longing sort of way; he wanted to see Valka too, but he couldn't fit. *I suppose. If your father lets you in.*
Hiccup took Helena from his shoulders and held her in one arm as he knocked on the door. A few moments later, Stoick pulled it open from the inside. “Hiccup, Helena!” He beamed at the sight of his son and granddaughter. “It's good to see you. Come in, come in. You don't have to knock, you know, you're family. You used to live here, for Thor’s sake!” he chuckled.

“Uh, heh, yeah…” Hiccup cleared his throat sheepishly.

"Good to see you up and about. How are you and Toothless feeling?” Stoick asked solemnly. His eyes flickered from the dried tear marks still slightly visible on Hiccup’s face, to the even more noticeable scars crisscrossing Toothless’ wings. He couldn't even imagine how painful it must have been, and wished he could have spent longer showing that wretched coward what happened when someone messed with his family.

“Better. I just thought I'd bring Helena to see mom, get out of the house, y’know?” Hiccup explained. Yes, out of my house and straight into another, great plan, Hiccup.

At the mention of his wife, Stoick sighed. “She's still asleep. Probably be a while ‘fore she wakes up, like with you when…well, you know. C’mon, I'll take you through.”

He led them into the bedroom, where Valka was resting, healing from a wound to her stomach. It hadn't killed her, thank the gods, but she hung precariously in the balance between life and death. Hiccup sat down in a chair beside the bed; Helena clambered from his lap onto the mattress and knelt by her grandmothers head, stroking her hair and crooning like a dragon, singing a lullaby with half-remembered words.

Stoick sponged her brow, and Hiccup reached out to curl his fingers around her limp ones. Toothless gazed at her sorrowfully and whimpered. “Wake up, grandma” Helena pleaded. The injured woman stirred a bit, moaning, but did not wake, and the little girl pouted. She asked, “why is she sleeping?”

“She's not well, darling” Hiccup reminded her, “Grandma needs to rest for a while. She'll wake up soon” he assured her, privately adding, I hope.

“Aye, don't worry, ‘Lena” Stoick assured her, ruffling her hair, “Your grandma will be right as rain in no time. She's a Viking, an’ more importantly she's a Haddock. Tough as nails, she is. Ouch…” he winced, twisting his shoulders, “I tell you what, sleeping in a chair does no good for this old back.”

Old. That one single word echoed in Hiccup’s mind. His gaze fell upon his father's beard, now almost more grey than red. The wrinkles on the back of the hand covering Valka’s. The lines at the corners of his mother’s eyes and mouth. He looked at Helena, still so youthful, and nearly shuddered to think of her growing old before his eyes as she would surely do.

A gentle snout nudged his arm and he looked at Toothless. The twin pools of green that gazed back at him were full of apology, and a silent promise that when he did have to say goodbye to the rest of his family, his other half would still be by his side. With his free hand, Hiccup reached up to stroke the black dragon and reassure his best friend that he didn't blame him.

“Son?” Stoick began. Hiccup and Toothless looked at him. He hesitated, glancing at Helena. Hiccup put a hand on her shoulder and said “Helena, I need to talk to granddad. Why don't you go play with Toothless and Cloud Jumper outside, okay?”

“Okay. Bye, grandma, bye granddad” the little girl said amicably, sliding off the bed and pattering out of the room. Toothless gave Hiccup a mock-exasperated eye roll for leaving him with the child, and followed her.
When they were alone, Stoick cleared his throat and said “You didn't have to go through all that, you know. None of us would have blamed you if you’d talked.”

Hiccup sighed. “It seemed like they would have tortured us anyway” he admitted, “Just because they could. They weren't just doing it because they'd been ordered to, dad, they…they were enjoying it.”

Stoick’s face darkened in angry sympathy. “What in Odin’s name did they want from you?” he questioned. “You said their leader was onboard – do you know who he is?”

“You're not gonna believe this” Hiccup warned him, “Their leader is Hauke’s son” he revealed.

Sure enough, Stoick's bushy eyebrows rose up to his receding hairline. “That man had a son?”

“That's what we thought. He did sort of look like Hauke, though, and he's working with hunters I know were part of Hauke’s tribe. Apparently he changed the name” Hiccup explained.

“And what did you say their leader was called?”

“Adulfr. Dad, he's insane. He's a…a Drago wannabe. He blames me and Toothless for killing his father; and, well, that was our fault, but it's not like we knew he existed! Now he thinks that I'm some kind of vengeful, dangerous warrior who sets dragons loose on my enemies and lies about wanting peace” Hiccup ranted, just barely remembering to keep his voice down.

He told his father everything that Adulfr had told him. “Let me get this straight. This man heard rumours about you as a boy, grew up thinking you were someone you're not, and when he found out you were responsible for his father's death, he stopped admiring you and swore revenge?” Stoick clarified.

“Pretty much.”

“And he's raised an army against us…so he can follow in the footsteps of Drago?”

“Dad, he thinks Drago and I do - or did, I suppose - the same thing. Control dragons. He has no idea…he bought into the rumours of me being some kind of ‘mighty dragon conquerer’” Hiccup said sarcastically, rolling his eyes, “and into the idea that Drago wanted to get every dragon under his sway to bring peace. He's convinced himself that I only care about dragons…”

He trailed off, frowning, which unsettled Stoick. Before the older man could ask what was wrong, Hiccup exclaimed “It’s just like with Snotlout! They both blame me for their father’s deaths, they both think I only care about myself and dragons, they both thought I was going to betray Berk…”

“Well, then you've proven them wrong” Stoick pointed out.

“I didn’t, though. Just before you came, I…the hunter threatened to kill Toothless” Hiccup confessed, and Stoick’s eyebrows rose. “I couldn’t…I was going to talk. If you hadn’t turned up when you did…”

“"You wouldn’t have been betraying us, son. If people don’t understand that, then the fault is with them, not you” his father told him firmly. He knew perfectly well that there was a difference between selfish treason for one’s own ends, and a forced betrayal because the alternative was so much worse. He knew his son, and there was no way that Hiccup would betray his tribe willingly.

“I assume by ‘people’, you mean Snotlout. He’s going to be happy – I almost proved him right, and he won’t care why. He wouldn’t care if I’d proven him wrong, either.”
Stoick hesitated. “Listen…I know it's hard, to lose a friendship. Believe it or not, I was devastated when I had to exile Alvin” he confessed, “and despite everything, you always managed to stay friends with that riff-raff. I don't know how you do it, but I hope you don't stop.”

“I'm still friends with Fishlegs and the twins” Hiccup said levelly, “but I don't care what Snotlout thinks. He's dead to me.” Before Stoick could say anything else, Hiccup pressed a kiss to the back of his mother's hand, and stood up. “Thanks for the talk, dad. Let me know if mom gets better. Or worse. Either way. Bye” he said quickly, as he moved towards the door. Stoick let him go.

Outside, Hiccup found Helena in the middle of a game that entailed climbing onto Toothless, from him onto Cloud Jumper, sliding down the bigger dragons wing, and running around to do it all over again. *Fourteen* the Night Fury announced; he'd apparently been keeping count.

“Having fun?” Hiccup asked. She changed direction mid run and barrelled towards him instead, making a running leap into his arms. He staggered a bit, wavering on his peg leg, but managed to stay standing. “Oof! You're gonna be too big for this soon.”

Helena beamed. “Wanna go look for trolls!” she announced, loudly, right next to his ear.

He winced. “Indoor voice, sweetheart” he prompted.

“But we're outside!”

“Okay, so use your indoor voice inside and outside. Please don't yell in daddy's ear, or he'll go deaf.”

“Sorry” she pouted. He nuzzled noses with her, making her giggle, and said “It's alright. Why don’t we go see Gobber? He knows all about trolls.”

“Yay!” Helena cheered, but more quietly, as Hiccup led the way into down to the village with Toothless padding behind. From her father's shoulders she declared happily, “When we find ‘em, we can make them give your foot back!”

*Oh, dear. What have I gotten myself into?*

That evening, Toothless and Hiccup were fussed over by the dragons, all of whom were furious that their beloved Alphas had been captured and hurt. The villagers were no different; when he'd taken Helena to visit Gobber, it had taken ages to get to the square with all the people asking if he and Toothless were okay and apologising for doubting him.

It would have been quicker to fly, but Hiccup was uneasy about having his daughter, who just could not sit still at this age, in the saddle; and besides, Toothless was still sore.

A couple of days later, Astrid called another war council, inviting Alvin, Dagur and Heather (Snotlout, however, was absent). They and their allies were planning a large scale attack to recapture the Isle of Frigga. It was their nearest and largest source of sandstone for Gronckle Iron, although the dragons had brought back reports of deposits on other islands that could be used as reserves.

Of course, they would need able warriors to remain on the island and defend it; and since dragons couldn't drink or bathe in the water there, they would either have to leave their fiery steeds behind or find a way to supply fresh water as well as food. The hunters would no doubt try to besiege them. All of this was an issue…or at least, it would be. “I never thought I'd say this, but Snotlout was right” Hiccup announced. “When I know for certain if my mother will live” – he refused to add ‘or die’ – “I will send Cloud Jumper to the King with a request to come and destroy this army for good.”
“Woo!” the twins cheered, high five-ing, “Awesome ice blasts!”

Then something occurred to Tuffnut, if the bug eyed expression on his face was anything to go by. “Does this mean we can't get the Screaming Death to come and wreak havoc?” he asked.

“I think the Screaming Death would be overkill, don't you?”

They both looked disappointed. Ruffnut lamented, “I was looking forward to seeing the big guy again. Why can't we just get both? Twice the dragon, twice the fun!”

“Yeah! But they might start fighting…which would be awesome! Bewilderbeast versus Screaming Death, the battle to end all battles, the clash of titans, who will be victorious, and who w-!”

“Tuffnut!” Astrid snapped at him, “Sit down!”

He dropped back into his seat as if he hadn't just been standing on it. Biting back an exasperated groan – some things never change – Astrid turned to her husband. “Hiccup, I know you're angry at Adulfr” –

“Understatement.”

“- But what happened to facing the hunters ourselves, with our own strength?”

“What happened to doing what's best for Berk, and our allies?” he countered. “I thought we could do this ourselves, but we can't. I am allowed to change my mind, aren't I?”

“Of course. I just get the feeling – and this is just a hunch, mind you – that this is more about you getting revenge.”

“Whatever makes you think that?” he asked sarcastically, “It's not like they've done anything to me personally. Except endangering my people. And nearly killing my mother. And torturing my best friend right in front of me”-

Snap! The charcoal pencil in his hands splintered, startling them. Hiccup breathed hard, fists clenched. “They have to pay” he said through gritted teeth, “And if that means doing whatever it takes to make sure none of them live…well, as Adulfr himself said, that's just how war is.”

“So you're going to be the exact sort of person Adulfr thinks you are” Astrid said calmly.

“Ye-No! Are you – Astrid, it's not the same thing!” he protested, indignant and furious. “He thinks I set dragons on my enemies for my own sake. I'm doing this for our sake, Astrid! The King destroys this army, and everyone is safe. Berk, our allies, our dragons, the Night Furies, everyone. What am I supposed to do? Not fight my enemies because they might have crazy sons who will come and get revenge on me in the most destructive, roundabout way possible?!”

He was shouting now, and she opened her mouth to shout right back, when she was interrupted –

by a distant but bone shaking bellow.

Wait a minute…

“Uh, guys?” Fishlegs asked nervously, “Is it just me, or did that sound kind of familiar? As in, bad familiar?”

They all ran as fast as they could out of the Great Hall. As soon as they emerged, they could hear the shrieks and roars from the dragons, though only Hiccup, Toothless and Astrid could hear the thought-spoken cries of *Trespasser! Trespasser!*
Cloud Jumper back-winged out of a dive and hovered above their heads. *Alphas, come quick! A Spine-Twister, a massive one, is heading right for us!* he called.

Hiccup was already in the saddle, and Toothless took off after Cloud Jumper as fast as possible. He led them out to the east, slightly north, and in the distance they could see the unmistakable, rapidly growing silhouette of the Screaming Death. “Cloud, go back and tell the pack to prepare for a dragon on dragon battle” Hiccup ordered.

*Yes, Alpha-Hiccup.* The Stormcutter veered away, and Hiccup turned his attention back to the Screaming Death. Even from there, the mutant dragon looked angry.

“What is it doing here?!” Astrid demanded.

Heather added, “Do you think the hunters are using it?”

“That's what we were trying to tell you!” Ruffnut complained, even though they hadn’t, “Snotlout went to fetch the Screaming Death for us.”

“He what?!!” exclaimed everyone else.

Now that it was closer, they could see the Screaming Death wasn't heading their way for no reason – it was chasing another dragon. A Fire-Scale, to be precise, and a very familiar one at that. Hookfang was flying as fast as he could. Astrid cursed and cried “That idiot! He's gonna get himself killed!”

Toothless surged forwards. He soon caught up to Hookfang, who frantically babbled *Sorry Alphas I didn't mean to it was my riders' idea blame him help!!*

At almost the same time, Snotlout, clinging for dear life to his dragons horns, yelled out “Hiccup! Thank gods! Can you please tell this maniac that we weren't lying?!”

With the help of hundreds of dragons, they managed to get the Screaming Death subdued and got it through to him that if he destroyed an island for them, they wouldn't bother him again. It turned out Snotlout had told him that Toothless and Hiccup were the Alphas, and the Screaming Death had followed – well, chased – Snotlout back to Berk to discover the truth.

Back on solid ground, Astrid chewed Snotlout out in front of all the villagers, who were glad of the entertainment. “What in the name of Odin were you thinking?!” she shouted.

“I would tell you if you just stopped yelling at me!”

“Did the twins put you up to this?”

“No – well, sort of. I got the idea from them, but they didn't tell me to go and get the Screaming Death.”

“What did you two tell him?” Hiccup inquired of the twins.

They shrugged, and Tuffnut explained, “We told him you wanted to get the Screaming Death to destroy Botany Blight. We didn't think he'd actually be dumb enough to go get him.”

“Okay…why did you go and get the Screaming Death?” Hiccup asked Snotlout.

“I was wrong, okay?” Snotlout snapped, “I was wrong…about what I said. About you, and…betraying us. So I…needed a way to make it up to you.”

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. “An apology would have been a good start…”
“This is my apology. Just saying ‘sorry’ wouldn't make up for anything, so I had to actually do something. You wouldn't understand” Snotlout said defensively.

Hiccup sighed. This was exactly the sort of reckless, half-baked plan the other Viking would come up with…but it was also, he had to admit, brave and rather thoughtful. He remembered his father's words and sighed. “Look, I...Snotlout, things aren't going to be the same between us. But I...I feel like I've made enough enemies lately, so…” he held out a hand, “Truce?”

Snotlout stared at his hand. Then he hesitantly reached out and shook it, agreeing “Yeah, truce.”

From the crowd, Stoick looked on with pride.

It was extremely satisfying to descend on the army with the Screaming Death, and see the massive dragon bore through the poisonous island like a knife shredding parchment. When the isle of Botany Blight collapsed into the sea, the triumphant cheers and roars that went up were deafening.

That night, after lying awake long after Astrid had fallen asleep, Hiccup had given up and gone for a walk. Toothless had gone with him, naturally, in case they needed to return in a hurry. They had climbed up to the cliffs overlooking the ocean. For a while, neither of them said anything.

“Can't sleep, huh?” a familiar voice interrupted Hiccup’s reverie. Dagur came to stand beside him at the edge of the cliff. “Are you okay, brother?”

Hiccup sighed. “I don't know what Astrid wants from me anymore. First she tells me I should ask the King to help defeat this army, and now she says I shouldn't. What am I meant to do?” he complained.

“Oh...did you fight with her? Is that why you're out here?”

“I don't see how that's any of your business” Hiccup muttered; yet he admitted a moment later, “but no...I just couldn’t sleep. Astrid said we'd talk about it in the morning.”

Dagur hesitated, glancing sidelong at his former enemy turned friend and honorary younger brother. If he was being honest, he could see where Astrid was coming from. “To be fair…” he began tentatively, “You did say you wanted to make sure none of them lived. That's...that's not like you.”

Hiccup frowned. “I don't think you, of all people, should be lecturing me on why it's not good to want revenge” he retorted.

Dagur flinched a bit. That hurt. He had been trying so hard for years to put his selfish, violent past behind him, and for Hiccup to so callously throw it back in his face...Suddenly angry, he squared his shoulders and asked, “Would you rather I left you alone so you can get back to your sulk?”

“I'm not sulking.”

“Sure” Dagur agreed mockingly. Hiccup glared at him. “You're wrong, Hiccup. It's me, of all people, who can tell you that seeking revenge gets you nowhere. You know why? Because I've been where you are, I've gone down that road, and I almost lost everything. I'm not just gonna stand here and let you make the same mistakes I did” he challenged.

“This is not about revenge!” Hiccup snapped, but they both knew he was lying. “I want to end this war once and for all. I don't want our enemy to hurt the people I love, why is that so wrong?” he demanded.
“It’s not! Hiccup, it's not you wanting to end the war that Astrid has a problem with. It's that you said you didn't want to let any of the hunters live. Not all of them hurt your mother or your dragon, but you want to punish all of them anyway. Astrid’s right – if you did that, you’d be no better than Adulfr. You’d be exactly the sort of person you said he thinks you are.”

The two men glared at each other. Toothless watched warily, not interrupting, but ready to jump in if a fight broke out. Then Hiccup scowled, and turned away to stare out to sea again. “I gave those hunters a second chance when I first let them go free. Look what it's cost us. I have to stop this.”

“Yes, but not like this” Dagur insisted. When Hiccup failed to respond, he cleared his throat and asked, “You remember that time I saved yours and Toothless’ life, when he was hit by one of those dragon-root arrows?”

“I remember.”

“I told you not to get revenge then, as well” Dagur reminded him. “Sure, at first you tell yourself it's justified. That you're righting a wrong. But...if your enemy lives, they just come back to get revenge on you. And if they die, well...you've killed one person, what does it matter if you kill another? Then you want to kill them right when they become a threat...and before they become a threat...and the next thing you know, you're seeking revenge against people who haven't done anything, just because they spoiled your day or ruined your plans. It's a slippery slope.”

“So, what, are you telling me I should forgive them?” Hiccup asked incredulously, “Forgive Adulfr? After everything he's done? Everything we've been through because of him?”

“Because he's after revenge against all of us for what one person did” Dagur summed up. Hiccup opened his mouth to agree, then realised what the other man was getting at. He scowled. When had the formerly deranged Berserker become so...perceptive?

“I'm not saying you should forgive them” Dagur said, surprisingly gently, “but having them all burnt or frozen to death might be taking things a bit too far. Don't get me wrong, I get why you want revenge. If I were you, I'd have gotten the Screaming Death to kill them all and laughed; but I'm not you. You're you. And the Hiccup I know...isn't a murderer.”

Hiccup’s brow was furrowed, his mouth set in a hard line...but at those words, he was visibly shaken. “What am I supposed to do?” he asked finally.

“I don't know” Dagur admitted, “come up with one of your oh so clever plans, I guess.” He slung an arm around the younger man's shoulders.

Hiccup raised an eyebrow. “Is this a hug?”

“Nope!” Dagur smirked and grabbed him in a headlock, giving him a short but hard noogie before letting him go. Hiccup rubbed the top of his head, smoothing his mussed hair, and scowled at Dagur, who grinned at him.

“Goodnight, brothers” Dagur bid him and Toothless farewell, mounting his dragon. Sleuther flew away, leaving the Alphas alone with their thoughts.
The following morning found Hiccup complaining to his wife and dragon. "How is Dagur the one trying to get me to listen to reason? He's one of the most unreasonable people on the whole…I mean, he's gotten better, but am I the only one who finds him being the sensible one kind of weird?!"

Astrid was surprisingly patient about his nonsensical rant. "You have to admit, he has a point" she said reasonably, when he paused for breath. He scowled, which meant he knew she was right but didn't want to admit it. "You know when Dagur tells you something is a bad idea, then it really is a bad idea. The guy might be weird sometimes, but he's not stupid" she pointed out.

"Whose side are you on?"

Astrid started to retort, but Toothless beat her to it. *The side of not doing something reckless and stupid* he deadpanned from where he was lying on his stone bed. Astrid wasn't sure if he'd picked up the snark from Hiccup or if he'd just always been like that. She suspected it was a bit of both, actually.

"I don't see what your problem is" Hiccup protested, "All I'm suggesting is that we defeat Adulfr and his army permanently, and end this war for good. Why let it drag on when we can just…bam!" He gestured somewhat violently at the air, "And be done with it?"

"How do you know the King would want to destroy the whole army? All those lives lost…you said yourself, it isn't our place to make demands of the King of Dragons. I know your both Alphas, but…well, imagine what would happen if another Chief tried to make demands of me. It'd get messy."

Toothless purred in amusement at the thought of Astrid defending her authority against a challenger; it would surely be entertaining. *Can we get another chief to come here and challenge you?* he asked Astrid, *I want to see you win.* Astrid grinned at him and replied "We'll see."

"Astrid, I'm not going to demand that he destroys the army" Hiccup insisted, "I'm going to ask him to consider it, politely. And it's not even me who's asking. I'll get Cloud Jumper to go. Just as soon as my mom heals more and starts to wake up" he declared.

His wife folded her arms and gave him a look. "Why don't you and Toothless go? You went before."

"I can't leave Berk" he protested, "not now, not with everything that's happened, or could happen."

"So what you're saying is, you're scared."

"I can't take the risk of leaving our island until this war comes to an end" he insisted. Something else occurred to him, and he added, "Lyse should be back in a week or so. If she's brought some of the Night Furies back with her, and if my mother still hasn't woken, then we'll go to the king ourselves" Hiccup decided.

"Why wait? If ending the war is so important, then just go and order Cloud Jumper to take your message to the king right now" Astrid suggested.

He did a double take and blinked at her, unsettled by the sudden change in attitude. "Uh…I'm sorry?"

"You're obviously convinced you're right. If we can't change your mind, then just go ahead and do
it.” Astrid folded her arms and shrugged. “Toothless and I'll wait here.”

Uncertain, Hiccup glanced at his other half, who merely cocked his head to one side and whistled expectantly. “You…alright, fine. I will” Hiccup blustered, taking a step towards the door. Just one, though.

“Okay. You do that” she nodded, idly polishing the blade of her axe. Hesitantly, Hiccup turned his back and took another step towards the door.

A moment later he turned back and demanded, “Why did you change your mind?”

“Am I not allowed to?” she asked innocently.

“No – I mean, yes – I mean, of course, but there must be a reason.”

“I just feel like I'm fighting a losing battle” Astrid shrugged. “You're sure that you're doing the right thing, you're focused” she said, without a hint of irony, even though he wasn't focused right now at all. “What are you waiting for?”

“You're…you're actually on board with this?” he asked incredulously, before remembering, “Wait, I already told you why I'm waiting. For my mother to wake up, so Cloud doesn't have to worry about her whilst he's gone.”

“That could be a while yet. A week, at least, which is just about as much time as it would take to go to the Ice Nest and back. Why not ask him to go now, and she’ll probably be awake by the time he gets back” Astrid reasoned.

Hiccup frowned suspiciously. “I feel like you're trying to hint at something” he deadpanned.

“I'm not hinting. I'm saying, very clearly, that you should go and do what you feel you need to” Astrid declared firmly. “If you can deal with having hundreds, maybe thousands of deaths on your conscience, then go ahead.”

The deaths of people he didn't know and who were attacking his home? Somehow, Hiccup thought he'd be alright. And yet…He squared his shoulders and marched out of the room. When they heard the front door close, Astrid looked at Toothless and inquired, “So, how far do you think he's gonna get?”

The black dragon flicked his ear-flaps and replied, *Halfway, maybe.* They didn't have to wait long before hearing the door open again, and then the bedroom door opened and Hiccup walked in. He groaned and sat down heavily on the edge of the bed. “I can't do it” he admitted, defeated, burying his head in his hands.

A slender arm wrapped around his shoulders, as Astrid set her axe aside and sat beside him. “That's because you're a good person” she reminded him, resting her other hand on his heart. “You are not the man Adulfr thinks you are, and no matter how angry you might be, you know that killing everyone isn't the answer.”

Hiccup no longer felt very angry. He sighed, “You're right. This isn't me. I just…don't know how I can fix this.” He spread his fingers and hands in a shrug, helpless.

“This isn't about you” Astrid chastised gently. “Adulfr might be after revenge on you, but by attacking Berk, he's made this about all of us. So we're all going to figure this out, together. Toothless, what do you think we should do?” she asked.
The Night Fury stretched, cat-like, and hummed thoughtfully. *I don't know… I mean, I know what I'd do if it were dragons, but you humans don't make sense.*

Smirking, Astrid suggested “Okay, let's pretend Hiccup and Adulfr are both dragons. Now what?”

*If they were dragons… if a rival Alpha tried to take over our pack, Hiccup and I would challenge them and defeat them, and then either make their flock part of ours, or drive them all away.*

Toothless explained, *but I don't know if an enemy human flock would accept our victory in the challenge.*

“Challenge… that might just be it” Hiccup muttered. He looked at Astrid and said aloud, “I should just challenge Adulfr to holmgang. Thor knows he's given me enough reason to.”

“That would work” she nodded thoughtfully, “you have a solid claim, and if he refuses he’ll look like even more of a dishonourable coward than he already is. Where are we going to hold it?”

“Healer’s Island; it’s neutral territory. Just don't tell Gothi. I’ll practice beforehand; and when I win, we outlaw him and his army from the archipelago for good.”

“When you win? You know it's not exactly a guarantee, right? He might be just as skilled as you are, or more so.”

“Thank you for summing that up” Hiccup said sarcastically, “and excuse me for trying to think positive. Besides, I have a secret advantage. Right, Toothless?”

*That’s right…but I don't think it's going to be a secret anymore. Not from Astrid, anyway.*

Hiccup noticed that his wife was giving him a look. The one that said, ‘start talking’. He swallowed nervously…. but the Biter was out of the bag, thanks to him and his big mouth, and she was going to get it out of him sooner or later. “Uh… heh, heh… so, you know how I decided to learn to sword fight properly, and I turned out to be pretty good at it?”

“Yes…” she agreed, eyes narrowing.

“W-well I am. I am a good swordsman, really. Honest. It's just, I'm even better when Toothless helps me. He’s my secret advantage, and I need to win this duel, so it's really for the best if I let him help me” he rambled.

Astrid frowned, puzzled. “How does he help you? Hiccup, you decided to learn sword-fighting so you could defend yourself and Toothless, instead of always relying on him.”

“I know, I know, but he insisted. He's not gonna fight Adulfr alongside me, or anything, he's just going to, um, enhance my abilities through our bond, that's all.”

Toothless could tell that Astrid was still confused, and losing patience, so he explained, *I can give him my strength so he doesn't tire, and I can watch his enemy. Adulfr’s body will tell me what he's going to do, where he's going to move, and I can warn Hiccup before he does it. I know challenges are one on one, but we’re heart bound, we are one.*

Astrid now understood, but she was rather suspicious. Hiccup hastily added, “He hasn't been doing this the whole time; and it's not like he's doing the fighting for me. He gives me an edge, that's all. I know it sounds like cheating, but in a fight like this, I need all the advantages I can get.”

The thought of fighting with anyone's strength but your own, to Astrid, felt rather dishonourable. Then again, she held herself to very high standards, and Hiccup was right; he needed to win the duel,
and it wasn’t as if Adulfr wouldn’t cheat given half the chance. He and Toothless worked as a seamless team when they battled on the wing; why shouldn't they be able to do so battling on the ground?

“Alright. You two do what you need to – but you still need to practice” she warned, “Toothless’ warnings won't do you any good if you can't make use of them.”

“Yes, Chief” Hiccup agreed, smiling. He gave her a kiss and then stood up. “C’mon, bud, let's go.”

Lyse should have returned by the end of the week; but Sunday came and went and there was no sign of her, or the Night Furies. The good news was that Valka finally recovered enough to wake up properly, much to the relief of her husband, sons and daughter-in-law. She was horrified when she caught sight of the whip marks on Toothless’ wings, and they had to stop her climbing out of bed to unleash her wrath upon whoever had hurt her precious boys.

It was another week and a half before a scout woke Toothless and Hiccup with the news that Lyse had returned, and she had company. As quietly as possible, Hiccup dressed and saddled his dragon. Astrid woke up anyway, and sleepily warned her husband that if he went out, he stayed out, she wasn't getting woken up again.

Hiccup felt a lot of trepidation on the way to meet Lyse and the Night Furies at the cove. *Stop worrying* Toothless chided, *They won't blame you. They wouldn't dare.*

When they got there, Lyse was waiting alongside five familiar Night Furies. Hiccup dismounted and approached the lone Spike-Tail first. “Lyse, are you okay? I didn’t think you'd be back so late, I was getting worried.”

*I’m fine, Alpha-Hiccup* she purred at him. Her tail-tip flicked nervously as she glanced at the Night Furies added, *I just…had to detour.*

“Detour?” he repeated, confused. Before he could ask, he heard Selena cry out *Toothless, your wings!*

Abruptly, all eyes were on Toothless – and more importantly, on his scarred wings. He raised them defensively to hide the scars. *It isn't as bad as it looks* he protested.

Selena cocked her head and whined, *What happened? Have you been in a fight?*

Before Toothless could answer, Shadow added, *When Lyse found us, she told us you were under attack from hunters. Did you get injured fighting them?* he asked, rumbling concern deep in his chest.

Hiccup and Toothless exchanged a glance. *It was the hunters who injured me…but it wasn’t in a battle* Toothless admitted. *They wanted Hiccup to tell them secrets about what we were planning, so they…they tortured me to get him to talk.*

*WHAT?!!*

All of the dragons had flared their wings or yelped in alarm, but Shadow’s furious shriek rang out and sent crows scattering from the treetops in an invisible cloud of cawing feathers. The emerald eyed Night Fury trembled and snarled unconsciously, angrily. He demanded, *Who did that? Where are they? I'm going to rip their hearts out, how dare they!* His claws gouged furrows into the soil beneath his paws and Asha, his mate, tried to nuzzle him and calm him down.
Hiccup took a deep breath and looked at the cluster of Night Furies. *Listen, there's…there's something I have to tell you. The hunters...their leader figured out I might know something about where you had come from. I wasn't going to tell them, honest, but then...they were gonna break his wing and I couldn't – it hurt so much – I had to tell them. I'm sorry. I told them where your nest is. I'm so sorry* he confessed, cringing, shame in every line of his body.

The Night Furies stared at him. Selena was the first to speak. *But you can't have* she protested, with a puzzled noise.

*I did. I'm sorry, I...I know I betrayed you. If there had been any other way, I...* He shrugged helplessly.

Toothless placed himself protectively between Hiccup and the others, and said firmly, *This isn't his fault. He didn't have a choice, so don't blame him.*

*We don't!* Selena insisted, *but you really can't have told them where we live. You don't even know where we live!*

*Your highness, we mustn't*-*

*We have to tell them something, Nocte! Can't you see how badly Hiccup feels about all this? The least we can do is make him feel better* Selena insisted.

By this point, Hiccup and Toothless were very confused. *Err...tell us what?* Hiccup asked, bewildered.

Selena happily purred, *You haven't betrayed us, silly. You can't have told these awful humans where we live, because you don't even know where our new nest is!*

New...? *No, but – you told me, it's in a valley, with a twin peak... mountain...* said Hiccup, trailing off uncertainly.

*We were living there* Shadow agreed, *but it was too far from the sea, too close to the territories of other dragons. The pack couldn't have lived there for very long. We left years ago, we founded a new Nest. We never told you about it...for just this reason, really. For fear you would tell people about it, even if it wasn't on purpose* he explained.

Hiccup sagged in relief, steadying himself against Toothless. *Oh, thank the Moon. I thought - Wait. Lyse, I...* He turned to the Spike-Tail in puzzlement and asked, *How did you find the Swift-Wing nest if it wasn't where I told you it would be?*

She chittered amusement at him and explained, *When I drew closer to the mountain you told me about, I asked some local dragons if the Swift-Wings lived there, to make sure I was still on the trail. They told me which way the Swift-Wings had gone, so I flew that way until I caught their scent again and followed a hunting party back to their nest. I followed your brother, Alpha-Toothless, actually* Lyse revealed, tipping her head at Shadow, who flicked his ear-flaps, embarrassed.

*You're losing your touch, Shadow!* Toothless teased him.

*Shut up* Shadow grumbled, not meeting anyone's gaze.

Hiccup nearly laughed, but hid it in a cough at the last minute. He reached out carefully to Lyse, mindful of her fangs, and scratched under her chin, making her purr. *Lyse, thank you. You are brilliant, you really are. I'm sorry I sent you on a nearly pointless journey. Go and get some rest, you've more than earned it* he coaxed her.
She stepped away and lowered her heavy head submissively in gratitude. *Thank you, Alpha-Hiccup. Please, don't worry about the wrong directions. You couldn't have known. Goodnight, all of you* she bid them, before spreading her tired wings, turning and taking a running jump into the sky.

Hiccup turned back to the Night Furies and said, *I still don't understand – if you want to keep your new nest a secret, then why did any of you follow Lyse here?*

*Well, I came because, you know, we're family* Shadow admitted, pawing awkwardly at the grass. *And Asha came because I don't think she trusts me on my own.* He winced as his mate indignantly swatted him with her tail.

Hiccup bit back a small laugh. *I know the feeling.*

*I came because I missed you guys* Selena said brightly, before adding, *So Nocte and Skylancer followed me because mother doesn't trust me on my own, even though I can take care of myself* she grumbled.

*Orders are orders, your highness* Nocte said calmly.

*So please don't try to evade us, or the Queen will have our hides* added Skylancer. He was… probably joking.

*Okay. So, I guess we better fill you guys in.* Between them, Hiccup and Toothless explained all that was happening, and why, and their plans…and then they went snow surfing down the lower slopes of Berk’s mountain, because why the heck not? After the last few days, they deserved a bit of fun.

Hiccup intended to practice as much as possible before challenging Adulfr to holmgang. There was a lot at stake, and he needed to be ready. In the meantime there was still a war to be fought. The dragons that Hiccup sent out to spy on Adulfr’s army reported that the armada had abandoned the Isle of Frigga. The ships were tracked to the Straits of Baldur – clearly, Adulfr was planning to besiege their islands.

They couldn't wait for Hiccup to issue the challenge and receive a response – they had to act, because the trade ships were due to arrive any day now. The plans they had made to recapture the Isle of Frigga were reworked for driving the hunters out of the straits. They would attack at night, the better to use the Night Furies camouflage to their advantage.

The day before the attack, Dagur offered to spar with Hiccup. Whilst they fought, Toothless lay Sphinx-like on the edge of the training ring and watched them. His ear-flaps twitched at the sound of paws padding up behind him, and he glanced over to see Shadow approaching.

*Mind if I join you?* the other Night Fury inquired, standing near his younger brother. Without taking his eyes off Hiccup and Dagur, Toothless replied, *Not really.*

Shadow realised that his brother might be distracted. He looked over at the sparring humans – they weren't fighting with blades, but with metal sticks, so it obviously wasn't a real fight. He knew Hiccup, but the bigger male, with red hair like fire and wide wild eyes, was unfamiliar. *Who is that?* 

*That’s Dagur. He's the Chief – the Alpha – of the Berserker tribe* explained Toothless. He couldn't resist adding, *He’s also Hiccup’s older brother.*

Shadow stared at him in surprise. *He has a brother?! A human brother? Why did you never-?*
Toothless hooded his eyes in a dragonish smirk as he said casually, *Well, at least that's what Dagur likes to think.*

He nearly laughed aloud at the look on Shadow’s face. *I ought to bite you for that, Alpha or not* Shadow grumbled. Toothless purred in amusement, mouth pulled back in a gummy grin as he eyed his sulking brother. Before he could continue the teasing, he heard Hiccup cry out and felt pain burst against his ribs – his head whipped round just in time to see his human half get knocked to the ground.

*Hiccup!* In a single bound, he leapt into the ring and rushed over to where Dagur was hauling Hiccup to his feet. The older man backed off as Toothless nosed anxiously at his human, whimpering in empathy at the pain on his flank, an echo of the bruise forming beneath Hiccup’s armour.

“It's alright, bud, I'm fine” Hiccup assured him, shooting a not so subtle glare at Dagur.

“Uh…heh, heh. Sorry. Guess I don't know my own strength.” Dagur laughed awkwardly. When Hiccup simply frowned at him, he cleared his throat and cast around for something else to look at. He soon found it. “Oh my gosh. Hiccup, look!”

Hiccup looked. “Oh, hi, Shadow. Where's Asha?”

*She’s fishing* Shadow replied, eyeing Dagur warily. *Why is he staring at me?*

“Oh, good question. Dagur, why are you staring at him? You're sort of creeping him out. Me too, for that matter.”

Dagur had the widest, maddest grin on his face. “It's - he's a – Hiccup, Night Fury!”

“I did tell you they were here.”

“I know, but now I get to see one in the flesh!” Dagur exclaimed gleefully.

Toothless gave an indignant grunt and demanded, *What am I made of, charcoal?!*

“Dagur, you’ve already seen a Night Fury in the flesh.”

“Oh, right. But still! Hiccup, you have to introduce us!” Dagur insisted, bouncing on his toes like an excited child.

Rolling his eyes, Hiccup gestured between Dagur and Shadow. “Shadow, Dagur. Dagur, Shadow. Now that everyone's introduced, can we get back to training, please?”

“Oh, c’mon, it won't hurt to take a break. We can have a race!” Dagur suggested brightly, “It'll be great. You and Toothless versus me and Shadow, going whoosh, zoom, eee-ooosh!” He swiped his hands through the air, apparently acting out the race he wanted to have. “He can wear my saddle – not mine, I don't wear one, I meant Sleuther’s. It'll fit – probably – and then-!”

“Dagur! Slow down! Look, Shadow is a wild dragon. You can't just throw a saddle on him. You need to earn his trust first, and even then, he might not want to be ridden” Hiccup reminded the Berserker Chief with somewhat strained patience. First rule of dragon training, earn their trust first. Was that really so hard to remember?

“Right, right, sorry. It's okay, Shadow. I'm not gonna hurt you, I'm a nice human, see?” Dagur held his palm out towards Shadow and looked away…but he was quite clearly still peeking at the wary
Night Fury out of the corner of his eyes. Hiccup face-palmed and exchanged a long suffering look with Toothless.

Shadow looked from Dagur to Toothless-Hiccup uncertainly. *He wants to ride me?*

*So we can race* Toothless agreed, *It’ll be fun. Unless you think you're gonna lose. No, wait, you are!*

*Toothless…* Hiccup eyed him disapprovingly, before telling the other Night Fury, *Ignore him, Shadow. You don't have to if you don't want to.*

Shadow hesitated. Maybe it wouldn't hurt…just this once. Just to see what all the fuss was about, why the dragons here were so willing to be ridden. Besides, he needed to try and take his smug little brother down a peg. *I'll do it* he agreed, *but just this once.*

“Are you sure?” Hiccup checked. When Shadow replied in the affirmative, he turned to Dagur and explained, “Shadow says he’ll let you ride him – but just this one time, Dagur, understand? One ride, and that's it.”

“Right. Got it. This is so great!” Dagur cried eagerly, beaming.

Twenty minutes later, Shadow was sprawled on the ground and panting, as Toothless pranced around him victoriously. *I win!* the Alpha crowed, swiping playfully at his brother's shoulder. *I told you that you were gonna lose!* Shadow glared and whipped his tail around to make Toothless stumble. *Don’t act like a hatchling. I would have won, easily, if I hadn't been weighed down* he protested.

Toothless snorted at him. *Dagur's not that heavy. Face it, you're just losing your edge. So, how did my tailwind taste?* he asked mockingly, shaking his rump, *Cos you were eating it most of the time.* Shadow stuck his nose in the air and replied, *I don't know, but it sure smelled bad.*

*Why you-!* Toothless shrieked in outrage and pounced on Shadow, biting his ear-flap in retaliation for the insult. The two drakes scuffled, snapping and clawing. Both of them had their fangs retracted and were pulling their blows, but it was still an alarming sight for any nearby villagers to see two Night Furies seemingly at each other's throats.

*I still don't see what the big deal is with having a rider* Shadow yawned dismissively, grooming himself; the fight had stopped as suddenly as it had started. *I mean, I know why you let Hiccup ride you, but I don't understand why the dragons here would want to have a bit of leather strapped to their backs or neck and shoulders, and have a human sitting on top of them.*

*I’ve told you, it's about teamwork. About having a partner. We can do stuff the humans can't, and they can do stuff we can't. We can do so much more if we work together. It's worth putting up with a little extra weight or discomfort to have a friend flying with you* Toothless explained calmly.

*I suppose.* Shadow scratched at an itch with his hind paw and decided, *but I don't think it's for me.*

*Fair enough* Toothless shrugged, and stretched. *Are you ready for the battle tonight?*

*So long as there's no-one on my back, I'll be fine.*
Every ship in the straits was armed to the teeth with catapults, bolas launchers, mounted crossbows...any dragon rider or enemy ship trying to get past them would have to deal with boulders, dragon-root arrows, oleander arrows and fire-bales being flung at them.

Hiccup and his Night Fury would be hard pressed to deal with so many ships...but the hunters weren't expecting four Night Furies. The intelligent black dragons knew how to maximise their combined firepower to best effect; they paired off and fired three blasts at a time, so that when one dragon ran out of shots, their partner would be ready with more.

There were over a hundred and seventy five dragons attacking, in seven groups of twenty-five or more with the core riders as wing-leaders. Whilst some teams dove shrieking to the attack, others hovered out of range and caught their breaths. During one of these brief lulls, as he and Toothless scanned the battle for any sign of trouble, a Fire-Scale flew over to them, her flames flickering across her scales.

*Alphas! I just saw more dragons with riders coming from the east!* she warned them, twisting in mid-air to look back at the straits and the sea beyond. Frowning, Hiccup pulled his spyglass from its loop on the saddle and peered through it. In the dark it was near impossible to see anything, but he could just make out small flying shapes, heading for them.

If these dragons had riders, then...“It's alright! Find Astrid, tell her I think we’ve got reinforcements!” Hiccup ordered the Fire-Scale drakaina, who swerved away and went in search of his wife. Toothless and Hiccup dove to the attack again, taking out several catapults and a net launcher (plus the net). When they briefly retreated, the new dragons were closer, and they definitely had riders on their backs.

Toothless swerved around to fly level with the Spike-Tail in the lead. “Hey, Eret, Sky Fire! Welcome to the party!” Hiccup called over to them, “Think you guys can lend a hand, or talon, or whatever?”

“You got it, boss!” Eret shouted back, grinning. A plasma blast exploded nearby. “Whoa! Was that-?”

“Yep! Try and keep up” Hiccup challenged, just before Toothless swerved away. Eret surveyed the battlefield and grinned in excitement. Patting Sky Fire’s neck encouragingly, he looked over his shoulder and shouted to his men, “Come on, lads! Charge!”

Dawn was breaking by the time the battle ended, with ships on every side battered almost beyond repair. The hunters ships had fared worse though; they didn't have dragons to blast apart boulders or burn the shafts of spears, or tow them back to safer waters. Adulfr’s armada had put up a worthy fight, but eventually they were forced to retreat.

Victorious, the Hooligans, Outcasts and Berserkers (Astrid had refused Tuffnut’s suggestion that they name the combined army ‘Team Hob’) returned to their own islands. Eret and his crew of ‘dragon wranglers’ went to Berk, with their ship mooring up in the harbour; just getting all the ships sorted out and ready for repairs was a mess Astrid had to untangle first.

Eventually though, Astrid and Hiccup met with Eret at the docks, after he’d come back from making sure his beloved ship was safely anchored. “Hello, Chief” Eret greeted, bowing to Astrid, before nodding to Hiccup. “Hey, boss.”

“Hi, Eret. It's good to see you again. I see you still haven't cut off that ponytail” Hiccup commented.
“And I see you still haven’t grown a decent beard” Eret retorted dryly. The two of them grinned at each other. Eret clapped him on the shoulder and hugged Astrid, giving her a kiss on the cheek. “We’ve got some catching up to do, huh?”

“Well, it has been a year. If you and your men were all on dragon-back, then who was sailing your ship?” Astrid inquired.

“Oh, yeah, get this. I hired some new shipmates to help sail the Cresting Wave. They're not so keen on the dragons though, but I bet you can help with that, boss” Eret suggested confidently.

Hiccup smiled and agreed, “I'd be happy to.”

Just then, Skull Crusher landed nearby and Stoick dismounted, striding over to join them. “Astrid, Hiccup. We had visitors, uninvited ones.”

“Berk was attacked?” Astrid asked in alarm.

“No, not attacked. Some of Adulfr’s men tried to sneak onshore and leave us some unpleasant gifts. Changewing eggs and grimora. Fortunately, the dragons spotted them and we ambushed the buggers.”

“We need get the eggs back to Changewing Island before the Changewings notice they're missing” Hiccup noted, before asking, “What did you do with the grimora?”

“Simple. We left the barrels in the middle of the ocean – even if the wretched buggers get out, they’ll be poisoned straightaway” Stoick explained, before adding, “and don’t worry about the Changewing eggs. Gustav’s taking care of it.”

“We'll figure out what to do with the prisoners later” Astrid decided, “For now, let’s get some rest. Eret, you and your men are sleeping on board your own ship, I take it?”

“Yeah, don’t worry about us. We’ll manage” Eret smiled, petting his dragons nose. Sky Fire chirruped agreeably.

Hiccup and Astrid went back home, where their little girl was fast asleep in bed. “She’s been good as gold” Agatha assured them as she left for her own bed. The chief and her husband unsaddled their dragons, pulled off their armour and collapsed into bed without even bothering to change into nightclothes. Stormfly and Toothless curled up and fell fast asleep as well. They were all exhausted.
Late the next morning, Hiccup and Astrid woke up. With no one to wake her, Helena too had overslept. It was going to be hard getting her to settle down to sleep that night. Agatha came over to babysit her and told them that Eret was waiting with his men at the docks. Astrid donned her feather-shouldered chieftain’s cloak, Hiccup and Toothless their ceremonial peytrals; after all, they wanted to make a good impression.

When they arrived, Eret was standing outside the archway with his now nine strong crew, including four new hires. “Morning, chief, morning, boss” Eret smiled broadly, getting to his feet. He stepped aside and turned to his new ship-mates. “Well, lads, allow me to introduce the Chief of Berk, Astrid Hofferson, and her husband, aka the Dragon Ambassador, Hiccup Haddock. Chief, boss, these are my new shipmates; Aksel, Alfgautr, Andvari and Safira” he acquainted everyone.

“Welcome to Berk” Astrid welcomed them with a smile; they shook hands with her and then with Hiccup. “Have you had breakfast yet?” she inquired.

“Yeah, don't worry, Chief, we've eaten” Eret agreed, before adding, “Hope you don't mind if we resupply here.”

“Not at all” she replied amiably.

“Thanks. Tinni, you're in charge while I'm helping show our new shipmates around Berk.”

“Sure thing, captain.”

“Before we begin, do any of you have any questions?” Astrid inquired.

There was a pause, and then Aksel, the youngest of the four, looked at Hiccup and asked curiously but shyly, “Did you really defeat a Bewilderbeast? Because I thought that dragon was just a myth.”

“Eret told you about that, huh? No, they are real, and yes, Toothless and I did defeat one. Although I'm not sure if you can call what we did ‘defeating’ him…he just sort of left on his own.”

“And did you really slay a Red Death?”

“Yes, we – hey!” Hiccup abruptly cut himself off to run over to a nearby bickering Monstrous Nightmare and a Hobblegrunt whose scales were scarlet with anger. He got between them and pushed their muzzles apart; they could snap his hands off with one bite, but instead they both whimpered apologetically as he scolded them and sent them off in opposite directions.

Clearing his throat, Hiccup returned to the others. “Sorry about that.”

“It's fine. Let's get the tour started then, shall we?”

Hiccup smiled and gestured for her to go first. “After you, milady” he said politely, a perfect gentleman. Astrid pecked him on the lips as a reward. She walked up the path and Hiccup followed, their dragons faithfully pacing alongside them, easily keeping up.

Behind them, Hiccup clearly heard Aksel whisper, “Did you see that? His hands were practically in their mouths!”

“Crazy man” one of the others muttered.
As they walked up through the village, the inhabitants, human and Dragon alike, eyed the newcomers with curiosity and a bit of wariness. The villagers greeted the familiar faces warmly; “Good morning, chief. Morning, Hiccup. Morning, Eret”; and were greeted warmly in turn.

As Hiccup and Toothless passed, nearby dragons stopped whatever they were doing and lower their heads and shoulders submissively to the pair, purring contentedly. Toothless crooned approval back to them, touching noses with ones who approached, and Hiccup petted them as he passed. It held their little procession up a bit, but by this time everyone on Berk was used to the dragons devoting their attention to their Alphas simply because the pair were nearby.

The exception being their guests, of course. “Are they…bowing to you?” Aksel wondered, as Hiccup scratched under the chin of a Zippleback’s head whilst the other nuzzled snouts with Toothless.

“Yeah, they do that. See, the Bewilderbeast we defeated? He was the Alpha, the leader, of all of the dragons enslaved in Drago’s army. After Toothless and I made him surrender, the dragons of his pack, and the dragons of our pack, saw us as their new Alphas. So they bow to us, in respect and deference…we don't force them or anything, they just do it.”

One of Eret’s men, Alfgautr, protested gruffly, “But you must have trained them to bow in the first place.” Hiccup recognised his voice and realised that the bearded blond was the one who thought he was crazy for putting his hands near the fangs of a dragon.

“No, actually, all dragons bow to their Alphas, even wild ones. It's an instinctive act of submission to the dragon at the top of the hierarchy” he explained, using what Astrid had dubbed his ‘lecturing voice’.

“It can't be that easy, having beasts that breathe fire living everywhere” Safira, the only woman in Eret’s crew, suggested.

“Well, just because they can breathe fire, doesn't mean they will” Hiccup defended, “Most of the fires get started by accident. But they do happen, so I designed this series of elevated water channels”, here he gestured up to the network of troughs, “to douse fires wherever they might pop up; which on Berk, admittedly, is pretty much everywhere.”

“Not to mention, all our dragons have been trained to help put out fires. They can smother the flames, flap their wings to blow them out; Hiccup even invented water slings that they can use to carry water to a fire and drown it” Astrid revealed.

"But I'll admit, having such large creatures living on the island did come with its fair share of challenges” Hiccup conceded, “such as, where they could all stay. Then we got attacked by Whispering Deaths and discovered a series of caves beneath the village, which are right through here.”

He and Toothless led the way through a large archway carved out of the stone, into a spacious cavern. There were steps carved into the rock down to an open space; colourfully painted stables of varying sizes tucked into every gap and hollow in the walls. It was full of dragons, and apart from the ones who were asleep, they all bowed to their Alphas. “Be at ease” Hiccup told them all, before looking over his shoulder and announcing “Welcome to the stables, filled with custom nests to suit every kind of dragon.”

They spent a few minutes showing their guests around the cavern, displaying the storm doors and various features. “Our blacksmith, Gobber, came up with the idea to have a saddle post and water
trough at each stable” explained Astrid, “all replenished by the water wheel outside. And the deeper tunnels have torches that are burning pretty much all day, every day. We humans can't see that well in the dark, after all.”

“You must use up a lot of oil” Alfgautr commented gruffly. He was very practical-minded, and disliked waste.

“Nope. We don't use oil; Fire-Scale gel provides a longer lasting flame, and we have a practically limitless supply” Hiccup explained.

Puzzled, Aksel cleared his throat and asked, “Uh, I'm sorry, Fire-Scale? What's…?”

“It's the dragon you would call a Monstrous Nightmare” said Hiccup, “We use less…well, silly and insulting names for the different breeds now. Deadly Nadder’s are Spike-Tails, Zippleback’s are Twin-Heads, Gronckles are Rock-Tails, etc. Sometimes we use them interchangeably. Now, see, if you look at the cave walls, you can see some graffiti drawn courtesy of Berk’s youngest artists. This is my favourite piece” he said fondly.

The ‘artwork’ in question was a series of small red handprints and some black smears that sort of, if one was very generous, vaguely resembled a Night Fury. Or not. “Our daughter did that” Astrid explained with an amused smile, “Helena. She’s just turned three.”

“She's precious” Hiccup added, before eagerly suggesting, “We should introduce them to her!”

“Maybe later” Astrid said wryly. “Shall we move on?”

They left the caverns and continued up through the village. Hiccup pointed up at the sheer cliffs of Berk’s mountain and all the caves, complete with landing platforms, visible there. “We ran out of room below ground, so we started carving – well, blasting – new caves out of the cliffs above ground. I think at this point Berk might be more hollow than solid” he quipped. “Oh, and the landing platforms? Each one is attached to a pulley system. All the dragon has to do is yank on a rope inside their cave; the platform swings up, and the counter-weight holds it shut. You can't see them from here, but there are slanted gaps at the end of the platform, so when it's closed, the rain, sleet and hail can't get in, but the fresh air and sunlight can.”

There was a feeding station nearby; some children were giving fish to the dragons. When the group came near they scrambled over to say hello to the Chief and their teacher and to clamber all over Toothless. The Night Fury gave his rider a long suffering look as the youngsters swarmed him; although Toothless had to admit that the human children were somewhat more tolerable than the hyperactive, disobedient Scuttleclaw hatchlings.

Chuckling, Hiccup ushered the kids away. Astrid pointed out some places of interest in the village, but really, the most interesting places on Berk were those involving dragons. When they reached the village square, Hiccup announced, “And this is the dragon armoury. It used to be just a blacksmith stall, but now we’ve expanded it into a one-stop dragon service centre. We still make a few weapons here, but we mostly build fireproof saddles, wing slings – heck, Gobber even practices dragon dentistry!”

He was beginning to think the dragons breaths might smell better than some of the Vikings, but he didn't say that. Some of them might overhear.

Astrid introduced Gobber to Eret’s new crew-members. The old blacksmith gave them a bit of a tour of the workshop, helped – or hindered – by Hiccup eagerly showing off his inventions and the
dragon-wing windmill that powered them all.

Out of the four, Aksel looked the most impressed. “You've thought of everything” he said to Hiccup, “It’s no wonder dragons like to live here.”

“That's all well and good, but what about the people?” Alfgautr demanded, “What do they get from having dragons underfoot all the time?”

Eret grinned and quipped, “Well, apart from the Terrors, most of the dragons can’t get underfoot. They're too big.” Everyone else chuckled, and the blond scowled a bit. Eret clapped him on the shoulder and shot him a warning glance that said ‘behave’.

“Dragons are people too” Hiccup insisted, “You have to look past the fangs and claws and scales to see it, but they’re more like us than humans realise. If you really want to see what it's like living with dragons, well…” He gestured to Toothless’ saddle and smiled invitingly, and asked, “How about a ride?”

Alfgautr looked like he was regretting ever asking the question, whilst Andvari turned a bit pale, but the other two seemed interested. Aksel raised his hand like he was a child in school, with a tentative but hopeful smile on his face. “I'll, uh…I'll do it. I'll have a ride. On a Night Fury…wow…”

So Hiccup swung himself into the saddle and motioned for Aksel to climb on behind him. “I'm not gonna be too heavy, am I?” the young man asked as he somewhat awkwardly climbed on.

“Nah – Toothless is a lot stronger than he seems. He can carry my dad around – for a while, at least – and my dad's huge. You're not that much bigger than me.”

Astrid offered the others a ride, but only Safira accepted. The other two weren't as keen to climb onto the back of a dragon. Being around tame dragons was one thing – riding them was another matter entirely. "Hold on tight" Hiccup advised Aksel, and felt the man’s hands tighten on his shoulders. Astrid gave a similar instruction to Safira.

The dragon leapt, beating his wings hard to clear the buildings and tilting them to angle into the wind. Aksel felt his stomach stay behind as if he was on a ship being pitched near vertical by massive waves. They climbed ever higher, spiralling upwards on the thermal of warm air rising from Gobber’s forge. He held on tight and kept his eyes screwed shut, and very much regretted his decision.

They went up and up for what felt like forever…then the flight levelled out, as Toothless found a good strong wind to glide on. Hiccup glanced over his shoulder and asked, “You okay back there?”

“Sure!” Aksel squeaked unconvincingly.

“…You, uh, gonna loosen your grip there? Or open your eyes?”

“I'm good.”

“Aksel, trust me. Trust Toothless. We won't let you fall” Hiccup reassured him. The young sailor kept a firm grip on Hiccup’s shoulders, repeating a silent mantra of don’t look down, don’t look down, don’t look down…

He dared to open his eyes; and of course, the first thing he did was to foolishly glance down. He glimpsed the ocean far below and tightened his grip instinctively. Hiccup winced. “Aksel?”

“Huh? Oh, sorry”, the man loosened his hold a bit, “It's just…oh my gods, that's high. I…I can see
the mountaintop! Do you guys really go this high all the time?” he asked, half impressed and half disbeliefing.

“Oh, we can go much, much higher than this. This is as high as I take new riders at first, though.”

“This high? Wouldn't it be safer to start closer to the ground?”

“Actually, it'd be more dangerous. See, the biggest danger when you're riding a dragon is falling off, right? If you fell off right now – you won't, but if you did, Toothless and I would catch you. But we’d need time to do it. The closer a new dragon-rider pair is to the ground, the more at risk they are from crashing, especially if they're inexperienced” Hiccup explained.

“Oh…yeah, that makes sense. I didn't think of that. You know…I think there might be something to this whole ‘living with dragons’ thing. The next time I'm back in my own village, maybe I'll… mention the idea” Aksel said thoughtfully. They probably wouldn't listen, but it couldn't hurt to try.

Hiccup smiled in triumph. “Glad to hear it.”

During lunch, they filled Eret and his crew in on the war. When he heard about Hiccup’s plan to challenge the army’s leader to holmgang, Eret couldn't help but ask, “Uh, boss? It's not that I don't believe in you, or anything, but what exactly are you planning to do if you don't win this duel?”

“If I don’t win, then I'm going to use our last resort” Hiccup explained, “Toothless and I will lead the dragons from Berk; I won't let them fall into Adulfr’s hands; and we’ll go to the King. We might have to go to him anyway, if Adulfr doesn't keep his word and leave the archipelago. I don't know anymore, Eret” he sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose, “I'm just ready for this war to end.”

“Fair enough; but for what it's worth, I hope you win” Eret told him.

“You and me both.”

“See, what I really don't get is…okay, you said this Adulfr person is out for revenge, right? Personally I think an army is overkill, but here's the thing – why are they doing this? What do they think they're getting out of it?” Eret wondered. Whether it was for money or glory, from vengeance or fear, men always had a reason to go to war.

“We interrogated the few we captured after the oleander attack” said Astrid, “but they hardly told us anything. Just that they were ‘taking care of old business’ and ‘striking first’. I suppose…well, we have to assume they're in this for the same reason they joined Drago’s army” she shrugged.

“But you didn't know who their leader was at the time, did you?” Safira pointed out, but her tone was quizzical. Astrid shook her head. “Alright, so, why don't you ask them what they were offered by him?”

“You can tell them if they don't talk, you’ll sic the dragons on them” Jorge, one of Eret’s crewmen, suggested half-jokingly.

“We tried that” Astrid admitted, “and it usually works a treat, but these guys…they just kept saying things like, ‘you're proving us right. Keep threatening us, you're proving us right’. They were scared, but it's like they didn't care.”

"What they meant was, we’re proving Adulfr right” Hiccup said bitterly. “He played on their fear of dragons, and convinced them that we – that I would turn dragons on them if they didn't defeat us first. So when our dragons threatened them, all it did was make them feel justified in attacking us.”
“That's stupid” Eret protested, “If they had half a brain between them, they'd know they were asking to be threatened by attacking Berk. Only a moron pokes a stick into a wasp nest, and only a bigger moron blames the wasps” he said wisely.

“Well, there's only one way to find out. Come on, Hiccup” Astrid instructed, getting to her feet. “I think it's time we paid our uninvited guests a visit.”

Astrid and Hiccup strode into the jail, and found themselves the recipients of wary and resentful glares from the occupants of the cells. Astrid planted her hands on her hips, drew herself up and demanded, “Tell us how Adulfr Haukeson convinced you to join his army and attack our island.”

The glowers continued, but nobody spoke. “Have you all forgotten what happened five years ago?” Hiccup questioned, somewhat rhetorically. “We’ve defeated you before. I took down Drago and then I let the rest of you leave, and lately you've been making me regret that decision. Whatever Adulfr told you about me, I assure you it isn't true. Think about it. If I really wanted to take over the world with dragons, don't you think I would have started doing it by now?”

The prisoners were still silent, but this time the silence spoke volumes. They wouldn't meet the two Vikings eyes. As he looked around the jail, Hiccup glimpsed a face he hoped he'd never see again. He stiffened, eyes narrowing. “You!” he growled, making quick strides over to the cell and grabbing the man’s collar. “How do you have the gall to set foot on this island after what you did to my dragon-?”

“Oh, yeah, how is th’ Night Fury? Y’know it were nothin’ personal, like” the wretch sneered at him. Hiccup punched him through the bars, hard, and he staggered backwards with a satisfying yell of pain.

“Astrid?” As she asked sharply; it wasn't like him to be so violent. Maybe she was rubbing off on him. “Wait a minute, is that-?”

“He's one of the hunters who tortured Toothless” Hiccup revealed through gritted teeth, all but snarling like a dragon himself. His sense of mercy and decency could only stretch so far, and for this piece of scum, he had none at all. Hiccup could forgive most people most things, but he would never, ever forgive anyone who harmed those he loved.

Astrid stared coldly at the prisoner. “I see” she said calmly.

“I wash never going on thish island” the man protested, his voice thickened by a nosebleed, “I were jush on th’ ship. You lost snatched ush all up an’ stuck ush in ‘ere. But ya know what? We’re gonna get out, an’ we’re gonna come back to get all these dragons o’ yours.”

Hiccup fists clenched; his jaw was so tight it hurt. “Here's an idea. Why don't I go and get some dragons and lock you in a bigger cell with them?”

The man smirked, humourless, and looked past Hiccup to the other prisoners in the cells. “You lot hear that? The Dragon Master wants to feed me to his pet monsters just cos I asked a question!”

Bitter muttering ensued; Astrid glared at them all and snapped, “That's not what he meant”- but Hiccup held up a hand to cut her off, without taking his eyes off of the despised hunter, the same way he wouldn't take his eyes off a snake.

In a low voice thick with barely controlled anger, he said clearly, “No dragon in their right mind would devour you – not unless they wanted to be poisoned. But kill you? The dragons know what you did. If you escape they'll smell it on you, your guilt, your fear. And they're gonna do what
dragons do. If I were you, I'd stay in jail.”

With that threat hanging in the air, Hiccup turned on his heel and strode out of the jail. Wordlessly, he swung himself into Toothless’ saddle and the pair took off to patrol the island…and warn the dragons that a hunter who had hurt their Alphas was here in the Nest.

That very night, the hunter worked to pick the lock of his cell. The other prisoners warned him there was no point, some of them had tried to escape before and failed. Too many dragons, that were too alert and wary. He scoffed at them all. Bunch of cowards. He wasn't going to just sit here in a crowded cell for Odin knew how long; he was going to escape, and damn to Helheim anyone or anything who got in his way.

Never mind the dragons; he could sneak past the dumb beasts, keep to the shadows; his dark clothes still held the odour of dragon-berry juice, that would keep his true scent hidden from their noses. It had worked a treat with the oleander poisoned fish.

He had not been present at the Battle of Baldur Straits; nor had he seen Selena and Asha the night of his capture. So he had no idea that there were Night Furies, who could see in the dark and not be seen, keeping an eye on the island and all the inhabitants. He finally got his cell door broken open – he freed the men from his own tribe, but too many people would slow them down, they'd be too noticeable. The rest of them were on their own.

They checked the coast was clear and slipped out of the jail. These idiot Berkians hadn’t even left a guard at the door! That, though, was because there was a guard on the roof. As soon as Shadow saw them emerge, he spread his wings and leapt, vanishing into the darkness before the hunters looked round suspiciously at the faint noise.

They made their way down to the docks, intending to steal a longboat. They looked all around, moving as quietly as they could and keeping to the shadows, clutching whatever weapons, however small, they had managed to conceal in their clothes. Even a dagger could be used to fend off a dragon, after all, if you knew how to use it right.

Then, when they finally reached the path down to the docks…they found their way blocked by the dragons that had been suspiciously absent the whole way there. More dragons landed behind them, surrounding the would-be escapees in a circle of outspread wings and fangs. It finally dawned on them just how outmatched they were, and that this had been a really, really bad idea.

They tried to fight back, but they might as well have been defending themselves with toothpicks. The dragons swatted knives from their hands and snatched them up in claws and jaws, and dropped them into cages, and slammed the doors shut above them, and dropped rocks onto the doors to pin them closed. Alpha-Hiccup had taught them how, and it was a clever and funny idea, to trap dragon hunters in traps meant for dragons.

They locked up every hunter – except one. The one that had attacked their Alphas for cruel sport. That one they hauled into the sky, higher and higher above the ocean…far enough from the island that no one there would be able to hear his screams.

The rest never saw him again.

*Toothless? Did we do the right thing?* Hiccup asked the next day, as they were out on the lookout for enemy vessels.
*What do you mean?*

*I mean, telling the dragons about...whatever his name was. That hunter.*

Toothless snorted, dismissive. *Don't tell me you pity him.*

*No, it's just...they're going to fear the dragons, and me, even more now. I'm just worried I might have made things worse.*

*Hiccup, you can't control what they think. It's like Eret said, they brought this on themselves. If they hadn't listened to Jerk Junior and stayed at home, none of this would have happened.*

Hiccup bit back a laugh. *You're right* he sighed, *Thanks, bud. You always know what to say.*

The black dragon somehow managed to preen in mid-flight. *That's because I'm the sensible one* he said dryly. Hiccup half-heartedly swatted his shoulder in remonstration.

A few days later, Hiccup found Eret emerging from the jail. “Eret? What were you doing in there?”

“Oh, just chatting with the guests” the ex-trapper replied with a disarming smile. “I was just explaining to them that you're not going to feed them to the dragons the way you did to that one guy”.

“They didn't eat him” Hiccup said automatically, without denying that he had indeed let the dragons kill the man. The only things that eased his conscience a little was that the hunter deserved it, after what he'd done, and that it had been a quick death. Shadow had delivered the killing shot, taking vengeance on his brothers' behalf, and they had burned the body.

Hiccup sighed and dragged a hand over his face. “They must despise me even more now. Why were you even talking to them?”

Eret shrugged. “I figured since they were a captive audience – ha – it'd be a good opportunity to try and change their minds about dragons. And since, yeah, they probably hate your guts, I figured I was the second best man for the job. After all, you taught me everything I know.”

“Eret, if you can pull that off, I'll...give you a raise.”

“You don't even pay me.”

“A bigger cut, then. I'd be very impressed – not to mention grateful. Speaking of which, thanks for bringing your new crew here. I know some minds...a lot of minds...can't be changed about dragons, but knowing I've changed even one, it means a lot.”

Eret smiled and clapped him on the shoulder. “Happy to help, boss.”

“Well, if you want to help, how about sparring with me?”

“Right, you're still practicing for the duel. When are you actually going to challenge him? I mean, it's been almost three weeks since you came up with the idea, hasn't it?”

“Actually, the dragons spotted a hunter ship off the coast of Dragon Island this morning. Whilst we were driving them away, I gave one of the hunters a message to take back to Adulfr. If he hasn’t responded by tonight – and I doubt he will – I’m going to take a more direct approach.”

“You think you're ready?”
"I hope so."

Adulfr was in his cabin, reading over the letter, one hand idly stroking Skadi’s fur. The dark grey she-wolf had been his most trusted companion ever since he was a boy. She and all the pack...Fenrir, Garmr and Sigrún...he missed them, but he had only been able to bring one with him.

He would take a wolf over a dragon any day. Wolves were beautiful creatures, graceful in form and motion; unlike dragons, with their hideous jutting fangs and spikes and lumps. He could admit, he supposed, that the Night Fury was one of the more…palatable dragons to look at. When he succeeded in getting the dragons under control, he might have to ride one himself. A dark smile played over his face as he considered it; perhaps he should become the new master of the Night Fury who killed his father.

That would be neatly ironic, and bring everything full circle quite nicely. This wasn't entirely a matter of revenge; oh, that was part of it, undoubtedly. The Dragon Master and his fanged steed had stolen his opportunity to prove himself to his father…but if he could not prove himself to Hauke, then he would have the respect of everyone else.

Even if he had to take it by force.

His tribe had learned to fear him, respect him, but he would not be a forgotten footnote in history, a worthless nobody. Drago Bludvist would have been known and respected by the world. He would have brought the creatures that plagued the world that rightfully belonged to mankind to heel, beginning with the fiercest of them all...the so called Dragon Master would rather let the beasts run rampant as they pleased, and expect humanity to put up with them.

“Come, Skadi” he said, rising to his feet, “I believe it's time we gave Hiccup Haddock the Third our reply.”
Time had no meaning to the leviathan that swam beneath the waves. He had only the barest awareness of the turn of the moon and sun through the sky; he had no idea that it had been five years since his entire life changed.

Ever since, he'd been wandering the oceans, feeding on the creatures that lurked in the depths and trying to find a place he belonged. At first, he thought he should find a pack to rule over. It felt like what he was supposed to do. Master had always told him he had to control other dragons, and he knew he could…so, shouldn't he?

Yet whenever he tried to take over a pack – and he should be able to easily – he found that he couldn't. In his minds eye, he saw the face of the first human to ever show him mercy, to ever teach him what mercy even was. His chest would tighten like chains were wrapping around his heart, and his gut felt like the giant squids he'd devoured had come to life and were writhing inside him.

It was unpleasant and confusing and unfamiliar. He had never experienced such an emotion…even when he had done wrong and displeased Master, he had felt fear at the thought of the punishment that would surely come. It took a long time for him to realise that what he was feeling was guilt.

These nests had Queens or Alphas of their own – they didn't want or need him. When he finally managed to overcome his hesitation, and take over a pack, he found he didn't know what to do. He defended the nest, but should he lead his new subjects into battle? Against whom?

There was no one to tell him what to do. For as long as he could remember, Master had told him what to do. Now, however, Master was gone and he was alone. Beast supposed that what he needed was a new Master. Someone to tell him what to do, because freedom had been nice for a while but then it had become…very, very lonely.

He would like a new Master – a kinder Master, maybe. One who wouldn't hurt him. Then he remembered the small human again. The human who had killed Master, but shown him mercy. Beast wanted that human to be his new Master.

He knew that the human and the Swift-Wing with whom he was heart bound had defeated him together, so they would be the new Alphas of their pack together. Perhaps they would show mercy to him again and let him join their pack, and then he would have somewhere he belonged.

Now, five years after being challenged and defeated and sent away…Beast was returning to the archipelago.

All of this was unbeknownst to Hiccup and Toothless, who were flying above Berk and keeping an eye on things as usual. The Night Fury’s ear-flaps pricked at the distant sound of a dragon’s screech, registering it as the sound of an intruder alarm. He banked into the wind and wheeled around to face due south, eyes scanning the distant horizon.

“What is it?” Hiccup frowned, before the scream sounded again, close enough for him to hear. A flick of the tail-fin and they surged forwards, honing in on where the alarm call had come from. In a matter of moments, they had caught up to the Hobblegrunt that had sounded the alarm. *What’s wrong, Camara?* Hiccup asked her.

Camara weaved around and slowed by a hover to their side, pointing with her narrow muzzle down
and towards the ocean. *There’s a ship, Alpha-Hiccup. One of the hunter’s ships, coming this way!*

*Just one ship?* Hiccup wondered, before he realised... *Camara, go back to Berk and find Astrid, tell her what's going on. We’ll watch and wait* he instructed.

The drakaina couldn't exactly bow in mid-air, but she ducked her head in a nod before darting away. Toothless flew forwards and they soon reached the lone ship, and began to circle above it. There was the usual complement of catapults and arrow launchers on the deck, aimed skyward; but given that the ship was alone, it seemed more likely that these were a mere precaution.

Unwilling to fly down onto an enemy vessel without backup, the pair waited and watched until Astrid arrived. She was accompanied by Stoick, the rest of the Core Riders and Eret. All of them looked at Hiccup with expressions ranging from worry to hopefulness to badly hidden fear; they knew what this had to be about.

Hiccup took a deep breath and blew it out, and said aloud, “Well, here goes nothing.”

They flew down and landed on the deck of the ship. The hunters allowed them to, and Hiccup wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He could feel his skin prickling with nerves, goosebumps popping up beneath his clothes and armour. He was confident, and yet...

Stormfly and Skull Crusher landed on either side of them; the others remained in the air, hovering near or circling the ship. The hunters on deck watched them warily and they did the same. Hiccup dismounted and walked forward a few paces, and then stopped, facing off across from Adulfr.

The man had a wolf standing at his side, dark grey matted fur and piercing toxic yellow eyes. When Hiccup noticed her, she growled at him. "Hush. Sit, Skadi" Adulfr commanded, without taking his eyes off Hiccup, and the wolf obediently did so. The growl stopped, but the unsettling stare did not.

Astrid, who had never seen the hunter’s leader before, was struck by how eerily similar he and her husband looked. Same slender build, similar messy hairstyles although Adulfr’s was shorter, same hard expressions…she made a mental note to never mention the comparison to Hiccup.

“I take it you got my message” Hiccup broke the silence first.

“Yes, it was delivered. It was rather rude of you not to have the decency to at least challenge me in person, you know.”

Biting back a thousand retorts, Hiccup clenched and unclenched his fists before admitting, reluctantly, “I suppose. Well, consider this the in-person challenge. I, Hiccup Haddock, challenge you, Adulfr Haukeson, to holmgang. First to disarm the other wins.”

Adulfr raised an eyebrow. “First to disarm? I didn't think you were such a coward. A true holmgang is fought to the death.”

“Neither of us have any reason to risk being killed by the other” Hiccup pointed out.

“And yet both of us have every reason to want the other dead” Adulfr shot back. He eyed Hiccup sceptically and remarked, “It seems to me that the only reason you would suggest a deathless holmgang is because you're afraid you might lose. You're taking all the fun out of it.”

Hiccup cast around desperately for some way out. He could – he thought – kill Adulfr, if it came to it, in self-defence…but he didn't really want to risk being killed.

Thankfully, before he had to try and come up with an excuse and possibly – probably – make things
worse, Eret called down from Sky Fire’s saddle, “The whole point of this duel is to bring an end to this war you started, not make it worse. You know what we’ll do to you if you kill Hiccup, and we know what your men will do if he kills you. He’s right - there’s no reason to risk it.”

Hiccup glanced up at Eret and gave him a subtle, silent thank you. Adulfr frowned, seemingly lost in thought, before sighing. “Very well” he said resignedly, “Not to the death. It does make life easier, I suppose. And the stakes?”

“If I win, then you and your army need to leave in peace, and you are to never return, and your men are never to hunt any dragon in the Barbaric Archipelago” Hiccup explained clearly.

Adulfr considered this, and finally nodded. “Very well; you have my word. But if I win, then you will be exiled from this archipelago, and before you're sent away, your final order to your dragons will be for them to obey me.”

Hiccup frowned. “I don't control them as much as you think I do. I can't promise they'll obey you, even if I do give that order” he pointed out.

“I only need your word that you will give it” said Adulfr.

Only the order? He could agree to that much, at least; he doubted any of the dragons would listen. It wasn't as if Adulfr could tell the difference between a command of will and a mere instruction. “Fine. You have my word” he said curtly.

“There is one other thing I want,” Adulfr said faux-casually – before pointing at Toothless. “Him.”

Hiccup stared at him in disbelief. “What?!”

Toothless hackled and growled, a posture mirrored by the wolf. She looked like she wanted to leap at them, if not for Adulfr’s fingers digging into the scruff of her neck. “You heard me. If I win, I have your Night Fury.”

“No. No! You can't have him,” Hiccup refused. “Everything else, but not him.”

“Then I won't accept your challenge, and the war will continue, and I will take your dragons by force.”

The other riders protested…but Astrid was forced to admit that Adulfr had the right to make such a demand. Hiccup knew she was only being impartial, as a Chief should, but he couldn't help feeling betrayed. He couldn't agree to this! He couldn't agree and he couldn't refuse...

So he made his choice. *Toothless, do you trust me?*

*Always* came the reply.

Adulfr held a hand out, and challenged, “So, is it agreed?”

Hiccup strode forwards. In those moments there was almost utter silence, as if the entire world had held its breath. Finally he reached out and grasped his enemy's hand. “Agreed – on one condition. Nobody gets hurt. Not my people, not the dragons, no-one.”

“So be it. We shall meet in three days time, at dusk, on Healer Island” –

“Not there” Hiccup said hastily, “Berk. Our village Elder…didn't take well to my arranging a duel on sacred ground” he explained.
That was an understatement - he'd just returned to Berk after passing on the message when Gothi snagged him, thumped him on the head with her staff, and scribbled crossly in the dirt. Her message, roughly translated, was that if he even thought about spilling blood on a sacred island, Adulfr would be the least of his worries.

They agreed on the time and place – then Hiccup mounted up and the dragon riders took to the air again. He refused to talk about what had transpired.

During lunch, Eret arrived in the Great Hall and inquired, “Chief, can I give you some advice?”

“Uh, sure, Eret. What is it?” Astrid asked.

He sucked in a breath and released it slowly. “I think you should set the prisoners free.”

Everyone stopped and stared at him. “You think she should what?” Hiccup demanded, frowning. Where had this even come from?

“You heard me. What good is it doing anyone, keeping them here? The last time they tried to escape, did they attack anyone? Did they do anything except try to leave?”

That gave them all pause. Hiccup shifted uncomfortably, and reluctantly admitted, “Well, no…but if we set them free, they'll just go right back to Adulfr and”-

“And so what? It's not like they have anything to tell him. I've been talking to them, trying to understand why they're doing this. And I can't get through to the ones from Adulfr’s tribe – those guys just seem to think humans are better than dragons, for whatever reason. But the rest of them? Yeah, they're scared of the dragons, but they're more afraid of us. The riders. And especially you, boss.”

Ruffnut scoffed. “Who'd be scared of Hiccup? Come on, who'd be scared of that?” she laughed, gesturing to…well, all of him. Hiccup decided not to make a snarky retort for once, and instead said to Eret, “Is this about the whole ‘dragon master’ thing? Because I'm not some kind of”-

“Yeah, we know you're not a maniac like Drago Bludvist, but they don't. They don't know you like we do. What they do know is that all of the dragons in his army are now under your command. And they've heard rumours. That you came back from the dead, that you were cursed…the really superstitious ones think you're some kind of demon.

“They're afraid that if more and more tribes fall under your sway and start riding dragons, how long will it be until those tribes are attacking their enemies on the wing? Better to put the fire out at its source, so to speak, than let it spread and consume them” Eret explained.

“But even if that did happen, would it really be Hiccup’s fault?” Fishlegs asked reasonably. “I mean, it's not like he can control what people do.”

“But if I were the one who convinced them to ride dragons in the first place…I'd still be responsible, in some way” Hiccup sighed. He scrubbed a hand over his face and asked Eret, “So you think letting them go will help convince them I'm not as bad as they believe?”

“Exactly. Who knows? They might not go back to Adulfr. And if they do, it won't make much of a difference now.”

Hiccup sighed. Everything Eret said made sense, even if he didn't want to admit it. Astrid agreed with him as well, which more or less settled the whole matter. The rest of the village took a bit more
convincing, but eventually they were persuaded that this was for the best.

Needless to say, the prisoners were rather suspicious. It took a while for Eret to convince them that the dragons weren't waiting outside to snatch them up as soon as they came out. It was odd, having to persuade people out of cells. Astrid made it very clear that this act of mercy was a one-time deal; they could go back to Adulfr and attack Berk all over again, but next time, they wouldn't be treated so leniently.

When one of them asked why they were being set free, Hiccup replied, “So you can tell everyone that I'm not a demon, or a war-mongerer... I'm just trying to defend my people, and I will do anything to protect my family. Remember that” he warned them.

Astrid sent word to Alvin and Dagur to release their prisoners as well, for the same reason and with the same warning.

The day of holmgang was bright at dawn, but as the day went on, the clouds gathered. Hiccup wasn't superstitious, but he couldn't help feeling a bit of foreboding when he glanced up at the gloomy sky. Everyone said it wasn't a good omen, and he just hoped it was a bad omen for the other guy.

The duel was taking place in the training ring, on a piece of hide, as per tradition. The Berkians, as well as many of the dragons, were gathered at one side of the ring. Even more perched on the cliffs above it. Adulfr’s men stood on the other side. Astrid sat in the throne, which all but swamped her small frame – it had been built for Stoick, after all.

Adulfr and Hiccup faced off on opposite sides of the ring. Astrid was somewhat surprised to see that Toothless wasn't with Hiccup – he'd only ever said to trust him, when she asked how he planned to deal with Adulfr’s demand for Toothless should he be victorious. That made her suspicious, but she'd decided to let it slide this one time.

She made the usual speech, doing her best to keep her voice level even though it was her husband down there, and ordered the combatants to present their weapons.

Adulfr held his broadsword aloft, turned so the sharp edge faced his opponent. Hiccup took Inferno from his thigh in a practiced, fluid movement, and with a click, the retractable blade shot up from the hilt. Some people – a lot of people – would think it foolish to fight with a hollow blade, but Inferno was his sword and he knew how to wield it.

He'd been tempted to set it alight, but decided at the last moment that that was probably going a bit too far.

Maybe next time.

He was doing his best not to show it, but Hiccup was nervous. Sword-fighting might be something he was good at, but it wasn't something he'd trained vigorously in. Adulfr undoubtedly had. Not to mention, the other man was holding his sword in his left hand – and Hiccup, though he had practiced long and hard, had really only sparred against right handed opponents.

At first, it was difficult. At first, Adulfr had the upper hand, putting Hiccup on the defensive. He had years of practice, and knew moves Hiccup had never seen before, much less attempted. There were more than a few moments that set the crowd gasping, as he teetered on the edge of defeat.

Yet he was quick on his feet, and focused, and he just managed to stay a step ahead of Adulfr. He gripped the hilt of his sword so tightly that his knuckles turned white – then red, cut by one of his
opponents strikes. He gritted his teeth against the stinging pain and blinked away the beads of sweat that trickled into his eyes. He parried and lunged and drew blood of his own.

Of the two of them, Adulfr was getting in more strikes than Hiccup. It was all he could do to keep up and stop Adulfr disarming him, let alone disarm the man himself. They saved their breath for fighting, but Adulfr’s eyes were burning with anger and bloodlust – he could only imagine what his own expression betrayed.

Then it all came to a head. Adulfr struck at him, and he brought his blade up to block it, but rather than pull away, Adulfr bore down on him. Struggling to hold him back, Hiccup felt his foot sliding out from under him. Instinctively he moved it back, bracing it against the ground, but when he dared to glance back, his heel was right at the edge of the hide. If he was forced back any further, he'd lose.

Trapped, with nowhere to go but down, Hiccup's arms shook with the effort to hold back his enemy’s sword from his throat. He wished he'd asked Toothless to lend him just a little bit of strength, but he'd wanted to fight Adulfr fair and square…if he could only…!

Their eyes met, and Adulfr smirked. “Don't worry” he whispered, “I'll take good care of the Night Fury.”

The mockery and veiled threat in those words angered Hiccup; and suddenly, he knew what he had to do. It was a move he'd tried before, unique to him, but it was difficult to pull off and he had never quite mastered it. *It's now or never.*

He set his feet, summoned all his strength, and pushed Adulfr back a little…and then he pivoted. He spun out of the way, and Adulfr staggered, caught off guard and off balance. Quickly, Hiccup slid his sword around his opponents, right to the hilt, and twisted hard.

The blade jarred out of Adulfr’s hands; Hiccup seized it, and crossed both swords at his enemy’s neck. For a moment all was silent, but for his heavy breathing and the roar of his pulse in his ears. Then Astrid stood up and cried out the words he'd been longing to hear – “Hiccup wins!”

Cheers and excited shrieks erupted from one side and above – roars of disappointment and resentment from the other. Hiccup and Adulfr stared at each other in disbelief, albeit for slightly different reasons. “No! No! I demand a rematch!” Adulfr shouted, “You cheated!”

He made a grab for his sword. Hiccup stepped backwards, and Adulfr felt hands grab his wrists and pull them behind his back. He looked over his shoulder and glared at Eret furiously. “Traitor!” he spat.

“And proud of it” Eret smirked at him. “What do you say, Chief? Do we need a do-over?”

Astrid considered it, and then shook her head. “We agreed that the first man to disarm the other would win. There were never any rules set for how you had to disarm each other.”

Adulfr was all but spitting with rage. “Of course you'd say that! You're biased, you little blond bit”-

Hiccup put his now flaming sword to Adulfr’s throat. “You don't talk to my wife” he ordered, glaring. The dragon hunters found themselves surrounded by Vikings and dragons, all of whom wanted this lot off their island. Somebody shouted out, “Night Fury!” as Toothless bounded into the ring, and went straight to Hiccup’s side, growling menacingly at Adulfr.

“Hiccup, state your commands” Astrid instructed.

He drew himself up and declared, “As the victor of holmgang, I hereby exile Adulfr Haukeson from
the Barbaric Archipelago. Leave with your men, and never hunt dragons here again. These islands are defended.”

Cheers went up again at this proclamation. Adulfr was manacled and escorted to the docks, along with the rest of his men. Toothless nuzzled Hiccup happily, and his friends ran or jumped down into the ring to congratulate him.

He jumped on Toothless’ back and they hovered above the ring, with everyone looking up at them. Toothless roared in triumph; Hiccup stood up in the stirrups, holding his sword aloft, and ignited it. All around, the dragons threw their heads back and roared or flamed along with their Alphas.

The Vikings threw a great feast to celebrate Hiccup’s victory that night. Later, when they returned home long after Helena had been put to bed, Astrid cornered Hiccup in their bedroom and kissed him slowly. “I am so proud of you” she smiled when they came apart. “You fought Adulfr and won all on your own, without…actually, where was Toothless?”

Her suspicion only grew when Hiccup blushed and fidgeted uncomfortably. “Uh…Astrid, I have a confession. Toothless wasn’t there because…I asked him to wear his auto-tail, and stay away so that if Adulfr won, and exiled me, he'd still be able to get to me. And, um…I was never planning to order the dragons to obey him. I mean, I would have said it, but that's all it would have been.”

Astrid hummed thoughtfully. “So what you're saying is…you were planning to cheat after the duel.”

Hiccup sighed. “Yeah. I know it's wrong, and dishonest, and dishonourable…”

“Yes, but, I understand why you felt you might have had to. And honestly, I was planning to rescue you and Toothless anyway” she admitted. It wasn't like she could just let him stay exiled, after all.

“I'm glad we’re on the same page.”

“Mmm, speaking of which…Toothless, do you mind if I keep Hiccup to myself for tonight? He has things to do. To me.”

Hiccup blinked. “Oh. Oh. Yes, yes I do” he agreed, putting his hands on her hips and sliding them up towards…

Toothless caught on. *You’re not even in heat!* he complained to Astrid.

“Then it's the perfect time.”

Hiccup gave his dragon an apologetic look. “It's just for tonight. You can sleep upstairs in the”-

*No, thanks. I think I'll stay out tonight.* He'd go and complain to Shadow and the others about the weird mating habits of humans.

“Suit yourself. Hey, why don't you make a nest with Selena?”

*Shut up, Hiccup!* Toothless grumbled, pushing his way out of the hatch. When he was gone, the couple laughed. Hiccup made a mental note to make it up to his dragon later…then most coherent thoughts left his mind entirely, as Astrid pulled him into another kiss and tangled her fingers in his hair, her other hand sliding down to…

“Now then, where were we?”
A Common Enemy

The following day, to everyone's disappointment but no-one's real surprise, they found that nothing had really changed. They flew out to check that the army had left the night before, as agreed; and though some of them had, most of them unfortunately had not. Which meant that the riders were right back at square one, faced with the dilemma of driving the hunters away from the archipelago.

Astrid called a war council, inviting Dagur, Heather and Alvin to Berk, as well as the Core Riders. Needless to say, none of them were pleased with this turn of events. “Ooh! I would love to get my hands around the scrawny neck of that lying, treacherous little wretch…” Dagur mimed strangling Adulf, and cried out “I hate cheaters! But I’m glad you won, Hiccup.”

“Aw, thanks, Dag”-

“Pay up, Snotlout” the Berserker Chief insisted. The younger man rolled his eyes and forked some gold over.

“Wait…were you guys betting on whether I'd win or not?! And you bet I'd lose?! Thanks a lot, Snotlout.”

“Hey, don't blame me! I bet on the most logical outcome!”

“I don't believe this…”

“I don’t believe him!” Fishlegs exclaimed indignantly, “going back on his word like that, the nerve! Hiccup would never…” Fishlegs trailed off when he saw his friends’ guilty expression. “Hiccup? Why…why do you look like that?”

Hiccup winced. He knew he ought to be honest with them, so he told the others what he had confessed to Astrid the night before. “This is different, Hiccup” she insisted, even though he felt that it wasn’t. “Adulf had you stuck between a rock and a hard place. You would have been doing it to protect the dragons, protect Toothless – to protect all of us.”

“That doesn't change the fact that I would have broken my word because it was inconvenient” he pointed out. Whatever his reasons, it still would have been wrong. His mouth twisted into a wry smile as he said half-jokingly, “I'll keep that in mind next time I try to challenge someone to a duel.”

“Hey, it doesn't matter what Hiccup would have done. We exiled them. Now it's fair game for us to go bam!” Snotlout declared, thumping the table, “and wipe ’em out!”

“No, Astrid refused, “We’re not going to ‘wipe them out’, Snotlout. We need a new plan. A better one.”

“Well, if yer hadn't told me to free the ones I had locked up in the dungeons back on Outcast Island, I could've used ‘em as a ransom” Alvin complained. “You Berkians have gone soft. I had plenty o’ ways to part their lips, if they”-

“No, Alvin” Hiccup interrupted, glaring at him, “We’re not torturing anyone. We won't stoop to their level.”

The Outcast Chief looked disappointed. “Not even just a little limb tugging?”

Now both Hiccup and Astrid were glaring at him. He sighed. “Fine. Have it your way.”
“We need to do something different” Hiccup said firmly. “This is a problem, and this time we can’t just shoot fireballs at it until it stops being a problem.”

“Uh...why not?” Ruffnut asked, “We do it all the time!”

“Not this time.”

“Alright, dragon alpha, so what are we going to do?” asked Snotlout.

“We need to...” Hiccup sighed, “I need to prove to these guys that I'm not the man Adulfir has made them think I am. We need to convince them to let us help them. Adulfir must have generals and captains to lead the hunters. If we can get through to any of them, then perhaps we can convince them to leave, or maybe even fight alongside us.”

*You’re going to do your Hiccup thing?* asked Toothless. Hiccup winked at him, and he purred approvingly.

“It’s not that I’m against the idea of negotiating, but I think that last bit might be a bit of wishful thinking” said Astrid.

“Perhaps, but it’s worth a shot. If I'm going to call myself the Dragon Ambassador, I need to be diplomatic. That means I can't only care about the needs and views of the people I like. That wouldn’t be fair.”

“I wish you hadn’t chosen that title” Tuffnut complained, “It just doesn’t have a good ring to it. ‘Dragon Master’, now that rolled right off the tongue.” He sighed in disappointment. Everyone else ignored him.

“I think negotiating a peace treaty is an excellent idea” Fishlegs said approvingly, “and Meatlug and I'd be very happy to assist in any way we can.”

“Personally, I think this is going to fail” Snotlout declared pessimistically, “but I guess we can try it your way.”

“Hiccup, are you sure about this?” asked Heather.

“No, I'm not” he admitted, “but if there's even the slightest chance of ending this peacefully, then I have to try.”

The others all agreed that they should at least *try* to negotiate before they took more drastic measures – although it was clear that Snotlout, Alvin and Dagur were more eager for the drastic measures in case this plan didn’t work. “So, it's settled then” Astrid announced finally, “We’ll invite the leaders of the tribes to Berk to discuss a ceasefire.”

That very day, the flagships of all the tribes remaining in Adulfir’s army (with the exception of Adulfir’s own) received a Terror mail addressed to their leaders. Each letter was identical, and invited them to Berk for peaceful negotiations.

Many of the chieftains were suspicious. Adulfir had warned them that the Dragon Master would resort to any trickery to get them into his dragons claws. Yet a few of them were curious. Their men had been captured, but then they had been freed, and allowed to return to their tribe.

They had all been present for the duel of holmgang between Adulfir and the Dragon Master. They hadn't understood why their enemy had insisted on not fighting to the death; surely he should have
leapt at the chance to destroy his enemy, as he had with Drago Bludvist?

Some of them agreed with Adulfr, that the Dragon Master had cheated to win the duel, and therefore his victory was forfeit. Yet at the same time...he had won, and now he was asking for a chance to end this war peacefully, when by all rights he could gather his army of dragons and rain fire down from above. He could call upon the leviathan that lurked in the northern ocean. He could have the Night Furies – and where in Midgard had he lured them from? – take out their ships in the dead of night, invisible and deadly.

Finally, the curiosity of three of the chiefs got the better of them. They replied to the letters and agreed that they would come to Berk at the noted time and day. When they arrived at Berk’s harbour, Astrid and Hiccup were waiting for them at the dock. They weren’t sure about the idea of a woman being Chief, but they at least had the sense to keep quiet about it.

“Thank you all for coming” Astrid told them, “We know it won't have been an easy decision.”

The leader of one tribe, Umar, asked “Why did you ask us to come here?”

Hiccup and Astrid glanced at one another, confused. “Uh…for a peace talk?” Hiccup reminded them.

“Yes, but why?” Umar pressed. “Why would you want to negotiate? And why now?”

Astrid bristled a bit at that. Hiccup squeezed her hand. “May I remind you” she said, managing to keep her voice level, “that you led your men in an attack against my tribe and our allies. We had no reason to reach out to you.”

“As for why we want to negotiate; well, why wouldn't we?” Hiccup asked rhetorically. “My father once told me that men who kill without reason cannot be reasoned with. But that means I need to find out for myself if you have a reason. I want this war to end, and I'd rather it end peacefully than with even more bloodshed.”

They led Umar, Karsten and Ragnar up to the training ring. The others were waiting there with their dragons, and Astrid had ordered tables and benches to be set out. It was a rare beautiful day to be sitting outside, not in the Great Hall. Besides, Stoick always said that a good feast was one of the best ways to have a good talk.

“Okay, listen” Hiccup began, “Adulfr has obviously told you some…unflattering things about me. He thinks he knows me, and why I do what I do, but he doesn't. For one thing, he thinks I conquered a Night Fury…but I didn't beat Toothless into submission, or anything like that; I earned his trust and befriended him. The dragons don't listen to me because I force them to or they're afraid of me; it's because they trust me, and they like me.

“What this whole war really boils down to is revenge. Adulfr blames me for the death of his father… and yes, my dragon did kill Hauke” Hiccup admitted, “but Hauke tried to kill me first. Toothless was just trying to protect me, and we didn't even know he had a son. If I'd known that...things might have been different.”

The three guest chieftains were shocked to hear that Adulfr's father had tried to kill the Dragon Master; he had never mentioned that part. “Adulfr told us his father was killed for coming into your islands waters, that the attack was unprovoked” Karsten revealed. “We had no idea that his father attempted murder.”

Snotlout scoffed. “Even if he hadn't, we'd still have brought the fire down on that lot. Pro-tip: if
dragon hunters go up against dragon riders, it's us who're gonna come out on top.”

“Unless the dragon hunters are also riding dragons.”

“Shut up, Tuffnut!”

“Indeed, especially if their dragon of choice is of a particularly aggressive temperament.”

“…Good point, Ruffnut.”

“Err, yes, thank you, you two” Hiccup said pointedly. They didn’t get the hint, and continued to debate – with each other – who would win in a fight between ‘good’ dragon riders and ‘bad’ dragon riders. Astrid advised their guests to simply tune the pair out.

“Although, speaking of ‘bad’ dragon riders” Eret interjected, “The men we captured told me they were afraid their villages would be attacked by enemy dragon riders. Yeah, that could happen, but how is that Hiccup’s problem? And how do we know you wouldn't do the same thing to your enemies? And, most of all, how is being attacked by dragons with riders any different to just being attacked by dragons without them?”

The chieftains had to take a moment to work through all that. “My village is raided now and again by the local dragons” said Umar, “but I fear we could not defend ourselves against trained dragons, with riders who could counteract our defences. Adulfr persuaded us that aiding him in defeating you and your dragon army would be the only way to truly prevent such an outcome.”

Ragnar added, “As for turning dragons against our enemies; the idea is tempting, but such ferocious beasts are a double edged sword. We couldn't take the risk of having them turn on us, their masters, as well as those we fought.”

Finally, Karsten looked at their so-called enemy and asked bluntly, “Your real name is Hiccup?”

The young man sighed and rolled his eyes a bit. “Yes, it is.”

“Here's an idea” Eret said sarcastically, “Maybe instead of listening to the obviously biased guy-with-a-grudge, you should've bothered to learn about the man he told you to fear. And you still haven't answered my first question – how is any of this his problem? You made it his problem by starting this war in the first place.

“Chief Umar, defending villages from dragons – riderless or otherwise – is exactly what my men and I do. Freelance dragon wrangler, right here. And as for you” he added to Ragnar, “If the dragons you try to fight your enemies with turn on you, it probably means you weren't treating them well to begin with.”

Hiccup frowned slightly and said to Ragnar, “When you say you've been tempted to have dragons fight your enemies…do you mean to defend your village from attacks, or that you want to attack other villages? Because the first one I can understand, but dragons don't deserve to be used as living weapons. They're not just mindless animals that need to be ‘mastered’ or controlled or whatever you want to call it’ he insisted, “they have feelings and personalities and interests, they have families they take care of, they're people.”

They told the chieftains about all their dragons little quirks; about what great companions the dragons could be once you got to know them; they showed off some of the tricks they had taught their fiery friends.

Karsten claimed that some of the tribes relied on the dragon hunting trade. Eret explained all the
ways they could earn money without hurting dragons – trading in Gronckle Iron made willingly, using dragon…fertiliser…to improve the yield of crops, replacing fighting pits with racing courses.

As the talks came to a close, Hiccup felt like they had really made good progress. At the docks, the three chiefs talked amongst themselves for a moment. Then Umar turned to Hiccup and announced, “We realise now that we misjudged you. Adulfr has shown his true colours by betraying his word for the sake of revenge. We will help you stand against him, if you are willing to let us.”

“We appreciate that” Hiccup nodded, “but it would be better if you tried to persuade the other chieftains of what you’ve learned here today, if you can.”

“Hiccup’s right. We need to be uniting everyone against Adulfr, not dividing the army further” Astrid agreed.

“Very well; and for what it's worth, we are sorry” Chief Umar said earnestly. “This war was a mistake…we can only hope it is not too late to make it right.”

Word swiftly spread through the ranks of Adulfr’s army. The soldiers muttered about the Dragon Master, who was supposed to show mercy to none but dragons, and yet... It was said he called himself the Dragon Ambassador, but many of them weren't entirely sure what an ‘ambassador’ even was. As more of them heard of or saw for themselves the man's skill with dragons, how he calmed them with a touch and commanded them quietly…a new title was bestowed.

Thus did Hiccup Haddock the Third become known to his former enemies not as the Dragon Master, but as the Dragon Whisperer. When he heard it for the first time, he'd sighed resignedly and admitted it wasn't bad…but everyone could tell he not so secretly liked the sound of it.

Some of the hunters were simply anti-dragon; not all of their minds would be swayed. Yet as more and more of the leaders came to realise they had been misled entirely, their priorities shifted. Slowly but surely, they convinced their men that the real enemy here was not Hiccup, but Adulfr.

So they planned one final push, to drive Adulfr and his supporters from the archipelago for good. Team Hob – despite Astrid’s best efforts, the nickname Tuffnut had bestowed on them all had stuck – along with the tribes they had persuaded of their better nature.

The plan was for Team Hob and their dragons to sail down to the Isle of Frigga, and then their new secret allies would turn on the rest of the army. Then they were tipped off by an anonymous Terror mail that Adulfr was planning to attack Berk, in broad daylight to take away the advantage of the Night Furies…and that from the sound of it, he and his men weren't planning to capture the dragons alive.

That was worrying, but the plan did not change, only the location. The Outcasts and Berserkers set sail for Berk. The Hooligans prepared to defend their island. Hiccup regretted that this couldn't have ended without more bloodshed, but such was the nature of war, and if it came down to a choice between his dragons, and his enemies…

Adulfr's forces arrived in full. Their new allies had the element of surprise…or so they thought, but when the battle started, the hunters loyal to Adulfr fired at their traitorous former comrades. The battle was as chaotic as ever – and even more dangerous, for the hunters were firing barbed spears and arrows, not just nets.

Toothless and Hiccup darted back and forth, destroying the hunter’s artillery and protecting as many of their subjects as they could. Having the other Swift-Wings there was a huge help in defending not
just their people, but their allies as well. They spotted Adulfr on the forecastle of his ship, barking out orders. He was surrounded by crossbow-wielders, and had net traps ready to ensnare any dragon who came near.

He was obviously hoping Hiccup would come diving right into a trap…but Hiccup had no intention of killing him unless absolutely necessary. The peace treaty was tentative; they were giving him a chance to prove himself a better man than Adulfr made out, and killing Adulfr – however justified it might be - wouldn't do anything to help his image.

Adulfr and his men were outnumbered on all fronts, but they were relentless. Toothless hovered above the battle, catching his breath and gathering his fire; Astrid and Stormfly flew over to them.

“Hiccup, Toothless! Look!” she cried, pointing at the furthest ships, behind them, at the water…The water that was sloshing, and bubbling, as if something very large was emerging from the depths…

Beast did not know where his new Master would be. He had been swimming to find the nest of the Old King, because that is where his new Master had last been. He heard a commotion far above him, and saw the bodies of humans and dragons sinking in the water, so he swam to the surface to see what was going on.

He found rocks to brace his hind paws on and reared up, lifting his massive head out of the water. There was a battle, with dragons fighting humans and humans riding dragons. It was familiar and without being told, Beast sucked in a great breath and prepared to blast the ships with ice.

*STOP!* a familiar voice roared, so he stopped. Beast looked up and saw the Swift-Wing with new Master riding on his back. They both stared at him in shock. *What are you doing here?* the Swift-Wing demanded.

*SEARCHING.*

*Searching? For what?* new Master asked.

*YOU.*

His new Master’s jaw dropped, and he spoke like a human instead of a dragon. “What?!”

A female human riding on a Spike-Tail cried out, “Hiccup, where did this guy come from?!”

“Err…the ocean? He said he was looking for me.”

“I heard! But why?”

*Why are you looking for my rider?* the Swift-Wing asked.

*NEW MASTER.*

*Wait…you think I'm-?*

“Oh my gods – Hiccup! I think they're surrendering!”

Hiccup and Toothless tore their eyes away from the Bewilderbeast and looked back at the warring ships. Except that most of the fighting had stopped, as everyone stared at the massive Sea-Giant in shock. It wasn't silent, by any means – they could hear shouts and shrieks of fear – but there was, for the moment, a lull.
Thinking quickly, Hiccup said to Astrid, “Spread the word, that the big guy isn't here to hurt us, he's on our side.”

She nodded and Stormfly darted away. *As for you, do exactly as I say, understand?* he asked the Bewilderbeast.

*YES MASTER.*

*Okay, please don't call me that. Wait there!*  

He and Toothless flew straight to Adulfr’s ship. He was yelling at his men to do something, stop staring at the Bewilderbeast and fight, damn it! They blew up the traps, and sent his archers scattering. He looked up at them and howled like a wolf himself. “You!”

“It's over, Adulfr!” Hiccup shouted down to him, “You're outnumbered, and outmatched. Let this madness end!”

“Never! This is our world, a world for humans, not these fire-breathing freaks!”

*By the Moon, he's madder than Drago.* “That Bewilderbeast came looking for me. He knows I killed Drago and now he's obeying me instead. Why do you think he hasn't iced everything? I told him to stop, and he did.”

The hunters stared at him in fear. “Liar!” Adulfr spat, but it was tinged with doubt.

“You don't believe me? Listen!” Hiccup cupped his hands around his mouth and shouted, aloud and in thought-speak, “Roar!”

For a moment, he feared he was too far away…but the Sea-Giant heard him, and bellowed. It was deafening, and an even louder silence followed in its wake. Then Toothless roared out the command, *Come!*

Every single dragon came to flock around their Alphas, surrounding the enemy ships. The hunters tried to fight back, but then their vessels were boarded by the rest of Team Hob, and their new allies. For the second time in five years, they found themselves at the mercy of the Dragon Master.

Spitting with rage, Adulfr grabbed a crossbow and aimed it straight at Toothless. He was about to pull the trigger when a claw swatted it out of his hands, and something heavy threw him to the deck. He sat up and found two Vikings, a red-bearded giant and a strange-masked woman in front of him; a snarling Rumblehorn and Stormcutter behind.

“Haddock is right – this is over” another man announced, striding over with warriors…who aimed their weapons at Adulfr! At their own Chief!

“Gunnhild!” he cried, staring at his father's right hand man in shock. “What is this – a coup? Has the Dragon Master corrupted you as well – have you forgotten what he has done to our tribe?!”

“No, and I have not forgotten what you have done either. You've risked everything on this vengeful campaign, and almost driven us to ruin to do it. Hiccup Haddock – they call him the Dragon Whisperer now – may be your enemy, but he is not our enemy. It is time to let this go.”

Adulfr looked around wildly, like a cornered wolf ready to bite whoever came near. His men were captured or had betrayed him, the dragons had them surrounded, and Hiccup…he glared at the man riding the Night Fury, eyes burning with hatred.
Hiccup met his gaze without flinching and said clearly, “Go home, Adulfr. Go home and never return.”

When it was all over…when Gunnhild had taken command of the Wolf Fang tribe…when the ships had sailed away, some with promises to return in peace one day…when the Bewilderbeast had been sent to the sea stacks to wait for Hiccup…when the funerals had been held for the unlucky ones who had perished…Toothless and Hiccup stood on the cliffs overlooking Berk and the ocean.

That was where Astrid found them; she stroked Toothless’ head affectionately as he went to play with Stormfly. Hiccup kissed her, and they stood with their arms around each other, gazing out to the horizon. The war was over…their troubles weren’t, by any means, but whatever happened next…they would be ready.
Chapter Twenty Three

To say that the last few days had been busy would be an understatement. First there was the war with Adulfr and his hunters, and now that that was over, there was still the aftermath.

Hiccup had to work out how to negotiate with distant tribes to persuade them away from dragon hunting as a source of income and profit; he and Toothless were consoling those of their subjects who had lost loved ones in the battles; there were repairs to do and supplies to restock…Oh, and there was also a massive Bewilderbeast somewhere near the sea stacks, who had apparently come looking for him and expected him to be its master.

Now he and Toothless were flying out to the sea stacks, to find out what Drago’s Bewilderbeast wanted. Well, they knew what he wanted, what they needed to know was why. Toothless landed on the largest sea stack, the one he and the others tended to perch on when their riders were still practising tricks or even just staying in the saddle. *Do you think he's still here?* the dragon asked, as Hiccup dismounted.

“I don't see why he wouldn't be. He came all the way here looking for me, he wouldn't have just wandered off” Hiccup reasoned. They went to the edge and peered over. The waves frothed and beat against the rock far below them, but there was no sign of any leviathan. “*Hello??*” Hiccup shouted, aloud and in thought-speak. He rarely used both at the same time, but shouting aloud helped him project his thought-speak further…a similar effect occurred with dragons and their roars.

There was no reply. “Maybe he's near another sea stack?” Hiccup suggested uncertainly; but no, they could see the tell-take large bubbles rising to the surface as the dragon breathed. *Awaken* Toothless commanded. Again, nothing.

After brief consideration, Hiccup made another attempt. “*Come*” he shouted as loud as he could. There was a long pause, and then the huge, dark grey and red tipped crown and face of the Bewilderbeast emerged from beneath the water.

The Bewilderbeast loomed over them, on his hind legs and with a paw braced against the sturdy stone. At least, Hiccup really hoped it was sturdy. He caught his breath and cautiously approached the massive dragon, whose grey eyes followed him intensely. *Err…hello??*


“Uh…” Hiccup glanced back at Toothless, and then looked at the Bewilderbeast once more. *So … you're back, then. It's…been a while, hasn't it? Seen anything interesting, lately??*

*Oh, for Moon’s sake* Toothless rolled his eyes in exasperation, and marched forwards. *We sent you away five years ago, and now you've come back, and we need to know why. You call Hiccup 'master', but he's not. You don't have a master anymore, remember? That's why we sent you away, so you could be free* he reminded the Sea-Giant.

The sea dragon was still staring at Hiccup, and Toothless bristled a bit. He was unaccustomed to being ignored, and he didn't like the way Usurper was watching his human. He curled his tail
possessively around Hiccup and glared at Usurper, daring him to try anything. *Are you here to take over our pack?* he demanded, suddenly suspicious.

*I don't think he's here to do that, Toothless. Be nice* Hiccup chided lightly, swatting his ear-flap.

Toothless huffed at him. *Whose side are you on?* he grumbled.

*Yours* Hiccup assured him, stroking his head, *but think about it. If he wanted to take over our pack, he would have challenged us or done that telepathic call thing when he first came here*. That made sense, and Toothless sighed, nuzzling against Hiccup in apology and gratitude. Hiccup fondly scratched under his jaw, and continued, *Besides, if he was planning to take over, he wouldn't be calling me...you don't have to call me 'master'* he told Usurper. *I’m nobody’s master. People call me the Dragon Master, sometimes, but that's just a title and I don't really like it, and they've started calling me the Dragon Whisperer now which does sound better, I guess, and...I'm rambling, aren't I?*

*Yes, you are.*

*Confused.*

*I get that a lot. You can just call me Hiccup. That's my name; I'm Hiccup, and this is Toothless, my other half* he introduced them both. Toothless gave the massive dragon a curt nod, refusing to be intimidated. *What’s your name?* asked Hiccup.

*Beast.*

Hiccup hesitated. *Is that...what Drago named you?* he asked, trying not to cringe. He had no idea how the Sea-Giant would react to hearing his former owners’ name.

Beast growled a bit, a thunderous rumble, but he didn't seem to be growling at them. *Yes* he replied.

*Okay...so, why did you come back? It's not that we don't want you here* Hiccup added hastily, *It’s just, this is sort of unexpected. We thought you'd swum away to...be free, and do Sea-Giant things, y’know?*

Beast made no indication that he did know. *Returned. Searching* he said.

*Searching for me?*

To his surprise, Beast looked somewhat embarrassed; or as embarrassed as a Bewilderbeast could look. *You...Home. Lonely* he confessed with a deep and throaty whine.

Pity rose in Hiccup’s heart, washing away much of his initial uncertainty. *Oh...we sent you away, but you didn't have anywhere to go. You've been on your own this whole time. I'm sorry.*

The massive dragon actually cooed at him. *Old Master cruel* He projected an image of Drago, bull-hook raised and snarling; then, *New Master kind*, he projected an image of Hiccup himself, on Toothless’ back, reaching out to...Beast, of course, the images were memories.

Hiccup didn't know what to say. *I...Beast, I know I killed Drago, your old master...but that doesn't make me your new master. You don't deserve to be ordered about and made to do things, no one does.*
Beast whimpered. *Need Master. Lonely. Alpha. Packs. Take-over. Guilty. Confused. No orders. Lost* he explained, or tried to, at least. Hiccup needed a moment to sort through the barrage of memories, thoughts and emotions not his own. What Beast was saying, as far as he could tell, was that he was lonely; that he had tried to take over and become the Alpha of other packs, but felt guilt for it. He was confused and lost without someone to give him orders.

The bubble of pity grew and grew. Hiccup cautiously moved forwards, stretching a hand out to Beast. *It’s okay…I'm not gonna hurt you…no threat…* he said gently, humming softly. Toothless watched his back, green eyes flicking from his brother to the Sea-Giant and back again. Beast crooned, and leaned forwards a bit, never taking his eyes off the tiny human standing on the rock.

Dwarfed as he was by the massive dragon, Hiccup stretched up and placed his hand gently against Beast’s chin, the lowest bit he could reach. For a moment, he felt the rough scales beneath his palm…

Then everything else hit him.

A tidal wave of fear-guilt-lonely-guilt-fear struck him, burying his conscious mind in memories of Beast…as a hatchling, found abandoned by a younger Drago…taught to listen to and obey only Drago…beaten when he disobeyed…forced to destroy…made to control other dragons…he feared the bull-hook that struck him, even when he grew so large that the weapon would have barely made a mark on his scales.

It wasn't like when he experienced Toothless’ memories through his other half’s eyes; this was crushing. Hiccup screamed, hand still pressed to Beast’s scales as if he couldn't pull away. Then his reflexes kicked in and he staggered backwards, collapsing to the ground. Toothless leapt forwards and broke his fall, lowering him to the ground gently.

*What did you do?!* he roared at Beast, furious. He didn't care that the Sea-Giant was whimpering guiltily; whatever happened was his fault and that was all the Night Fury needed to know.

*Accident. Sorry* Beast tried to apologise. He leaned forwards, and Toothless stood over Hiccup protectively, snarling.


At last, Hiccup awoke with a gasp. He was trembling all over, and there were tears in his eyes. *It's okay, you're safe. He's gone* Toothless tried to reassure him, dropping his snout to nuzzle Hiccup’s face.

“No…” Hiccup reached up and grabbed his jaw, and pressed their foreheads together. There was too much, crammed into his mind all at once; he had to release it somehow. So he shared with Toothless everything that Beast had (inadvertently?) shared with him. Less overwhelming, this time, but every bit as disturbing as before.

He knew that Drago couldn't have treated Beast well, but the things that man had done…his idea of ‘training’ the poor creature to do his bidding was a travesty, and an insult to everything Hiccup believed in for the good of dragons.

Toothless was shocked too by the cruelty, and the fear Drago had instilled in Beast. It explained everything; why he listened to a man he could easily destroy, why he had fought so desperately out
of fear of pain...even why he had come back, because even though his life with a master had been
terrible, it was all Beast had ever known.

After the initial shock had worn off, Hiccup struggled to his feet and staggered to the edge of the sea
stack. "*Beast!*" he cried out. There was no response. "*Beast!*"

"You know, I think I might keep this one. What do you think?" someone asked. "...Boss?"

"Huh? Oh, sorry, Eret. What did you say?"

"I'm saying, I think I might help myself to this ship" Eret explained, gesturing to the large hunting
vessel they had beached to repair a hole in the hull. There were dragons standing patiently with
planks balanced on their backs or in their jaws, and little Biters fluttering about picking up chips of
wood and acting like they were doing everyone a great help. "Patch her up, strip out the dragon
hunting and...you-know-what equipment, replace the sails...she is a beauty of a ship, to be fair."

"I'll take your word for it" Hiccup shrugged, "but I thought you loved the Crashing Tide?"

"Oh, I do. I'd be sorry to let the old gal go" Eret admitted with a sigh, "but it's too small, you know?
It's just not practical. We're already having to double up in the cabins, except Safira...though
between you and me, I've been bunking down with Sky Fire instead of Tinni. One of them snores,
and it's not my dragon."

Hiccup chuckled. "Well, if you want the ship Eret, it's yours. It isn't as if we have much need for a
ship like that here. I'm sure Astrid won't mind."

"Yeah, guess I better ask her. So, why'd you zone out on me there? Something on your mind?"
asked Eret.

Hiccup sighed. "I'm just worried about Beast" he admitted. He and Toothless hadn't been able to call
the Bewilderbeast back, so eventually they'd given up and returned to Berk. "He needs help, and a
lot of it, and I'm afraid that we've scared him off."

"Ah, I'm sure he's fine. It's not like there's anything round here that could hurt a Bewilderbeast, after
all" Eret reasoned.

Suddenly Hiccup winced, rubbing his shoulder. He looked over to where Toothless was play-
wrestling with his brother, kicking up sand and gravel as they fought. "Watch the bite, Shadow!"
Their fangs were pulled in, but their jaws were strong, and it bruised.

*Sorry* Shadow paused to apologise, giving Toothless an opportunity to bowl him over and pin him
wringing to the sand. *Get off me!*

*No! I am the Alpha, submit to me or pay the price!* *What price? Being sat on by your fish-stuffed –*
the rest of Shadow’s sentence was lost in a shriek of indignant outrage as Toothless licked him, which sort of ruined the whole ‘mighty Alpha’ thing.

Even though he knew the scuffle was only in play, Eret still flinched a bit as they snapped at each
other. Night Furies played rough, it seemed. Retractable teeth he thought, must come in handy. "So,
I guess the Night Furies will be going back to their own nest, wherever that is, right?"

“Well, Nocte and Skylancer went back, but Selena, Shadow and Asha decided to stay a while
longer” Hiccup explained. The females were out fishing, as far as he knew.
“Oh, okay. So...I think I'm gonna go see if they need any help with the ship” Eret decided, wandering off down the beach. Sky Fire, who was dozing in the sand, heaved himself to his feet and padded after his rider, long claws carving furrows out in the gravelly sand.

Hiccup watched him go, feeling slightly at a loss. He knew there was plenty to be doing; patrolling their territory, helping Gobber in the dragon armoury, mediating disputes between dragons or them and their riders, checking in on Helena...that last was the most tempting.

He couldn't help but worry about Beast. Hiccup didn't think the mental flood had been on purpose...or rather, he suspected that Beast assumed he would be able to manage and so didn't hold back as much as he should have. Toothless was of the more pessimistic opinion that it was the sea dragons fault that his rider had been hurt. They'd argued about it, on the way home.

 Flashback

“I'm not hurt, Toothless. I'm fine. You worry too much” said Hiccup.

*And you don't worry enough* the black dragon scolded, rolling an eye back to glare at the human astride his shoulders. *You were screaming* he said bluntly, but his eyes were full of concern.

“Yes, but I'm fine now” Hiccup protested, “and besides, it was an accident. Beast didn't mean to dump that on me.”

Toothless bristled, a shudder running down his spine. *I don't care if he meant to do it or not, he still did it* he growled.

Hiccup rolled his eyes. “You're always like this. Can't you just give him the benefit of the doubt, for once?”

The dragon gave an incredulous groan and looked at his rider as if to say, are you kidding me? *I have every reason to be doubtful. You might pity him, but he's a powerful dragon, with a natural ability to control other dragons. If he decides he wants to take over our pack, or worse, take over me...I don't trust him, Hiccup.*

“Yes, well, I do. C'mon, Toothless, do you seriously think he's plotting something? The poor thing is lonely! He just wants a home, that's all.”

*Then he'll have to find a home somewhere else* the dragon retorted.

Hiccup frowned at first, but then something occurred to him. “You know what I think? I think you just don't like him because he ignored you. That's what you're upset about, isn't it, you big baby?” he guessed with a mocking pout.

Toothless gave an indignant grunt and glared at him. He chuckled. “Okay, so he's obviously got a bit of a one track mind...but I don't think he realises he's being rude. I'm sure I can persuade him to pay attention to you as well as to me.”

*He can't stay here, Hiccup. You know the pack won't accept him.*

“He's got nowhere else to go. We can talk to our subjects, persuade them to give Beast a chance – having a Bewilderbeast around could be really useful! Besides, he needs help. You felt it too – Beast is traumatised, Toothless. We can't just abandon him.”

*You and your big heart* Toothless grumbled. *Alright, fine. We’ll try it your way. I'm not happy
about this, though.*

Hiccup smiled, glad they'd settled the matter. “Thanks, bud. Trust me, it's all going to work out” he said confidently.

Hiccup was just about to suggest to the Night Furies, who had flopped down in the shade of the cliffs to groom themselves after the energetic scuffle, that they should go and do something…when Bosaal flew down and landed on the beach nearby.

Hiccup straightened up at once, and Toothless quickly rose to his paws. Bosaal dipped his muzzle in respectful greeting, and declared, *Alphas, we wanted to ask you – some of the other dragons and I, that is – when we are going to fly out and drive the intruder from our territory.*

*There are intruders?* Hiccup frowned, alarmed. Then he realised…*Wait, are you talking about Beast?*

*Is that what he calls himself? I'm talking about the rogue Sea-Giant that invaded our territory, Alpha-Hiccup* Bosaal explained.

*Yes, that's Beast. And he's not a rogue dragon, Bosaal; he came looking for me. He's lonely, that's all.*

The Thunderclaw eyed him doubtfully. *Alpha-Hiccup, that is the same Sea-Giant that enslaved the minds of myself and thousands more of our flock, and made us obey the whims of an evil human* he pointed out, as if Hiccup needed reminding of it.

*Beast was enslaved as well, Bosaal. Drago found him as a hatchling and mistreated him so badly… I know, he accidentally shared some of his memories with me earlier, I felt how scared and desperate he used to be. We're not driving him away…Toothless and I are going to find him and invite him to be part of our pack* Hiccup declared.

Bosaal and Toothless both stared at him incredulously, though the Swift-Wings expression was much more expressive. *We're going to invite him?* Toothless asked sceptically.

Meanwhile, Bosaal was spreading and mantling his wings restlessly. *How can we have a Sea-Giant in our pack? They are too powerful, and he is too unpredictable. Sometimes dragons try to join packs for bad reasons; what if he means to steal us away again*

Hiccup sighed. *Bosaal, you trust me, don't you?* he asked, reaching a hand out to the grey and blue dappled Sail-Back. Bosaal rumbled an affirmative and nosed at his palm. From sheer habit, Hiccup scratched at his snout as he went on, *Then trust that I know what I'm doing. I know Beast isn't a bad dragon; he's a good dragon that was under the control of a bad human. Please, give this a chance.*

Bosaal still didn't look pleased with the idea…but he did trust his Alpha, and Hiccup’s plans usually seemed to work out in the end. *Very well. I trust you, Alpha-Hiccup* he agreed, backing away and spreading his wings to take to the sky again.

Hiccup turned to the other two dragons. *Shadow, can you do us a favour?*

*What do you need?*

*We need to find Beast. Fly out, find Asha and Selena, and the three of you split up and search for him out by the sea stacks. Better yet, ask Sagu to help. You'll probably find him – the Scauldron, I
mean – in the harbour. He likes snacking on the offal from the fish the sailors have gutted and cleaned.*

*And what do we do if we find this Sea-Giant?*

*Tell him to…no, tell him I want him to come to the far side of Berk, where the high cliffs are, away from the village. And tell him I’m not mad at him. Okay?*

*Form a search party, find a Sea-Giant…in the endless ocean…tell him you sent for him. Got it*

Shadows rattled off.

Once he was gone, Hiccup swung himself into the saddle. *C’mon, bud. We’d better go and reassure the rest of our flock…*

A few hours later, Shadows returned with news that they’d found Beast, and led him back to Berk, and he was waiting for the Alphas in the ocean on the far side of the island. Despite some reluctance on Toothless’ part, they headed there at once. He asked Gobber to come as well, and bring his tools.

Perched on the high cliffs, Hiccup approached the edge and cupped his hands around his mouth. “*Beast! Come!*” he shouted. For a few moments all they could hear was the echoes; then the water broiled, and parted, as Beast heaved his enormous bulk up to lean against the cliff face. His tusks rested on either side of the little group.

*Master* Beast greeted the little human nervously. He was surely going to be punished for causing his new master pain and then running – or rather swimming – away. Those Swift-Wings had said his new Master was not angry with him, but why should he believe them?

Although, New Master didn’t look or smell angry. Beast wasn’t sure what he was feeling…he would learn later that it was relief.

Hiccup approached the Sea-Giant slowly, cautiously. “Hey, big guy. You had me worried there. It’s okay, I’m not mad. I know it was an accident. You didn’t mean to share so much with me, did you?”

Beast moaned sadly. *Yes. Guilty* he confessed with a regretful sigh.

Toothless narrowed his eyes suspiciously – he knew it! Hiccup signalled him to stand down, and tentatively asked, “You…did mean to do it? Can you tell me why?”

After a few moments, Beast replied, *Proof.*

“Oh…Beast, you don’t have to prove anything. I believe you. I know how wicked Drago Bludvist was, I'm not surprised that he…did what he did. But please don't do that again, okay? I've only got a tiny little mind compared to yours. I can't handle telepathy on that scale.”

*Understanding. Apology*.

“It’s okay, I forgive you” Hiccup smiled, taking care to not bare his teeth. Best to leave that until Beast had become used to him.

Beast’s lips parted. Toothless tensed, ready to leap and protect Hiccup from…frost? That was all, just a gentle cloud of frost. The Night Fury tried not to feel embarrassed.

Hiccup brushed the frost out of his hair and chuckled. “You really like me, don't you? Please, just call me Hiccup, not ‘master’. Actually…if you want to give me a title - not that I need one – you can
call me Alpha-Hiccup. Toothless and I would like you to join our pack – wouldn't we, Toothless?” he added pointedly.

Toothless sighed and resisted the urge to roll his eyes. *Yes, we do* he agreed reluctantly.

Beast peered at Hiccup curiously. *Join your pack* he repeated.

“Our pack, Beast” Hiccup reiterated, gesturing between himself and his dragon. “Toothless and I are a team, we’re two halves. We both lead this pack, together, so if you acknowledge me as your Alpha, then you have to acknowledge him as your Alpha as well” he insisted.

There was a long pause, a stalemate…then, at last, Beast closed his eyes in a slow blink, and agreed, *Alpha-Hiccup…Alpha-Toothless. Accepting*. Just like that, he agreed to respect and obey them both.

Hiccup was pleased with this development, but Toothless still felt somewhat uneasy. It couldn't possibly be that easy…

Gobber cleared his throat. “Eh…not tha’ this isn't interesting, an’ all…but didn't you need me for summat?” he asked.

“Oh, right.” Hiccup had almost forgotten the blacksmith was there. “ Beast? This is Gobber. He's not going to hurt you, he's a friend of mine. He's just going to help me get those awful manacles off your tusks” he explained.

“Whoa, hold on one bleedin’ minute. Ya never said I'd be doin’ tha’!”

“You never say no to helping a dragon” Hiccup insisted, “and they need to come off. Just looking at those things makes my skin crawl; and besides, it's not fair to Beast. Please, Gobber.”

The ageing blacksmith sighed heavily. “Alright, big fella, let’s take a look at this…”

At last, after much effort, time and prodigious swearing, they managed to unlock and remove the shackles. Beast would have two permanent dents in his tusks where they had been; the sores at the edges would, hopefully, heal with time.

It was nearing the end of a long day when Hiccup and Toothless stopped off at their house. Helena was outside, playing with her toys, tossing the stuffed dragons into the air to make them fly. Her face lit up when they landed, and she scrambled over to them straightaway.

“Daddy!” she beamed, reaching chubby hands up to Hiccup, who dismounted and grinned down at her and scooped her up into his arms. She nuzzled noses with him and petted Toothless’ snout, purring and crooning as much as the dragon. “Where were you?” she asked, “Dinner’s ready!”

“Oh, sorry, sweetheart. Your uncle Toothless and I have been busy. Err…did your mother cook dinner?”

“And what if I did?” Astrid demanded, appearing in the doorway. She folded her arms and gave her husband a look that said *choose your words carefully*. Hiccup glanced at Stormfly and then Toothless, but the dragons offered no way out of the mess he’d just stepped into.

“Ah…heh, heh…I’ve got great news! Beast has acknowledged Toothless and I as his new Alphas. He's joined the pack” Hiccup beamed, hoping to change the subject.
Astrid knew damn well what he was doing, but before she could steer the conversation back to the matter of her culinary prowess, Helena piped up, “Who’s Beast?”

“He's a new dragon, sweetheart” Hiccup said quickly. “He's a Bewilderbeast, also known as a Sea-Giant. You know how Toothless and I are the Alphas of our dragons?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Well, we became the Alphas after we defeated Beast five years ago. We sent him away, but he got lonely, so he came back here to try and find a home” Hiccup explained to his daughter.

She looked thoughtful for a moment, and then asked, “Is he big?”

“He's very big.”

“Can I see him?” she asked eagerly. Before Hiccup could reply, Astrid cleared her throat and said “You two come in and eat dinner before it gets cold. Hiccup, you can give Stormfly and Toothless their dinner afterwards, okay?” She stepped aside to let them pass.

After dinner – which was actually quite delicious, and Hiccup had to apologise several times for doubting his wife’s improved cooking abilities – Astrid cornered him in their bedroom. “Hiccup, you're not seriously thinking of taking Helena to see the Bewilderbeast, are you?”

“Why not? He won't hurt her. Astrid, he's changed. He even did that little frost-cloud thing the King does sometimes. With Drago around he was dangerous, I know, but now I don't think he'd hurt a fly” Hiccup said confidently. “Besides, I have an idea of how he can help, integrate into the pack, you know. He has nowhere else to go, Astrid.”

She looked doubtful. “What about the King? Wouldn't it be better for…Beast…to be with one of his own kind?” she suggested.

“That'd be worse. Beast actually did challenge the King, remember – his flock would be even less pleased to see the poor thing than ours. Besides, the King has better things to do than babysit a younger Bewilderbeast. It's best we don't bother him about this.”

Despite her reservations, Astrid agreed to help persuade the villagers that the massive Bewilderbeast who had taken up residence beside their island was not planning to bury them all in heaps of ice. Satisfied, Hiccup kissed her and they retired to bed.

Hiccup's plan was simple. The following morning, nice and early, he and Toothless flew out to the cliffs and summoned Beast up out of the water. At first, when Toothless called him, there was no response. They wondered if he was still asleep. Hiccup tried, and this time Beast did hasten to rise out of the waves.

*Good morning, Beast* Hiccup said pleasantly, looking up into the leviathans grey eyes. Beast eyed him with a sort of confused look. Clearly such friendly salutations had never been part of his daily schedule. Hiccup reminded him again that he had to listen to Hiccup and Toothless - *That means you come when either of us summons you* - and then told him of his new role in the pack.

*I want you to swim out and find a really big shoal of fish, and catch them in your mouth – but don't eat them, okay? No eating them. Bring them back here, to this island, and spit them up into the air. Then the flock can feed on them. Toothless and I are too small to feed our flock the way the King does, but you can help with that. Then everyone will see that you've changed and how good it will be to have you in the flock* Hiccup explained with an optimistic smile.
"No!" Hiccup exclaimed. *No, no, he's not a rival, Beast. He's an ally. You don't need to challenge him because you are a good dragon, who doesn't try to take over other Alpha's flocks* he said pointedly.

Beast stared at him for a long moment, and then crooned *Agreement.* Hiccup got the impression that the Sea-Giant would have agreed with him no matter what he said.

*Good. Okay. So, do you understand what I want you to do?*


*Yes! That's it, perfect* Hiccup beamed. Beast eyed him uncertainly, wondering why he was baring his teeth when all his other signals proclaimed he was very happy. *Okay, you go do that, then. Dismissed* Hiccup instructed, the way he would with any other dragon of his flock. Beast hesitated, and then heaved himself off the cliff face to plunge into the water below.

Of course things went wrong. On the first attempt, Beast spat out torrents of freezing water that solidified almost immediately and trapped the fish in blue ice. The dragons that narrowly avoided being encased were furious, and attacked the Bewilderbeast, who naturally tried to defend himself. By the end of it, there were several new icebergs bobbing around on the waves.

On the second attempt, after reminding Beast to not spit ice as well as the fish, there were a lot of mid-air collisions. The dragons had grown out of the habit of feeding in such a manner. Normally the crashes would be amusing, but they were all on edge because of Beast's presence; irritations flared like embers catching in dry grass, and Toothless-Hiccup were kept busy breaking up squabbles.

Then Alvin complained that Beast was taking the fish that his people needed to catch, and one of the few perks of Outcast Island was that it had some of the best fishing grounds in the archipelago. Similar complaints came from the seafaring villagers of Berk, so Hiccup arranged for Beast to move around where he fished, and to place his catch in a hastily designed container at the end of the dock.

Beast clearly wasn't used to being part of a pack, at the bottom of the hierarchy no less. Newcomers to any flock began on the lowest ledge, it was simply the way things were, but Beast thought he ought to be at least the second highest in the hierarchy. The dragons fled to their Alphas with complaints that Beast kept commanding them, and they weren't entirely satisfied by Hiccup's entreaties to just not bother the Sea-Giant, that he'd talk to Beast.

Hiccup was determined to make this work. He knew that Beast could change, that he had changed. Helena had begged to see the 'very big dragon', and he had taken her to meet Beast. The massive dragon had peered down at the tiny child in his Alpha's arms as if Helena was the most fascinating thing he'd ever seen, and puffed another little cloud of frost that had her giggling with delight. A dragon that made it snow!

Beast only seemed to want to obey Hiccup – and, to a slightly lesser extent, Toothless. Days went by, and everyone gradually became used to his presence. Things seemed to be going well, and Hiccup was relieved…but then, of course, another problem arose. One of their longships, returning from a trip to the taverns of Outcast Island, was torn in the keel someways from the isle of Berk.

Fortunately, nobody drowned; by sheer luck there was a scouting party nearby that spotted the sinking ship and dived to scoop the flailing, still half-drunk Vikings from the waves. Upon further investigation, they discovered that Beast had been steadily building up a ring of ice around the base
of Berk, hidden beneath the water.

When questioned, he explained that the Nest was too undefended, but Hiccup had forbidden him to breathe ice over the island. At first the icy wall had been too deep to trouble anyone, even Sagu who could easily swim over it and so hadn’t bothered to say anything. If Beast kept going, however, ships would run aground on the ice and Sagu would be either trapped on the outside of the wall, which wasn’t so bad, or on the inside, which would be worse.

Almost everyone clamoured for Hiccup to order Beast to smash the ice wall to pieces. He had another idea; if they let Beast keep going, and he made sure the Sea-Giant left a gap through which ships could sail, they would have a bigger and safer harbour. It took a while, but he finally managed to persuade them that an ice wall would help. He'd mark out where the gap would be so they could sail their ships through safely.

So despite the reservations of everyone except Hiccup, Beast was allowed to keep making his wall. Hiccup recruited Sagu’s help in monitoring progress and making sure Beast didn't accidentally block off the part of the wall that had to stay open for the ships. When the spires of ice began to poke up out of the waves, the sunlight caught them and split into many colours. It really looked quite beautiful.

Again, just as things seemed like they might settle down, something went wrong. Hiccup was beginning to seriously suspect that the gods, or one in particular, had taken an inexplicable disliking to him.

First, the fish stocks began dropping – the fishermen were returning with smaller catches. Almost immediately, to Hiccup’s endless frustration, villagers tried to blame Beast. The Sea-Giant insisted he was innocent, and Hiccup defended him, saying that Beast hadn't been eating the fish they caught, he'd been eating squid and deep sea fish.

Then, just a few days later, another ship was sunk. It was nowhere near the ice wall Beast was doggedly breathing into existence, but the sailors still blamed the Bewilderbeast. This time, however, they had some pretty damning evidence; a large shard of ice that pierced straight through the hull.

“But it can't have been Beast” Hiccup protested to the furious captain, “He wasn't anywhere near your ship when it was sunk!” It was futile, though, to argue with them. They were Vikings. Eventually, they reluctantly agreed that perhaps the ship had simply collided with an iceberg, that the whole ordeal was an unfortunate accident. Nobody’s fault in particular…but it was obvious where the fingers of blame were really pointing.

“You're lucky nobody died!” the captain shouted finally, before storming off. Hiccup knew immediately that he had to figure out this mystery, and fast. He walked to the end of the dock, tossed a handful of chum into the water – Toothless licked the remnants off his palm – to get Sagu’s attention, and when the silhouette appeared at the surface, he called *Sagu, come here, please.*

The Scauldron’s head rose leisurely out of the water, snapping up the discarded fish guts as he did. *Yes?*

*Sagu, listen. Something sank a ship yesterday, and people are blaming Beast. Mostly because the ship was sunk with a big piece of…ice…but that doesn't mean Beast did it! So, I need you to help him look around and see if you can figure out what did sink the ship* Hiccup explained.

The Scauldron eyed him doubtfully. *What if Beast did sink the ship?* he asked. It wasn't that he suspected the Bewilderbeast; he'd been wary at first, but then Beast started to share his catches with
him and they developed…not a friendship, exactly, more of a close acquaintanceship. So he didn’t like the thought that Beast had been disobedient, but it did sound kind of suspicious…

*If that's so, then I’ll deal with it* Hiccup declared, *Would you please just start searching?*

Sagu snorted at him, droplets of boiling water hissing as they struck the colder waves, and replied *Alright.* He ducked beneath the waves.

Hiccup rounded up anyone willing to fly out and search for the real culprit. Even he could tell most of them were just humouring him. He and Toothless searched as well, and were soon joined by the other Swift-Wings. *What are you doing?* Selena asked curiously.

Hiccup explained what was going on. Then Shadow asked the same as Sagu; what if Beast was responsible?

*He said he'll deal with it* Toothless informed his brother, before his human brother could say anything. *And just how do you plan to do that?* This last was directed at Hiccup.

The young man sighed. *The same way we deal with any dragon who breaks the rules. If it really is Beast doing this, then…he has to go. I can't…I can't put the needs of one dragon above the well-being of our people; but Toothless, you know it's not him. Don't you? You've spent as much time around Beast as I have, you know he's changed!*

Toothless glanced back at his beloved partner and gave a sympathetic croon. *I don't want to believe it either…but we only know one kind of dragon that can spit ice like that* he pointed out. The last two words sounded strange, but Hiccup couldn't put his finger on why…

They scoured the ocean and found nothing. One by one, most of the others gave up and returned to Berk…of course, Hiccup refused to give up. He had to try to clear Beast’s name, he wouldn't just jump to conclusions like everybody else and assume it must be the big bad Bewilderbeast doing all this…

Toothless was just about to suggest that maybe it was time they went back, this was going nowhere, when Shadow came racing towards them. *Come quick!* he roared, *Your nest is being attacked!*

The three of them raced home as fast as they could. When they got there, Hiccup couldn't believe his eyes. There were lumps of ice smashed into the village, crushing homes and – gods, he hoped they hadn't crushed any people. The dragons were in uproar, circling and screeching alarm calls; every rider was in the air and firing at the ocean. Toothless flew straight for Astrid and Stormfly.

“What happened?!” Hiccup demanded as soon as they were close. Inwardly he cursed; how could he be so stupid? Sending Beast away when he could defend Berk in their absence!

“Can you not tell?” she shouted back sarcastically. He must have rubbed off on her. Suddenly her eyes widened and she screamed, “Look out!!”

Toothless and Stormfly hastily barrel rolled out of the way of a chunk of ice as big as the house their riders lived in. It continued unimpeded towards the island, but a well-aimed and timed plasma blast sent it shattering into smaller, more easily dodged shards. Angered by the attack, Toothless turned and roared out, *Beast! Come!*

There was no response, and he snarled in frustration. How dare the Sea-Giant disobey him! He had agreed to respect them both as his as his Alphas, so why –?
Astrid had come to the same conclusion. “Hiccup! It must be Beast, I'm sorry, but we need to”- she was cut off, yet again, by another chunk of ice bursting out of the water and sending everyone scattering for cover. As he watched it fly, Hiccup suddenly had an epiphany.

“It's not Beast!” he shouted, to Astrid and anyone else listening, for good measure.

“Hiccup” –

“Beast doesn't spit ice like that!” he pointed out, “he’d fire the ice out in one big wave, not in pieces!”

They had to dodge again. “Toothless, fire!” Hiccup ordered, pointing at where he thought the chunk of ice had been fired from. The Night Fury blasted the water, several times...and then something burst out of the briny deep. They'd never seen anything like it before.

It's head resembled that of a horse, but with large scalloped fins in place of ears. It had the body of a snake or eel, with fish-like scales, bulbous blind-white eyes, downward curving tusks and a mouth full of a chunk of ice. It promptly spat it out at them, with tremendous force. Fortunately, they didn't have the village at their backs, so the ice crashed harmlessly into the water instead.

When they recovered, Hiccup started laughing. “Ha! See? I told you guys it wasn't Beast!”

“I've never seen a sea dragon like that before!” Fishlegs exclaimed. He wanted to get a better look, but Meatlug – and every other dragon – had recoiled at the sight of the creature. It let out an unearthly screech and vanished beneath the waves again.

“...Fishlegs? Toothless says it's not a sea dragon…it's a sea serpent...apparently they're two different things!”

*What is it doing here?* Shadow demanded, *These creatures lurk in the depths of the ocean, they don't come to the surface and attack humans like this!* 

*I think it's a juvenile* Cloud Jumper remarked, *It's too small to be full grown. We might be facing a rude adolescent.* 

“Cloud says the serpent might be a teenager” Hiccup reported, “who's attacking us…just because.”

As if on cue, the serpent poked out of the water and spat another chunk of ice. It must have been digging them out of the wall with those sharp tusks. Toothless dodged it, but the strain snapped Hiccup’s restraints, and he fell off into the water. Of course his dragon plunged in too, and twisted around underwater to find Hiccup.

He saw his rider – and then he saw, but could do nothing to stop, a fanged mouth snapping out and enclosing his other half. With a furious shriek, that sent water flooding his throat, Toothless swam after the vile serpent as fast as he could.

Hiccup couldn't believe it. One minute he was underwater, but unhurt…the next, he was in a foul smelling enclosed space, with sharp points jutting at him from all sides, and a surge had him sliding down something horribly slimy. Blind and choking, he grabbed at the sharp things – teeth, probably – and sliced his hand open, the saltwater burning it – but he managed to get a grip and clung to the slippery surface for dear life. *Toothless!*

*I'm coming! Hold on!*
*Don’t have much choice!*\*  

Of all the ways to go, being swallowed by a sea serpent was *not* high on Hiccup’s list of acceptable deaths. Drowning in its mouth was very low as well, but that was another possibility. He could feel the breaths trapped in his lungs and throat fighting to escape, and he was genuinely afraid that any moment now, he’d lose his grip or breathe in and suffocate…

Suddenly, something jolted the serpent hard, and Hiccup went flying out of its mouth. The shock parted his lips and the water rushed in; he reached out to the black shape he could just make out swimming towards him…they were going to die…and then the ocean floor inexplicably rose up underneath him and he was thrust into the light.

Gasping, retching, Hiccup grabbed at whatever was underneath him and held on tight. *I’ve got you!* Toothless was there, so he clung to his dragon instead. They were both shaking.

“Hiccup! Are you okay?!”

“It *ate* me!!”

*Begone!* Beast roared beneath them; he and Toothless were perched precariously on his head. He lurched forwards to head butt the sea serpent, and had the heart bound pair scrabbling for balance. Hiccup scrambled into the saddle, cradling his injured hand, and they took off to join the others and watch the unfolding drama.

“This is awesome!” Tuffnut yelled wildly, as Beast sprayed ice at the sea serpent, which dodged out of the way and shrieked at them all. Beast growled, and then made a strange gargling noise. The serpent responded in kind.

“Are they *talking* to each other?” Astrid asked incredulously.

“Err...maybe?” Hiccup shrugged. Whatever they were saying to each other, it didn't go well. Beast fired more ice at the sea serpent and bellowed *Threat! Threat-to-Alpha! Threat-to-Nest!* The serpent surfaced again and spat water at them all, snapping at the dragons that nearly fell into the sea. Toothless fired a plasma blast at it; then Shadow did so, and Selena… “Everyone! Fire at it together!” Hiccup shouted. The dragons had the serpent surrounded; in unison, they flamed at the creature, making the water steam.

The serpent hissed and dived again. Beast submerged as well – and then burst out, the serpent hanging off his tusks. He shook his head back and forth like a dog; the serpent went flying – it was the length of two and a half Scauldrons, and if this was a juvenile Hiccup didn't want to know how big an adult would be.

It hit the water with a massive splash, surfaced one last time to screech at them all – and then it coiled around and swam away. Beast growled after it...moments later, everyone erupted into cheers, and the beat of dragon wings sounded like thunderous applause.

Toothless flew down to land on the island, closely followed by Stormfly. Their riders dismounted and Astrid immediately hugged Hiccup, ignoring that he stank of rotting fish – before the smell became too much and she had to pull away, her eyes watering. “I'm glad you're safe, love – but gods, you reek.”

“Don't remind me – gah! Toothless! You're making it worse!”

*You need a bath!* Toothless insisted, but he restrained himself to licking Hiccup’s wounded hand.
Beast, who had clambered up to rest his tusks on the ground, crooned concern to Hiccup. The young man smiled up at him, and at the dragons who were perching on his head. Neither he nor they seemed bothered, when before the dragons hadn't wanted to get too close to the Sea-Giant.

“Beast, thank you. You saved my life” Hiccup said gratefully.

*Our lives* Toothless added, nuzzling his other half. *I shouldn't have doubted you. I'm sorry* he apologised. Beast purred and breathed a cloud of frost over them.

“None of us should have doubted you” said Astrid. “You are a good dragon, and I think I speak for everyone when I say, thank you for defending us, Beast.” There was a chorus of agreement from the other Vikings, and even the dragons.

Beast looked at them all. *Accepted?* he asked Alpha-Hiccup.

Hiccup grinned at him – Beast was starting to think humans bared their teeth most when they were happy, strange creatures. “Oh, you've earned your place and then some, big guy. Well done.”
The island of Berk, Selena had decided, was the strangest and most interesting place…much more than her own Nest. It wasn't that she didn't like her nest; it was beautiful there, with plenty of food and streams to drink from and play in. All her friends and her family was there. She was the Queen-to-be, one day she would lead her pack. It was where she belonged.

There were things to like about this nest, too. It was much more varied, with all the different kinds of dragon and the humans living together. There were so many bright colours! Back home, it was mostly all green and brown. The sunrises and sunsets were lovely. One of the nicest, strongest, bravest drakes she'd ever met lived here…

Selena alighted on an outcropping and shook herself. What was she doing? Daydreaming about a male, like some kind of lovesick fledgling. Who cared if Toothless was clever and brave and even kind of funny? He belonged here, with his pack, and she belonged with hers. There were plenty of drakes back home who desired her, who would be thrilled for her to accept one of them as her mate. Surely one of them would be acceptable.

Except that none of them liked her for her. She was the desired of every unattached high ranking male in the nest, but that was because she had the highest rank (except for mother). Everyone told her to give one of them a chance, things might change…but Selena didn't want to have a mate just to see if they would get along well. She'd rather see if they got along well and then choose them as her mate, but all the drakes back home were so busy competing for her affections, that none of them bothered to just spend time with her.

Toothless never tried to pursue her, and strangely enough, that was the thing she liked most about him.

She tried to shake the thoughts away again. She was being silly. Toothless didn't pursue her because she wasn't his desired. He was devoted to Hiccup, because they were two halves, and that was right. Besides, he was the Alpha here; one of them, at least. She couldn't ask him to leave his pack and join hers, any more than she could leave her pack and join his.

Selena knew she ought to go home, before she grew too attached to Berk and its wonderful strangeness. She was the Queen-to-be. She had to go back.

So why didn't she want to?

"Hey, bud. What do you think?" Hiccup asked, holding up a piece of parchment. He and Toothless were up in his workshop. The dragon looked at the paper politely; to him, the drawing vaguely looked like his tail-fin. He said as much.

"It's a new design. I was thinking about how…inconvenient…it is to switch your tail fin out for the auto-tail. The other day, I saw Helena playing with some leaves – she said she was making a nest, bless her, and she was shuffling them like this"– he picked up some papers to demonstrate, "and it gave me the idea to try and design a double sided tail-fin for you."

Toothless cocked his head curiously and asked, *How would it work?*

"I'm going to try and combine both the tail designs. Two fins, one on top of the other. The top one is the usual fin that I control, but the one underneath is an auto-tail. I'd make it so whenever you need
to, you can switch it to the auto-tail and fly on your own” Hiccup explained.

*How are you going to make it switch?*

Hiccup looked sheepish. “Err…I haven't figured that out yet” he admitted.

Toothless gave him a sarcastic stare, as if to say, good luck with that, then. *There’s one other thing I don't understand* he said.

“Yes?”

*Why do you think I need a tail-fin that lets me fly on my own?*

His little brother shrugged casually; Toothless wasn't fooled. “Well, in case of emergencies – like, if we get separated somehow and you want to get to me quickly, and there's no-one around who could help you fly to find me.”

*Fair enough…*

“Or…maybe you'd just want to fly without me there…if you were, say, spending some quality time with someone other than me. Someone you like, who's sweet and brave, who has bright blue eyes…” he trailed off and glanced at Toothless.

*I like spending time around Astrid, but wouldn't she just ride Stormfly whilst you're riding me?*

Hiccup’s hopeful expression dropped into a deadpan stare. “Ha, ha. You know that's not who I meant. I was talking about Selena.”

*Oh…but I don't see why I'd need to be flying on my own to spend time with her. You like spending time with her too, don't you?*

“Of course, but wouldn't you two want some privacy?” Hiccup asked pointedly.

Toothless blinked. *Wait…really, Hiccup?* he groaned. *Is this about Selena and I being mates? You know that's never going to happen.*

“Why not? I know you like her, and I know she likes you. My marriage to Astrid hasn't come between us, so you being mates with Selena won't either. Besides, you deserve to be happy” Hiccup smiled, before something occurred to him. “Or is it that you don't want kits?”

*Yes* Toothless answered, far too quickly. Hiccup frowned. He was about to press the issue when a Spike-Tail landed on the platform. She told them that some of the more troublesome dragons had been chasing the sheep again and a few of them – the sheep, not the dragons – had gotten stuck in a ravine that the dragons couldn't reach.

So they went to rescue the sheep. Toothless forbid the cornered troublemakers from going anywhere, and Hiccup set the others to round up the rest of the sheep and herd them back to their pens. He enlisted Sven’s help rigging up a harness to lower him into the ravine, since he was the only one small enough to fit. Toothless watched the rope anxiously for any signs of it fraying. One by one, Hiccup coaxed the sheep out of the small space they'd crammed themselves into and put them into the harness to be hauled up.

Once all the sheep were out, and Hiccup had been pulled out as well, the only thing left to do was scold the dragons who had caused the mess in the first place. Since nobody was hurt, the Scuttleclaw fledglings were let off with a stern talking to and made to apologise to Sven.
Up in the air, Hiccup suggested, “Why don't we go check on Urchin?”

A couple of days after the sea serpent attack, after Fishlegs had stopped geeking out over the existence of actual sea serpents, he'd suggested it would help the Bewilderbeast settle in if they gave him a new name. One that had nothing to do with his old life. Once they'd persuaded Beast it was a good idea, he insisted that Hiccup name him, so Hiccup had named him…Urchin. This led to the following repeated exchange…

“But why did you name him Urchin?”

“Well, because he sort of looks like one. A really, really big urchin.”

“But that's what you'd call a grimy, naughty kid.”

“…Well, he needs taking care of like a kid, and he was naughty – through no fault of his own!”

“But wouldn't he rather have a more fitting name?”

“He likes that name. He told me. But hey, if you have a better idea, feel free to take it up with him.”

So on, and so on…but the name still stuck.

When he wasn't out searching for shoals of fish with which to help feed the flock, or for his own meals, Urchin would hide in the water below the cliffs of Berk. His ring of ice now encircled the island, but for a gap through which four ships at a time could sail, and an archway underwater for him to swim through.

Despite the progress he'd made, Urchin was still struggling. He wouldn't emerge from his watery hiding hole for anything except to get food or when the Alphas called him. Even now that the pack was more accepting of his presence, he drove away any of them that worked up the courage to approach him. Sagu, Toothless and Hiccup were the only three he was really willing to let come close.

Hiccup was always very careful with him. When he was called, Urchin would scramble to obey, and Hiccup would reassure him again that he wasn't in trouble, that he could take his time. He would wait until Urchin settled before seeking permission to approach and touch him on his own terms. At first the dragon would always say yes, only to sometimes flinch or even growl. Then sometimes he would refuse, but cringe fearfully, expecting to be punished for his refusal. He was afraid to say no, but he was also afraid to say yes.

This time Urchin did let them get close. Whilst he was scratching the scales of Urchin’s cheek, perched up on his tusk, Hiccup glanced mischievously at his dragon and then said *Hey, Urchin?*

*Yes, Alpha?* Urchin asked immediately, grey eyes opening a bit to squint at him.

*Did you know Toothless has a desired?*

There was an indignant grunt from the Night Fury on the ground. *Don’t listen to him, he’s lying!* he protested immediately.

Urchin rumbled *Alpha-Hiccup not-liar. Disbelieving.*

*Thank you, Urchin.* Hiccup smirked at Toothless, who glared at him. *It’s true. Her name is Selena. Toothless has a crush* he singsonged. The black dragon rolled his eyes in exasperation.
Urchin squinted at Toothless and asked *Curiosity. You-crush-what?*

Hiccup stifled a snigger. *No, no, he's not crushing anything. I just mean he's attracted to Selena...even though he keeps denying it.*

Toothless gave him a withering glare. *Now you know how us dragons felt around you and your mate* he retorted.

“Ha! So you admit she's your desired!”

*I said nothing of the sort!* 

Beast looked between them uncertainly. *Desired. Confused* he crooned curiously. He didn't understand what they meant. After being abused so long by Drago and made to enslave other dragons in turn, there were many things he didn't know about dragon culture that the others took for granted.

*A dragons ‘desired’ is someone they're attracted to as a mate* Hiccup explained quickly, before Toothless could say anything. *Toothless is attracted to a female Swift-Wing named Selena, but he won't admit it.*

*I never said that* Toothless protested. *I only said we couldn't be a mated pair. I can't pursue her, so she's not my desired. It's simple, Hiccup.*

*I think you're making it more complicated. At least tell me why it wouldn't work out between you, cos I don't believe it's just because you don't want to have kits with her* Hiccup retorted, sliding off Urchin’s tusk.

*Maybe I don't want kits.*

*I think you're lying. You must have the instinct to pass on your traits as much as the next dragon. Besides, I think you'd be a great father! You're so good with Helena, aren't you?*

Toothless fidgeted. *That’s…different. Okay, fine, if it will stop you pestering me* he huffed, rolling his eyes. *Selena isn't just any drakaina. She's the future Queen of her pack. We can't live there with her, and she can't live here with us. What am I supposed to do? Mate with her and let her raise our young herself?*

Hiccup looked thoughtful. *She isn't going to take over her pack for a while, though…is she? I mean, her mother isn't old, right?*

Toothless gave him a deadpan stare. *Aren’t you the one who told me it was rude to ask a female their age?*

*Touché. I’m just saying, Selena wouldn't have to go home to Myrkr for at least a few years. There’s no harm in suggesting it. You think Toothless should ask Selena to be his mate, don't you, Urchin?*

*Agreement.*

*See?*

*That doesn't count* Toothless rolled his eyes. *He agrees with everything you say.*

*That’s cos he knows I'm right.*
This conversation was getting nowhere; clearly the only thing to do was pin Hiccup down and lick him to death, so Toothless proceeded to do just that.

“Argh! Get off!”

*Don’t interfere, Urchin! He deserves this!*

The Sea-Giant stared at the pair in bewilderment, hesitating. His master…no, no, his Alphas didn't seem to be paying attention to him anymore, and Alpha-Hiccup had said he could leave whenever he wanted, so he slipped back into the sea. This was all too strange for him.

Later, Hiccup was working on his double sided tail-fin design, whilst Toothless curled up and dozed nearby. Out of the blue, Hiccup asked aloud, “Is it because we’re heart bound?”

Without opening his eyes, Toothless bluntly asked, *What?*

“Do you not want Selena to be your mate because we’re heart bound?”

This time, Toothless did open his eyes and raised his head to stare at his other half. *I thought we were done chewing on that bone* he complained.

“Nope, this bone is still getting chewed on” Hiccup said stubbornly, “and I want a real answer, mister.”

Toothless snorted dismissively. *You can't boss me about* he grumbled, closing his eyes again. When he peeked a few moments later, Hiccup was still looking at him expectantly. He groaned in exasperation. *You're nearly as bad as a Scale-Shifter hatchling. Why do you want to know so badly?*

“Have you met me?” Hiccup asked jokingly. Toothless didn't seem amused. He sighed and said, “I want to help, buddy. Something's bothering you about this, something you won't talk to me about, and the only thing I can think of is the heart bind. D'you know what I think?”

When Toothless didn't bother to prompt him, Hiccup continued regardless. “I think you're scared, that if you're mates with Selena then you won't have time for me. That something might happen to me when you're with her, or that you'd have to choose between us” –

*Of course I'm scared!* Toothless snapped suddenly. Hiccup flinched. *You give me good reason to be. I don't need to have a kit because you're just as bad!*

Hiccup frowned, offended. “Okay, seriously? I can take care of myself, Toothless. I'm not some hatchling you need to take care of and keep an eye on all the time!”

*No, of course not. Hatchlings paw at and poke their snouts into strange things, stalk too-big prey and growl back when they're nipped, and you don’t do anything like that, do you?* Toothless said sarcastically.

Hiccup knew exactly what the dragon really meant, and he scowled. “I thought you trusted me.”

*I do trust you.*

“But not to take care of myself?”

*Hiccup, you never listen. You're reckless. You know when something is dangerous and you do it anyway, and normally it's okay, because I'm there to snatch you out of death’s jaws* -
“You're not always there, and I've still managed to survive” Hiccup protested, “and I was younger and stupider back then! I've changed, I'm more careful; but I can't not do something for fear that something bad might happen. That's not living, Toothless” he insisted, “You know it isn't.”

They faced off, man and dragon, on either side of the room. Toothless’ anxiety bled through to Hiccup, who couldn't stop himself from taking a step forwards. Neither could Toothless; they met in the middle and Hiccup stroked him, soothing away the nervousness and frustration they were both feeling. “It's okay” he murmured softly, “It'll be okay, bud.”

Toothless whimpered and nuzzled closer to him. *How?* he asked.

“We can figure this out. Selena can live here, with us – we’ll make room – and if you want to be alone with her, I'll make sure I'm somewhere I can't get into trouble…”

*There’s nowhere like that* said Toothless, but his purr was amused.

“Ha, ha. Toothless, just answer me one thing. If you say no, I promise I'll drop it and not bother you about it again”. He took a deep breath and asked, “Do you want Selena to be your mate?”

The dragon stiffened. Hiccup waited patiently, and at last, Toothless admitted, *Yes. I do.*

“Then don't let fear get in the way. That just leads to regret. Take it from someone who’s been where you are…it never hurts to try. Even if she says no, you'll feel so much better afterwards. Trust me.”

Toothless closed his eyes and sighed. *Alright* he said finally.

That night, with a lot of encouragement from Hiccup and Astrid, a very nervous Night Fury ventured out to find his desired. Wearing the auto-tail - Hiccup still hadn't finished his plans for the double-tail – Toothless searched Berk and found Selena in the cove, drinking from the lake.

She looked up when he landed beside her and tipped her head curiously. *Toothless? Where's Hiccup?* she asked.

*In bed, probably. I…came looking for you* Toothless admitted, pawing at the ground shyly. They looked at one another – green eyes meeting blue – and at the same time, said *Selena/Toothless, I've been thinking* -

They croaked out nervous laughter. *You go first* Toothless prompted politely.

*Alright. So, I've been staying here for a while now…almost two moon-turns, really. And it's been great* she purred happily, *I really like it here. So much that I…I know I ought to go home, to my own Nest…but I kind of don't want to.*

Toothless felt his heart beat faster. *You mean because you're the Queen-to-be?* he asked, trying (and probably failing) to sound at ease.

Selena shrugged, a flick of wingtips, and said *I suppose that's one thing, yes.*

*But…you don't have to take over as Queen for a while, do you?*

She blinked. *I guess not…but I'm still not sure if I could stay. I'd miss mother, and Lulu…*

Of course; she already had a family in her own Nest. Toothless felt foolish. *So much for feeling better* he thought resignedly, but then Selena asked, *What have you been thinking about?*
…Sort of the same thing. Selena, ever since I met you, saw you even, I felt…drawn to you* he confessed, looking away and nosing his own shoulder in embarrassment. *I…I know there are so many reasons not to, but…I'd like you to be my mate. Please?*

Selena looked confused. *I thought…I thought you didn't want me to be your mate. You didn't want to choose between me and Hiccup…*

*I don't…but Hiccup said I should ask you anyway. He said he'd feel better if I did.*

*Do you feel better?*

*Actually, I feel kind of awkward and itchy* said Toothless. A moment later he realised it might not have been the best thing to say, but Selena just laughed. He couldn't help but join in, and he did feel a bit better afterwards.

Once they’d recovered, Selena asked, *Do you really mean it? Do you want me to be your mate?*

*Yes, I mean it…but what about your mother and sister?*

*Oh…it would be okay. I can always fly there and see Luna, and when she's old enough, I can show her the way here so she can visit us. I bet she'd love that. Mother…she'll be mad* Selena said with a mischievous gleam in her eye, *but I'm too old for her to tell me what to do. And she can't complain, because I know she likes you, she'll just deny it* she declared confidently.

Toothless could hardly believe his luck. *Do you…want to go for a flight?* he suggested, purring at her.

She nuzzled him and replied, *I'd love to. Race you to the mountain top!*

They raced together, and danced together…they came together, and fell together, and afterwards, they curled up close to home together.

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When news of Toothless and Selena’s mating spread, everyone was thrilled. Even more so when, a few days later, her scent changed and they knew she was pregnant. “Can you believe it? We might have up to two baby Night Furies being born right here on Berk!” Fishlegs enthused. They did have twins sometimes.

Helena was absolutely overjoyed. “I’m gonna get a cousin, and they're a dragon!” she would gleefully inform anybody who’d listen.

Not long afterwards, though, Nocte and Skylancer returned to find out when Selena was coming back to their Nest. *Your mother asked us to come and bring you home, your highness* Nocte said solemnly.

Selena glanced at Toothless, and then back at the two drakes. *Thank you, Nocte…please tell mother that I miss her and Luna very much, and I'll visit as often as I can…* They looked at her oddly and she pressed on, *but I've chosen Toothless as my mate and I'm going to have a kit so I'm just going to stay here on Berk if that's alright.*

Skylancer looked between her and Toothless, saw how their tails were curled around each other, and sighed in a resigned sort of way. *Congratulations, your highness, Alpha-Toothless* he remarked calmly. They purred at him.

Nocte looked agitated. *Your highness, are you sure you've* -
Yes, I'm sure, Nocte. Toothless asked me to be his mate, and I accepted, and that's that. Besides, I won't be taking over as Queen of our pack for a while. I've made my choice…and if mother is upset by it, then she can come here and tell me herself* Selena declared, lifting her jaw challengingly.

Toothless felt like he ought to say something. *I know this is sort of troublesome* he admitted with an apologetic whine, *and I wasn't going to ask, but I wanted to, and I didn't want to have any regrets. Also, Hiccup kept tugging my tail about it.*

“Throw me in the deep end, why don't you?” Hiccup muttered. He looked up at the pair of Night Furies and promised, *We'll take care of her.*

*I don't need taking care of.*

*I meant protecting. From hunters. Who definitely won't get to her!* he added quickly to Nocte and Skylancer. *So you can tell Queen Phoebe that she definitely does not need to come here and, well…*

*Kill us?* Toothless supplied.

Nocte turned to Shadow and Asha. *At least tell me you two are coming back.*

*We are, but…well, we're only going to come back again when the kit is born, so we figured we might as well stay until Selena gives birth. After all, this is our niece or nephew we're talking about* Shadow explained.

Selena could be incredibly stubborn when she wanted to be. Skylancer took the news with a sort of resigned patience, and eventually even Nocte gave up trying to convince her to return. They promised to let everyone know what was going on and that they could come and visit whenever they wished.

When Selena was less than halfway through her pregnancy, everyone seemed to decide at once that it was time to start thinking of names. They all had plenty of suggestions, ranging from the inane (Toothless Junior), to the appropriate (Moonlight) and every variation in between. Selena soon felt a bit overwhelmed by it all...she didn't know which of the multiple names to choose.

One night, she told Toothless about her worry. *I just don't know what we could call the little one* she crooned, glancing down at her swollen belly. *I want it to be a nice, pretty name…most of my family is named after the moon and stars, but…should I be different? What do you think?* she asked.

Toothless pawed uncertainly at the stone and couldn't seem to meet her eyes. *I had an idea…but I wasn't sure if you'd like it* he confessed.

Selena nudged his shoulder with her snout encouragingly. *I won't know unless you tell me* she pointed out.

*Right. Well…when I was a fledgling, especially after…after my mother died, I always wanted to name my own kit, if they were female, after her* Toothless admitted shyly. Selena was the second person he had ever told about this. He had mentioned it to Hiccup, who expressed approval of the idea and said that if Toothless ever had kits of his own, their name should be his and his mate’s choice, nobody else’s.

*What was her name?*
Selena purred in approval. *That's a lovely name...and a lovely idea. I never really thought about it, but maybe...if our kit is male, could we name him after my father, Crescent?*

Toothless agreed, *Of course...but, are you really sure?*

*I don't think we're ever going to be really sure...but those names just feel right somehow. I don't know why.* Selena shrugged, *but it's like, my instincts are telling me to go with them. Do you know what I mean?*

*Yeah. I know.*

About a week before Selena was due to give birth, Berk found itself having visitors from the west; Nocte and Skylancer returned, leading an assortment of other Night Furies. Black Fire, Corona and their other friends; even Luna and Obsidian had come along, sometimes resting on the adults backs during the long journey. By far the most surprising visitor was Phoebe herself.

*Mother! Luna! It's so good to see you!* Selena warbled joyfully, struggling to get to her paws and greet the Night Fury Queen. Her rounded stomach made this somewhat difficult. Luna scampered up to her big sister and nuzzled Selena, before sniffing curiously at her womb.

*Selly, is there a baby Swift-Wing in there?*

*Yes, Lulu, there is.*

*That's good. I thought maybe you had just eaten too much* the fledging declared teasingly. Selena swatted her little sister with her tail and flipped it out of the way when she tried to pounce on it. Then Obby pounced at her and the two of them started to wrestle. Fledgling fights were in play, and not worth worrying about, so the adults nudged them aside and ignored them.

Phoebe stepped up to her eldest daughter. *Selena, when I encouraged you to choose a mate and raise a kit, this is not what I meant* she declared sternly. Moon forbid she ever understand her headstrong, flighty offspring...but she couldn't bring herself to be too angry. She nuzzled Selena affectionately, then turned her cool golden gaze on Hiccup and Toothless. *You two are terrible influences on my daughter* she accused them, without much bite.

Still, they looked sheepish. Selena rolled her eyes and snorted dismissively. *Please don't give them a hard time, mother. I chose to stay here and have a kit with Toothless, they didn't make me* she protested. When Phoebe glared warningly through narrowed eyes, her ear-flaps lowered apologetically and she added *I did miss you and Luna, ever so much; and I promise I didn't pounce on this idea carelessly. I've been thinking about it for years, and I realised...that it could work out, if I tried, and I didn't want to not make a choice because something might go wrong or it might be hard sometimes.*

Phoebe crooned reassuringly and nuzzled her daughter, telling her *I'm not angry. I'm proud of you. You're all grown up and if you really are happy here...you are happy, aren't you?* she pressed. Some might call her overprotective, but she needed to know. She didn't want Selena to make a choice that changed her whole life if the novelty of an island where humans lived peacefully with dragons ever wore off.

Selena purred happily, only to wince when the kit inside her kicked. *I am happy, mother. I've been homesick and sore and exhausted the past few turns of the moon, but I don't regret any of it.*
Hiccup stepped forward and declared, *Your Majesty, Selena is part of our family now. We won't let her or her kit be harmed, I promise you.* Then Toothless, feeling like he ought to say something as well, added, *I wouldn't have asked her to be my mate if I didn't care about her. I didn't ask her for ages because I cared...wait, does that make sense?* he asked Hiccup, who chuckled and nodded.

*I believe you* Phoebe replied calmly, *I trust you both to protect her and not to hurt her yourself. Of course, if you fail...* she bared her teeth, ever so slightly, in warning, and hissed *I won't need to kill you to make you really, really regret what you've done.*

Toothless and Hiccup gulped. Protective mothers were terrifying.

Selena went into labour a few days later. A pregnant female was vulnerable and a birthing one even more so; the Night Furies had adapted to finding a safe, hidden place to give birth, so Hiccup and Toothless cleared everyone out of the stables for the night. Valka acted as a midwife of sorts, whilst Hiccup helped, and Toothless guarded all three of them.

The others waited outside, patient or restless or anxious or excited or anything in between. Time slowed down, until the night seemed to last forever...but at last, Valka emerged from the underground cavern. Heads resting on paws and flanks came up at once, the humans sat up and rubbed their eyes and yawned (Helena had been very excited by this permission to stay up long past her bedtime), and all inquisitive noses twitched towards the woman.

Valka remained silent for a moment, just to hold the suspense...then she smiled broadly and announced, *They're fine.*

There were relieved, joyful warbles and muted cheers from all sides. “Boy or girl?” Astrid inquired for everyone's benefit.

“Girl. You and Helena can come and meet her, if you like” Valka replied, picking up a basket of fish for Selena to eat and then regurgitate some for the kit. Astrid picked Helena up and followed her into the cavern. Inside one of the stables, resting on a bed of shredded furs and straw, was Selena. She looked tired, not nearly as much as Astrid expected, and very happy.

Toothless was lying opposite her, Hiccup crouched at his shoulder. All three of them were looking at a small black lump curled up between Selena’s forepaws. Hiccup looked up at his wife and daughter, smiled, and beckoned them closer. “Shh, Helena. Come meet your baby cousin, Ebony” he whispered.

The little girl put a finger to her lips and crept forwards to peer at the small dragon, even littler than she was. “Cute baby dragon” she cooed happily, reaching out to pet it. Hiccup caught her hand and told her gently, “No, darling. You mustn’t pet a hatchling without the mother’s permission, okay?”

Helena looked up at Selena and purred at her. “Please can I pet baby?” she asked. Selena licked her cheek, making her squirm and giggle, and nodded. So Helena stroked her fingers across the kit’s head and back, very gently. At her touch, the infant squeaked and wriggled, and blinked her eyes open for the first time. They were a bright shade of grassy green.

Toddler human and baby dragon stared at one another. Helena purred. Ebony purred back. “Green eyes like me!” the little girl beamed. Ebony poked a pink tongue out and licked her. Helena giggled and petted her again. “My name’s Helena. We’re gonna be best friends. Yeah, we are” she decided, before yawning widely. She looked like she wanted to curl up right where she was.

“Okay, young lady, I think you’ve been awake for long enough” Astrid decided, reaching out to
pick her daughter up again. Helena squirmed and pouted, protesting “I'm not tired! I wanna play with Eb…Eboh…” she frowned.

“Ebony, darling.”

“Eh-bo-nee” Helena spelled it out, “Wanna play!”

“No, Helena. It's time for bed” Astrid said firmly, getting to her feet. Ignoring the toddlers whining, she looked at Hiccup and asked, “Are you coming?”

“Ah, well, Toothless sort of needs to stay here – it's instinct, y’know, to protect his mate, and err… I don't want to make him feel uncomfortable, see, so I…”

“I'll take that as a no, then” Astrid said dryly. “It's fine, I did promise to share. I suppose it's too much to ask to share a bed with my husband every night.”

Hiccup gave her a lopsided smile and a kiss. He kissed Helena’s cheek and bid them both goodnight. Ebony whimpered at the sight of her new friend being carried away, and Selena nuzzled her.

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Ebony’s ‘hatching’, as it were, was more significant than most. After all, given her parents rank, the little drakaina was the Queen-to-be of the Berkian Pack. Not that Ebony knew or cared for this; she was more interested in being fed than in being pack leader.

It was important to the flock, though; the dragons came to welcome Ebony to the pack over the following days and weeks. They brought offerings of fish, and an assortment of other things the youngling could learn the taste and shape and smell of. Ebony was presented with everything from shiny scales, to pieces of honeycomb, to clumps of feathers. Like most infants she assumed everything was edible, at first, but quickly learned which were not.

Trying to raise a baby Night Fury would undoubtedly be difficult, but it would also be entirely worth it. After all the fear and anger and sorrow that had pervaded their lives since the hunters attack, Ebony’s birth was like the change from winter into spring. Joy returned, and curiosity, and perhaps most importantly... hope.
One warm summer evening on Berk, the Haddocks were, for once, having some wind down time. Astrid was grooming Stormfly, scrubbing a brush under the Spike-Tails jaw and over her beak as she purred and whistled happily. Selena was grooming Bunny, licking the two year old kit sprawled out carelessly between her paws and making small whines of protest at the unwanted bath.

Helena wasn’t happy that her cousin was getting a bath when she wanted to play. Thankfully, her parents didn’t try to give her a bath. Instead, her dad pulled her into his lap and began to read with her. He traced his finger along the words in the storybook and spoke each one aloud. “A is for Apple. B is for Bird.”

“Birdie” Helena smiled, pointing at the picture of the bird. Hiccup whistled an imitation of it tweeting, and pretended to peck at her nose. She wrinkled it at him and giggled.

“C is for Cat. D is for…”

“Dragon!”

“That’s right, clever girl” Hiccup praised, beaming at her. They kept reading together. He wasn’t reading aloud just for Helena’s benefit...Hiccup knew that Toothless was peering at the book over his shoulder, he could feel the dragon’s warm breath on the back of his neck. He didn’t know how much Toothless could understand, but he didn’t want to discourage him or make him feel left out.

As for understanding…in many ways, Toothless was strangely fascinated by the book and the words because he didn’t understand them. He knew that the small strange clumps of straight lines meant something, they meant sounds, because Hiccup said they did and his other half wouldn’t lie to him.

The heart bind let Hiccup hear thought-speak, but it had changed Toothless as well. When he looked at a picture, he didn’t just see meaningless curves and colours, or something that looked vaguely familiar. He could see in his mind what the picture was supposed to be. He recognised it as a bird, or a dragon, or somebody’s face.

It only seemed to work for things he had seen once before. Hiccup’s study was full of pictures of inventions he had yet to build, and Toothless couldn’t even begin to imagine what they might look like in real life. Still, he saw the pictures of himself and Astrid and Helena, and knew who they were meant to be, and that was nice.

Written words, though...they confused him. Hiccup pointed at each clump and said a word, but were the sounds of that word what the lines meant? How did he know which sounds to make? The lines didn't make any noise, and they didn't look like what they were supposed to be. Maybe this was just how humans drew sounds, with little clumps of lines. But which line meant which sound?

It felt like he was flying in pitch darkness, sending out his searching roar, but only getting bits and pieces back. His pride had kept him from just asking so far, but he wanted to know...so this time, when Helena grew bored of the reading lesson and scrambled off to play with Bunny, Toothless nudged Hiccup.

He shuffled his paws shyly and asked, *Hiccup? Do you think you could, maybe...teach me to read?*
Hiccup looked surprised and pleased all at once. Astrid, who had overheard, remarked, “I didn’t know you knew what reading was.”

*Hiccup said the clumps of little lines you humans draw mean sounds* Toothless explained, *but I don’t know which sounds they mean, and I’d like to know, because it’s itching at me.*

“Well, we’ll give it a go” Hiccup said gamely, before wincing. “Ow. Ah. My leg’s gone numb. We’ll start the lessons later, Toothless, I need to walk this off. Ow” he groaned, struggling to get to his feet.

That night, Hiccup lit a lamp in his workshop upstairs and held the alphabet book in its light. *Right. So, the smallest clumps of lines are called ‘letters’, Toothless* he began, the black dragon listening attentively, ear-flaps pricked. *Each letter can mean two different sounds, and if you put two letters together, it can mean another sound. You with me so far?*

Toothless actually looked a little lost. *How do you know which sound it’s meant to be telling you?* he asked curiously.

*You can tell from the other letters. Look, see this letter?* he asked rhetorically, pointing at the letter ‘A’. *This can mean an ‘ah’ sound, as in ‘apple’, or an ‘ay’ sound, as in ‘ale’* he explained. *You get it?*

Toothless stared hard at the lines, trying to memorise the shape of them. *Ah...apple...ay...ale...I think I get it* he said uncertainly.

Hiccup turned to the next page and pointed to the next letter. *This letter can mean a ‘buh’ sound, or a ‘bee’ sound.*

He went through each letter of the alphabet, explaining the sounds each letter could mean. Then he thought they’d better call it a night, he didn’t want to overwhelm the dragon all at once. *You’re doing really well, bud, good job* he praised, and Toothless crooned happily, nuzzling him.

For the next few nights, the reading lessons continued. Toothless could tell how patient Hiccup was being, so he did his best to pay attention and understand. He sort of got the idea, trying to memorise the shape of the little clumps that were ‘letters’, and the sounds they were pictures of. He could match sound to letter well enough, but stringing them together into a word was trickier.

It was all just so confusing! A sound in one word could be made by different letters in another word. Sometimes a pair of letters made a new sound and sometimes they didn’t. Some letters were silent, they were pictures of a sound that wasn’t there. Sometimes letters made different sounds if there was a certain letter behind them.

Take the word ‘sky’, for instance. *You said the last letter meant a ‘yuh’ or a ‘why’ sound. Shouldn’t the last letter here be the one that means an ‘I’ sound?*

*Well, because if we spelled it like this…it would say ‘ski’.*

*But I thought that other letter meant an ‘ee’ sound.*

*It does.*

*...Let me get this straight. The letter that means a ‘yuh’ sound means an ‘I’ sound when the ‘kuh’ letter is behind it, and the letter that means an ‘I’ sound means an ‘ee’ sound when the ‘kuh’ letter is
behind it?*

*…Pretty much. Look, they have to be spelled like that so we know how to pronounce them.*

*You could pronounce that letter with the ‘ih’ sound instead.*

*But then we’d have to say ‘I’m going skih-ing’ and that doesn’t make sense*.  

*Why not?*

*It just doesn’t, Toothless.*

Those words were repeated often over the next few days, usually in the same mildly exasperated tone. Hiccup could tell that Toothless was really trying, so he did his best to be patient and encouraging. There was just so much to explain, things that he took for granted and didn't have a good way to explain.

To be fair, the dragon was a quick learner; and unlike someone else Hiccup adored, he didn't tend to get bored and wander off in the middle of lessons. It was clear, though, that his inability to fully grasp what Hiccup couldn't help but make sound obvious, was frustrating Toothless. That frustration sometimes rubbed off on Hiccup, despite his best attempts to remain calm.

He was really, genuinely impressed by Toothless’ progress, but the dragon himself didn't seem to feel that way. It all came to a head one night…Toothless was picking his way through one of Helena’s storybooks, one hesitant syllable at a time. *…The…buh-lack…black…cat…chuh…chay…chased…chased the big…guh…grey…rat. The rat ran…in…into a…bur-row* he struggled to read, mispronouncing the last sound as ‘ow’.

“Burrow, Toothless” Hiccup corrected, saying it with the right ‘oh’ sound. The black dragon huffed impatiently at himself and glared through narrowed eyes at the words on the page. What was the matter with him? He knew the sounds for ‘burrow’ and what a burrow was, so why would he make such a silly mistake?

“Hey, don't beat yourself up” Hiccup said encouragingly, “You’re doing well! You're reading the one syllable words much quicker nowadays. It's only been a few weeks and you've already made so much progress. We’ll get you reading properly yet!”

Far from putting his mind at ease, Hiccup’s enthusiasm only made Toothless feel worse. Suddenly, he didn’t want to stare at little black lines and try to remember which sounds they meant. *I need a break* he said bluntly, padding up to the edge of the platform and looking up past the canopy at the clouds and stars.

Hiccup looked at him in concern. “Yeah, maybe we have done enough for tonight. A nice flight will clear our heads…unless, you'd rather be on your own for a while?”

That made Toothless’ ear-flaps go down in worry, and he glanced at Hiccup uncertainly. *You…don’t want to come?* he couldn’t stop himself from asking. Was Hiccup upset with him?

“No, no, of course I do. I just…thought maybe you'd want some time to yourself. You seem…a little stressed” Hiccup explained.

*I’m not stressed* Toothless lied, *and if I were, how would being on my own help anything?*

“Fair enough” Hiccup agreed, mounting up.
They flew over the island to make sure all was well and at peace in their domain. Dragons called out in greeting to the pair, but respectfully gave them their space. On the furthest shore, Urchin was lying with his chin in the sand and some of the flock perched on his head. He seemed unbothered by them for now, he had finally grown used to it, but he snorted away the seagulls that pecked at his nostrils.

It was peaceful, and the cool night air felt soothing against Hiccup’s bare skin and beneath Toothless’ wings. Yet despite this, he could still feel that something was bothering his other half. They simply glided for a while, letting the wind carry them, and presently Hiccup stroked his dragon-half’s shoulder, and murmured “We can stop the lessons if you want.”

Toothless made a small noise of surprise and a bit of alarm. *No, it's fine* he protested hurriedly, *I’m fine. I just needed a break. You don't have to stop teaching me how to read. I can still learn, I just…need to try harder* he said determinedly.

“ Toothless” his other half sighed, exasperated, “You do this every time. You pretend that nothing’s bothering you, but you know that I know that something is. You're going to tell me eventually, so why not tell me now?” he questioned. Some days, honestly, the dragon’s pride...

He could feel the tension in Toothless’ shoulders, and pressed his hands against them as if, by pressing hard enough, he could push away the troubles that weighed on the dragon. He felt more than heard Toothless sigh in pleasure and defeat and resignation all at once. *I don't want the lessons to stop* he said quietly.

“But is that because you want to learn to read, or because you think I want you to learn to read?”

That made the dragon peek back at him, curious and a bit confused. *Don’t you want me to learn?* he asked, tentatively adding, *…I thought you did.*

“I do…I did. I mean, it seemed like a neat idea, but I know it's frustrating you. I'll understand if you've changed your mind” Hiccup explained. Then he sighed and added, “It doesn't feel right, talking to you from back here. Let's land.”

They went to the cove, naturally, gliding down in a spiral to land at the edge of the lake. Hiccup dismounted and wandered over to pick up a stick, sitting down on a rock. He doodled in the dirt as Toothless sat beside him, folding a wing around him to keep away the wind. The dragon’s shoulders shifted in embarrassment and he couldn't meet Hiccup’s eyes.

“Why did you ask me to teach you to read?” Hiccup asked, not upset, simply curious. “I mean, why now? It's been years since I told you the lines meant sounds.”

*I just sort of forgot about it* Toothless admitted, *but then you began teaching Helena to read, and I was curious…and you've been trying so hard to teach me, I didn't want to let you down.*

“Oh…” Hiccup smiled fondly and turned so he could catch Toothless’ jaw in his hands. “You have never let me down, and you still haven’t” he reassured his other half. “So what if you can't read? I can't fly or spit flaming plasma out of my mouth. And I'll never be able to, no matter how hard I try. Maybe you'll never be able to read properly, and that's okay. If we could both do everything the same, we wouldn't need each other” he pointed out gently.

This was true; they were stronger together because of their differences, not in spite of them. Toothless rumbled a wordless agreement and closed his eyes in an affectionate slow blink. Hiccup returned it, reaching up to caress the dragon’s snout and jaw. “I didn't…I never meant to make you feel pressured. I’m sorry, Toothless” he apologised.
Toothless crooned reassuringly and licked his cheek. *It’s not your fault. I was…making myself feel pressured. I knew the lines meant something but I didn't know what, and I thought if I just tried hard enough, then…then I would understand* he tried to explain, *and I want to! I like looking at the lines and knowing what they mean. It feels like…like magic* he confessed, shyly.

Hiccup smiled and said, ‘I know what you mean. Toothless, the fact that you can read even a little bit is incredible! I am so proud of you. You're doing something no other dragon has ever dreamed of… and to tell you the truth, you can read better than some of the people here on Berk” he added, leaning in to whisper.

Toothless tipped his head curiously. *Really?*

“Really. A lot of humans can't read. It takes us years to learn to do it, bud, because we start off not knowing what those strange little lines mean either” Hiccup explained, before asking “Do you think you can remember what you've learned so far?”

*Yes, I think so* Toothless replied after a few moments.

“Then I don't think it'll hurt to take a longer break. If you still want to learn to read, then I'll do my best to teach you, but you don't need to learn it all perfectly in just a few weeks. We have all the time in the world, after all” Hiccup reasoned.

*You’re right* Toothless replied, crooning gratitude and rolling his eyes at himself, and nuzzled his beloved one. *We have time.*

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_Helena and Bunny led the way through the forest…as a small child, she had nicknamed the baby dragon ‘Bunny’ because her name sounded a little bit like “a bunny.” The adults had found it amusing and humoured her…and sort of regretted it ever since._

Her best friend Cammie, and her twin brother Ozzie, followed behind them. She’d wanted Aegir to come too, but he was sick in bed. “Um, Helena? Are you sure we should be out here alone?” Ozzie inquired, looking around cautiously at all the trees.

“Don't be such a scaredy-cat, Ozzie!” his sister admonished, rolling her eyes. She flicked away the bright red hair that fell into her eyes and teased, “Are you scared the trees are gonna get ya?”

Oswald frowned. “I’m not scared” he insisted, “I just don't think we’re allowed out here in the woods by ourselves. It's not safe.”

All three of the girls, even Bunny, stopped and stared at him. “Duh! That's why we’re out here! It's an adventure, Ozzie, adventures aren't supposed to be safe” Camacazi scoffed. Were there dangers lurking in these woods? She said bring it on!

Helena insisted, “There's nothing to be afraid of, Ozzie. Even if we do get into trouble, there are dragons everywhere!”

The little boy looked a bit incredulous at this. “That's sort of what I'm worried about” he said.

Helena gasped indignantly, and marched up to him. “Don’t be mean!” she scolded, poking him in the chest. “The dragons aren't gonna hurt us, Ozzie. You know that! I meant that they can go and get my dad and uncle Toothless, that's what I meant.”
Bunny was only four, and didn’t quite follow everything that was being said, but she lolloped over to Helena’s side anyway. Cammie came over too in a show of solidarity. Outnumbered, Ozzie sighed in resignation. “I’m sorry, okay? I know the dragons won’t hurt us on purpose…but we’re small, and they’re huge. They might…step on us, or something.”

Cammie burst out laughing. “You think they’re gonna step on us?!?” she giggled, stomping exaggeratedly down the path. “Look at me, I’m a big scary dragon! Grr!”

Helena started giggling as well. “Dragons don’t walk like that! They walk like this” she declared, taking the biggest strides she could and holding her arms like they were wings. It swung her hips back and forth, which on an eight year old looked utterly ridiculous. Bunny, delighted by this new game, mimicked her cousin and started stalking, her tail swishing from side to side. Ozzie rolled his eyes and trailed after them.

Around the next bend, there was a Hotburple dozing on the path and blocking the way. “Careful!” Cammie whispered loudly, “Mind the big scary dragon!”

The girls giggled behind their hands. Bunny crept towards the bigger dragon, dropped her hindquarters into a hunting crouch, and pounced! She landed sprawled over his back, and the Hotburple jerked awake with a gurgling snort. He sniffed the air and recognised Bunny’s scent, the Alphas scent on Bunny. The kit was no threat and not to be harmed, no hatchlings were, so he decided to just go back to sleep.

Bunny scrambled over him. “Good idea, Bunny!” Helena beamed, following her and climbing over the Hotburple as well. Cammie climbed over next. Ozzie hesitated, but if he went around it meant going off the path, and who knew what might happen then! So he clambered over as well.

“It’s not far now” Helena announced, before ducking under a low hanging branch and scrambling down a shallow gully. All four of them got rather muddy by the time they made it to a small clearing at the bottom. In the middle of the clearing was a large upturned sieve, with some string tied around one handle and a large stick lying on the grass.

“Yes!” Helena beamed, “We did it, you guys! We caught a troll!”

“Did we?” Ozzie asked dubiously. The girls ignored him.

“What’re we gonna do with it?” Cammie asked eagerly. “Ooh! Maybe it’ll lead us to buried treasure!”

“Cammie, trolls don’t bury treasure” Helena shook her head, “they steal socks. Duh. We’re gonna make ‘em give everyone’s left socks back, and my dad’s foot.”

“What if they ate his foot?”

“Um…then we’ll make them say sorry.”

Ozzie whispered, “How do you know there’s a troll under there? It could be a mouse, or a hedgehog…”

“Or a snake!” Cammie suggested, far too eagerly for his liking.

“Yeah…” he shuddered, “or one of those little squawking dragons.”
“They’re called Biters, Ozzie” Helena corrected, “and it won’t be one of them. Bunny marked her territory here so the other dragons would know not to disturb the trap we set.”

Ozzie looked a bit grossed out. “Wait…you mean…”

“Yep, she peed here” Cammie said brightly, pointing at the grass he was kneeling in, “right there!”

“Eww!”

“Shh!” Helena urged them, putting a finger to her lips. She beckoned for them to follow her, and tiptoed up to the sieve. Her friends followed her, and formed a circle around the trap. Bunny got ready to pounce on whatever they’d caught. Maybe if she was lucky, it would be tasty!

“On the count of three, okay?” Helena whispered, “One…two…three!”

She and Cammie grabbed the handles of the sieve and lifted it up. Bunny jumped on the pile of left socks they had used as bait, and the Biter curled up in the middle of them. The miniature dragon woke up with a frightened shriek and wriggled out from under her paws; he flew towards Ozzie, who yelled and ducked, and landed on a nearby tree branch. From there, he hissed irritably at them and scampered further up the tree.

*Sorry!* Bunny called after him with an apologetic whine, before nuzzling Helena, who smelled a bit sad. Helena smiled and petted her, before sighing in disappointment.

“So much for catching a troll.” Cammie huffed her hair out of her eyes and told a bemused Bunny, “Pee harder next time.”

“Wait! Trolls can turn invisible, so it might still be here, just hiding!” Helena insisted, crouching down and rifling through the bait.

“Um, but if it's invisible, it might have run off and we'd never know” Cammie pointed out. She bit her lip and suggested, “Maybe it really didn't work this time.”

“It’s never gonna work. Face it, Helena. The grown-ups are right, there aren't any trolls” Ozzie told her solemnly. She scowled at him, sulking. What did he know?

“Uh-oh” Ozzie said suddenly, picking up one of the socks. The Biter that had been nesting in their bait had chewed and burnt the socks. Not to mention, it had rained the night before, so they were wet and dirty as well. “I told you we’re gonna get in trouble.”

They put all the socks in the sieve, and covered it with Ozzie’s coat. The girls carried the sieve between them as Bunny led the way back to the village. All they had to do, said Helena, was sneak the socks into dirty laundry. Nobody would ever know! Ozzie asked how she was going to fix the holes. Helena protested that lots of socks had holes in them, the grown-ups wouldn’t notice.

However, as they emerged from the forest behind Helena’s house, they heard a mocking voice call, “Hey, princess!”

Some older boys sloped up to them. In the lead was Thuggory, Helena’s arch-enemy. He was three years older than her, and they had despised each other ever since she was old enough to walk. “Go away, Thuggory!”

“Don’t wanna” he sneered at her. Then he pointed at the sieve she and Cammie were carrying, and asked, “What's in there?”
“I said go away, you big dummy” Helena retorted. Bunny picked up on her irritation and stepped in front of the three kids, spreading her wings and growling.

That gave Thuggory pause. “Whoa…hey, call off your dragon” he protested, taking a step back.

“You ain't scared of a baby dragon, are ya?” asked one of his cronies. Thuggory glared at the speaker and protested, “I'm not scared of anything! But I don't have a dragon yet, so it's not fair if she gets to try and scare me with one – which I'm not!”

Bunny hissed at him. He flinched a bit, and then glared at her. “Watch it, scaly!”

“Don't call my cousin names!” Helena said defensively.

“Aw, whatcha gonna do about it? Tell on me to your momma?”

Helena glared up at him with righteous indignation. “I could. My mum’s the Chief. And I'm gonna be the Chief, so one day you guys”, she pointed at the boys she knew lived there on Berk, “are gonna have to do what I tell you.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I don't have to” Thuggory sneered at her, “So why don't you just run along, ickle baby Chief” he mocked.

One of the other boys said, “You don't gotta be scared of that dragon, mate. She calls it Bunny” he drawled.

The older kids sniggered. “Seriously? First it was ‘Toothless’, now ‘Bunny’? What's next, are ya gonna name a Night Fury ‘Snowdrop’ or something? You're just as weird about dragons as your dad” Thuggory said cruelly.

Helena gaped at him, outraged. “My dad’s not weird!”

“He is, too” one boy insisted, “I heard my mum say that his dragon cursed him, or summat, and that's why he can understand them.”

“You dummies don't know anything! Dragons can't curse people, that's stupid” Cammie scoffed at them.

“And uncle Toothless would never do that to my dad!” Helena declared passionately, little fist clenched. “They're best friends, so you just…just shut up!”

“That's what's so weird about him” said Thuggory, “He's best friends with his Night Fury even though Toothless bit his leg off.”

“Hey, yeah” one of the eleven year old’s lackey’s agreed, “My big brother said Hiccup tore his dragon’s tail-fin off and the dragon bit his foot off in rev-oof!” He grunted, the wind knocked out of him, as Helena dodged past Bunny and plunged her small fists into his midsection. He pushed her away, and Bunny jumped on him –

A full on fight nearly broke out, if not for a shadow falling on them all from above. The kids froze and looked up, wide eyed, as a sapphire-eyed Night Fury swooped down and landed in front of them, spreading her wings and baring her teeth defensively. It was much scarier when an adult dragon did it.

“Aunt Selena!” Helena cried out in relief, and Bunny purred happily at the sight of her mother even as she crouched submissively.
Thuggory and his cohorts, meanwhile, were looking more and more nervous. “Uh…nice dragon… shoo!” He flicked his hands pathetically at the Night Fury.

Wingbeats heralded the arrival of three more dragons, ridden by Astrid, Dagur, and Thuggory’s father, Mogadon, Alvin’s second in command. “Selena tells me you're picking on our daughters and their friends” Astrid informed the boys with a stern glare. Weak protests spilled from them and dried up almost instantly.

Mogadon dismounted and strode up to Thuggory and gripped his son’s arm. “What's the matter with you?” he demanded, “If I've told you once, I've told you a hundred times; you don't cause trouble for me when I bring you on these visits! What do you have to say for yourself, boy?”

“This isn't fair!” Thuggory protested, “we were just talking to them! Let go of me!” he yelled, struggling to tear his arm away.

“You're grounded. We’re going home, now” Mogadon stated firmly. He frogmarched Thuggory over to his waiting Fire-Scale. Once they were both in the saddle, he looked at the Chief of Berk. “My apologies, Astrid.”

“It's fine, Mogadon. Safe winds to you” she replied. The Outcast’s regent nodded, and then his dragon took to the air.

“As for the rest of you, I suggest you go on home. And I will be talking to your parents about this” Astrid warned the rest of the boys. They scurried off.

“Good riddance” Dagur muttered, before asking, “Oswald, Camacazi, are you two okay?”

“We’re okay, dad” Ozzie replied. Cammie declared more passionately, “We had 'em on the run!”

“Helena, are you and Ebony okay?”

“Yeah, mum; and her name’s Bunny, remember?” Helena insisted.

“Right, right…what're those?” Astrid asked suddenly, pointing at the sieve full of…torn and burned socks…that had fallen to the floor when the scuffle began.

All four children squirmed. “…Troll bait?” Helena offered nervously.

She and her friends all got grounded, but it was okay because Thuggory got in trouble as well. Helena was still disappointed that her troll trap hadn't worked. Maybe Ozzie was right and they weren't really real; but if they weren't, then that meant…

Hours later, she heard a knock at the door. “Helena? It's me” she heard her dad call, “Can I come in?”

Helena looked at Bunny as if to ask her opinion. The young kit yawned unconcernedly. “Yeah” she called.

Their dads came in; her dad sat on the bed next to her, and uncle Toothless sat down in the doorway because he couldn't fit in all the way. “I hear you've been hunting for trolls again” Hiccup remarked, half-jokingly. Helena wasn't looking at him.

“Trolls aren't real, are they?” she asked after a moment.

“…Not really, no” he admitted.
“You lied” Helena said accusingly, pouting at him over her shoulder. Bunny was doing the same; they probably didn’t realise how adorable it made them look.

Hiccup sighed. “I’m sorry. We adults aren’t perfect, you know. We make mistakes, and we’re just trying to do the best we can. Now, Selena also tells me you nearly got into a fight with Thuggory and his friends. What happened?”

She twisted around and said urgently, “I had to! They were saying horrid things about you and uncle Toothless!”

“Well, we appreciate you trying to stand up for us, but you don’t need to get into a fight on our behalf. Helena, you could have been hurt” said Hiccup.

“I could take him” she insisted. Hiccup chuckled.

“Oh, you are your mother's daughter” he said fondly, “So what were they saying about me and Toothless?”

"Horrid lies” she answered solemnly. “They said that uncle Toothless cursed you, and that he bit your leg off cos you cut his tail-fin off.”

Hiccup stiffened. “…Did they, now?” he said finally.

“Yeah. Boys are dumb” Helena sighed, before shuffling closer and hugging her dad. Out of sheer habit, he hugged her back, and scratched Bunny under the chin when she crept over for cuddles of her own. She rubbed like a cat against his hand and under Toothless’ jaw, purring happily.

*We need to tell them.*

*They’re too young.*

*They need to know, Hiccup. They'll find out sooner or later. Better they hear the true story from you than nonsense from someone else* Toothless pointed out.

*I guess so…but let's not tell them everything, not just yet. I don't want them to know that I...you know...* 

*Nearly killed me when we first met? Maybe it is best if we leave that part out for now.*

*You think?*

Hiccup took a deep breath. “Helena, you know Toothless and I love you and Bunny ever so much” he began. “You know that I’ve always just wanted what’s best for you, darling.”

“Yeah…why?” she asked, puzzled.

“…Sweetheart, there's something I need to tell you. What Thuggory and his friends said – it wasn't entirely a lie” Hiccup confessed.

Helena frowned, bewildered, and Bunny tilted her head to one side. “Wh-what do you mean?”

“You know the story I told you about how Toothless and I met?”

“Of course!” It was one of her favourite bedtime stories. “You found him in a trap in the woods that bit his tail-fin off, and you freed him and helped him fly again and were best friends forever.”
“Yes, that's all true…but there's a, uh, part I left out.” Hiccup took a deep breath and took the plunge. “The truth is…I'm the one who trapped him in the first place.”

Helena stared at him in disbelief. “You'd never do that to uncle Toothless!” she protested.

“I'd never do that now; but things were different back then. As for this”, he gestured at his prosthetic, “Toothless didn't bite my leg off to get revenge…he was trying to save my life.”

Helena frowned at him, and shuffled away a bit, which broke his heart. Bunny backed away as well, her ear-flaps lowered and a worried whine bubbling from her throat. That hurt Toothless as well…but the girls would find out the truth eventually.

“Darling, I'm so sorry. I didn't tell you because you were too young, and I knew you wouldn't take it well” Hiccup explained. He reached a hand out to her, but she didn't take it. “Helena, please. Can't you forgive me?”

She bit her lip, and finally asked, “Did uncle Toothless curse you?”

Hiccup half sighed, and half laughed. “No, he didn't. It's just that...something bad happened to me a long time ago, and Toothless saved me, but some people don't really understand how he did it, so they think it's a curse, but it really isn't.”

“What did he do?”

“Sorry, darling; you're both still too young for that’ Hiccup said apologetically. His daughter and niece puffed themselves up in comic indignation.

“Am not! I'm a whole eight years old!” Helena protested. Bunny tried to be as big as possible. They both appeared to have forgotten they were supposed to be cross with him. “Tell us, dad! Please, please, please, please!”

*Please, uncle Hiccup!* Bunny pleaded, pawing at his leg.

“Ah, me and my big mouth” he sighed. He glanced over at Toothless and asked, *Do you think this is a good idea?*

*Not really, but you know what they're like. If we don't tell them, they'll just keep asking until somebody does. Your child is worse than you are for tugging tails and tracking something she's curious about* Toothless replied.

*Pot meet kettle* Hiccup retorted, but he knew the dragon was right. Now they'd gotten the scent of a mystery in their noses, Helena and Bunny wouldn’t be able to resist getting to the bottom of it. Better they hear the true, if child friendly version from him...

“Oh, how do I put this...ten years ago, before we met your Aunt Selena and all the other Night Furies, Toothless and I heard that they might be living in a faraway land. So we went there to look for them. And when we got there, big surprise, we got into trouble” he explained. Helena smiled, amused.

“We got caught by some very mean people” he went on, testing the waters, “and the leader of the very mean people…he did something bad, because I wouldn't do what he said.”

“What did he do?”

“He tried to hurt me, but Toothless saved me. It's just...to do that, he had to use some special dragon
magic on me” Hiccup explained. Helena and Bunny stared at him with wide, wondering eyes. He went on, “Toothless and I are…are heart bound, and you're too young to really understand what that means, but it's the reason I can understand dragons.”

“Are mum and grandma and granddad heart bound too?”

“No. I sort of gave them the ability. It’s…hard to explain.”

“Can you give it to me?” she asked next, “I wanna hear what Bunny sounds like!”

*Please, uncle Hiccup!* Bunny pleaded, pawing at his knees, *Please, please, please!*

“Sorry, darling; but it just doesn't work on young kids. Maybe when you're older” Hiccup deflected.

Helena and Bunny pouted at him. “Can we be ungrounded now?” the little girl begged.

Hiccup smiled fondly and replied, “Well, that depends on if you've learned your lesson.”

“I won't go hunting for trolls anymore” she agreed.

“And?”

“And I won't get into fights with Thuggory, even though he's a big fat jerk who deserves it.”

Hiccup stifled a snicker. “Alright. I hereby officially unground you. So, does this mean I'm forgiven?”

She looked thoughtful, and decided, “I guess so. What do you think, Bunny?” The little kit nodded, tongue lolling in a smile. They both scrambled closer and snuggled against their dad’s chests, purring.

“Thank you, darling. I love you so much” Hiccup murmured, holding her close.

*And I love you, little Bunny* Toothless purred fondly as he nuzzled his own daughter. Over their heads, he and Hiccup shared a fond, secret look that said, We really are lucky, aren't we?

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