**For The Love Of A Princess**

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**For The Love Of A Princess**

by athingofvikings, ShipMistress

**Summary**

Reduced to little more than a favoured stable boy, Hiccup, despite his noble birth, has few prospects for more in life. But when he falls for a girl who came to look at the horses, being a stable boy might not be enough anymore. Together, they have tough choices to make and great risks to navigate if they want to survive and be together.
“Ah, there you are.”

His father’s voice was a mixture of amusement and annoyance, and Daniel hastily stepped to his side as to not let the mood tip toward the wrong side. He straightened his coat and the ornate scabbard hanging from his side, before he answered, “Well, I’m punctual, am I not? They aren’t even in sight yet.” His gaze wandered to where the road led out of the forest in the distance; while there was significant peasant and merchant traffic along the royal highway, the noble visitors that they were here to greet were not yet in sight.

“Indeed you are,” his father stated dryly, his eyes on the forest's edge as well. “Unlike your sister.” He paused and turned toward a young woman standing to the side. She wore a simple, yet elegant dress, appropriate for her status, her hair hanging in long blond braids over both her shoulders.

“Rachel?”

The woman in question bobbed a curtsey, her eyes cast politely downwards. “Yes, Your Majesty?”

“Tell me, when will the Princess be here? Our guests should be arriving any moment now.”

Rachel fidgeted slightly. “She… should be here any moment, too,” she said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

Daniel couldn’t hide his grin at the maidservant's nervousness regarding her mistress’ whereabouts. Ruff, as Rachel usually got called, was actually a fairly good liar, as he’d learned early in his life. But even she wasn’t able to fool the King on this matter.

“She’s not coming, is she” King Osmond said, sighing; it wasn’t a question.

Rachel hesitated, but then shook her head. “No, Your Majesty. She’s not.”

In exasperation, the King rubbed his forehead and groaned, while Daniel chuckled quietly.

“Ruff, go and send your brother to look for her,” he commanded. “And make sure she’s presentable and present for tonight’s dinner. I’m sure she wouldn’t want to insult the Grand Duke of Eastervale and his son by staying away.”

Ruff curtseyed again with a slight smile on her lips. “Of course, Highness. She’ll be there.”

The woman retreated, and King Osmond's shoulders slumped a little. “I swear, that girl will one day be the death of me,” he stated grudgingly, but Daniel could easily detect the humorous tone beneath. “And I’m blaming you for her behaviour.”

“Me?” Daniel exclaimed, still grinning. This wasn’t the first time they’d had this conversation after all.

“Yes, you. She spent too much time with you and your friends playing knights. No wonder she’s not acting like a lady now that she’s older.”

“Oh, and I’m sure the hunting trips you took us both on all the time had no effect on her whatsoever,” Daniel teased. “Teaching her how to use a bow and a knife surely was of great use to
They shared an amused look before both men began to laugh.

“It’s a good thing she still has two years until her customary marriage age,” the Prince stated after a while. “I doubt any of those lordlings would willingly put up with her as his wife. Although,” he paused as an absurd thought crossed his mind. Laughing, he added, “Who knows? Maybe, marriage would finally be able to tame her. She wouldn’t be the first woman to become at least a little domestic and well behaved as soon as it is her own home and family she’s responsible for.” Frigga forgave him… It was true, but even trying to imagine his wildcat of a sister as lady of her own household… No, that was just hilarious.

The King threw him a thoughtful look as if honestly considering his words, but then chuckled, and shook his head. “That might be true for some women. Not sure about her though.”

Daniel wanted to reply, but got interrupted by a horn sounding from the nearby watchtower. Both men looked up, just as the lookout called out.

“They’re here! House Jag’r is here.”

And they were. A group of riders appeared at the forest’s edge, led by two men on impressive black stallions, and slowly made its way down the road toward the castle.

“Huh… That’s unusual,” King Osmund murmured with a frown on his ageing face.

“True,” Daniel replied, frowning as well. “Where are the horses? It would make sense if they sent them ahead to the stables directly, but…” his gaze rested on the two men at the front of the group. Clearly, both the Grand Duke and his son were riding with their men so neither of them was overseeing the herd. That was unusual indeed.

“Well, we’re going to learn what happened soon enough.”

But when the riders reached the stairs where the King and his Crown Prince waited, their expressions were anything but alarming. The men and horses looked equally tired from the long journey as well as relieved to finally have reached their goal, but there was no significant sign of anxiety or worries to be seen.

“So, you finally made it,” King Osmond greeted his old friend.

“Indeed, we have. And about time, I’d say. Odin, I’m getting too old for this.” Sir Eret of House Jag’r, Grand Duke of Eastervale, awkwardly dismounted from the saddle, and stiffly went to take the King’s offered hand. He was a big man, tall and with broad shoulders. His long hair, once black, had become noticeably more silvery during the years, and his face, weathered by spending a lot of time outside, was marred by hundreds of tiny wrinkles. “It’s about time I hand over the reins to my son and retire, or I won’t be able to enjoy retirement anymore.”

The King smiled knowingly, and let his gaze wander to the younger man standing by his friend’s side. He looked like a younger copy of his father, except the wrinkles and grayish hair. “And there he is. young Eret in all his glory. It is good to see you again, lad.”

As so often, Daniel was amused by the familial tone of the King’s voice. If an outsider was to listen in on them, he surely would think it strange, but to all those involved it came naturally. Sir Eret was one of the King’s oldest and closest friends. Every year, he spent a few months in the castle, and his son, who was only two years Daniel’s junior, had always accompanied him. By now, Eret the younger was one of his own closest friends as well, his and his sister’s.
“Thank you, Your Majesty,” the young man replied, bowing skillfully. “It is good to be here too.”

The King nodded, and turned his attention back to his friend, while Eret turned toward Daniel instead. The two young men grasped their forearms in greeting.

“So, you finally made it?” Daniel started, grinning, and Eret grinned right back at him.

“Looks like it. I managed to reach the required age of twenty-one without getting myself killed. If that’s not a deed worth getting knighted for, then I don’t know the world anymore.”

“Indeed. And, maybe, you can even accompany me to the West once the formalities are dealt with. I’ll return there in a couple of weeks. Those skirmishes are great to earn some glory. Maybe you’ll even find a girl for yourself then, even ugly as you are.” Daniel winked at his friend.

“You mean, like you did?” Eret replied teasingly. “I didn’t know you’ve finally found yourself a future queen. Why haven’t I met her yet?”

At that, the Prince laughed. “Alright, you got me. Let’s not go there. We’re too young to settle down just yet. Not while there are adventures to go on and glory to earn. Another reason for you to accompany me though.”

Eret seemed to think about it, but then shrugged, and turned to pet his stallion’s nose. “Maybe I will. It depends on the King’s orders, I guess. Although, I think Father is going to ask him to let me return with him. To defend the noble horses of House Jag’r, or something like that.”

“Well, those *are* important, so you might be right. Which reminds me though… Where *are* your horses? I’m actually only here at the castle because Bento broke his legs in a dastardly ambush, and I had to put him down. I hoped you might have an adequate replacement among your herd this year. Maybe even this one?” He gestured toward the beast of a horse standing behind Eret. Up close, it was even more impressive.

“Crusher here?” Eret shook his head. “No, I don’t think he would be a good choice. He’s not trained as a war stallion. But I think we will be able to find a good one for you, I have two or three in mind already. I’ll show them to you during the next days. And as for the herd… Well, we sent them ahead already. It was a long journey, for everyone.”

At that, Daniel raised an eyebrow. “On their own? That’s new. I thought you wouldn’t trust anyone else to appropriately put up your most valuable horses, not even your own stablemasters.”

“Ah, that...” An almost sad smile crossed Eret’s face which made Daniel wonder for a moment. “Well, we found a new pair of helping hands a few months ago. And even if it is embarrassing to admit, the boy is even better with those beasts than father or me.”

“Oh, is that so? I can hardly believe that,” Daniel laughed, and shook his head. House Jag’r’s talents in breeding and breaking horses were legendary. “That really must be an impressive young man.”

Again, Eret’s face clouded for a moment, before he nodded, “That he is.” For a moment, he seemed lost in his mind, but then he shook his head as if to chase away unwanted thoughts. His face brightened again, eyes twinkling. “But on to more entertaining topics. Where is your sister? I had expected to see her here.”

“No, you didn’t!” Daniel laughed cordially, and Eret chimed in on his own joke as well. “You know her just as well as I do. Of course, she’s not here to greet some honoured guests when there are animals to admire instead. We both know exactly where Astrid is.”
01: The Wish I Whispered When It All Began

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Groaning, Hiccup sat down on one of the straw bales, and rubbed his aching leg. It had become rare for it to act up this badly, but the long ride had definitely taken its toll. For several minutes, he massaged the stiff muscles around the long scar until he was able to get back to his work.

He was alone in this part of the capital’s sprawling complex of stables, tending to the more spirited animals among House Jag’r’s herd. King Osmond’s stablemasters and their lads surely were good, but not good enough to deal with these beasts. At least not until they’ve all gotten to know each other and hashed out their positions among the herd.

There were only five, but quality definitely overcame quantity here. Three trained war stallions, a few of the biggest beasts they had – they had proper names, but, between being siblings and their general temperament, Hiccup and the other grooms called them Chomp, Squish and Trample when the senior grooms were out of earshot – his own bay mare Cassie, and a chestnut gelding named Markor, with a flowing auburn mane and tail; even unbrushed and dirty with road debris, the horsehair seemed to glow with health. That last one was special to him. He was, undoubtedly, a beauty, but even more important was that Hiccup had broken this one to the saddle himself. The gorgeous horse wasn’t the first one he’d trained to bit and bridle, but he still felt special to Hiccup. From all the horses that had come with them to the castle, Markor was the only one he had this kind of bond with, and it pleased him greatly to know what special purpose awaited him.

Hiccup worked his way from one horse to the next, constantly cooing and murmuring to them to keep them calm. They knew him and he knew them, their company always pleasant for each other. Working with these animals was a blessing. They didn’t care who he was, or who he was supposed to be. Who he should be. They didn’t care that he supposedly wasn’t strong enough or broad enough, that he wasn’t the fighter everyone had hoped him to be, that he was a failure. These horses weren’t interested in his past, in what he’d done and what he hadn’t done. It didn’t matter to them. To them, he was the guy with the oats and hay, the occasional apple, and the clean water, and who gave them good brushings over their glossy hides, and that was enough for them.

It was a simple but fulfilling work, and he could never be grateful enough to House Jag’r for taking him in when no-one else had wanted him anymore.

As he closed one of the stall doors behind Trample, next to Squish, and the two horses nickered to each other, Cassie nuded his arm, chasing away his gloomy thoughts, and he turned to affectionately scratch her nose. “Yes, you’re a good girl, aren’t you?” he murmured with a small smile. This was a good life... Working for his friend – no, for his cousin, he kept forgetting that they actually were related through his mother – had been weird in the beginning, but by now he didn’t really mind anymore. Eret never treated him like a servant, even though he technically was exactly that. It felt more like working with a partner. It was not what he’d anticipated for his life... but then, life never went as planned. This was a good life, honest work for honest pay. Hiccup had no idea what the future would bring, whether he would take the Grand Duke’s offer to replace one of his older stablemasters, or take Eret’s offer instead. Both options had their merits. Maybe one day, if they broke from House tradition and appointed a Master of the Horse, he would be considered for that position, but that was the highest he would likely ever aspire to.

Sighing, he reached for a pair of empty buckets, and went to the well outside as his thoughts kept running in circles. If he was honest with himself, it wasn’t a choice between those two offers. It
was about whether he wanted to continue fighting for his birthright, or simply accepted his fate and moved on. Settling down, living a simple life, marry, and raise a family… It didn’t sound so bad. It could be easy, simple, and peaceful. A good life for a man. It would be the better choice.

As the first bucket splashed down into the well and he drew it free of the water, he continued to stew on the question. Could he do it? Could he forget his past, his family, and everything that happened? Could he give up his search for the truth, give up the future he was born for? It was a tough choice.

*Odin, help me,* he prayed, not for the first time. *Send me a sign, anything, to lead me on the right path. All-knowing Father of Gods, you’ve seen the future. Help me choose…*

But, as usual, nothing happened. Well… he wouldn’t need to decide *now* . Now, he had horses to care for. His immediate future was to rub them down, and finish deciding on which horse to place in which stall; Trample and Squish got along well enough, but he wanted an empty stall on either side of Chomp. Complicating matters was the fact that Eret’s Crusher and the Duke’s Hunter would be placed here as well. And while all of their stallions were used to Cassie in general, placing her next to one of them probably wasn’t a good idea unless he wanted to deal with fights between the stallions over her. Chomp, in particular, had left a string of scarred hides back at the stud farm.

Hiccup returned with the filled buckets, still pondering options in his head – and stopped dead in his tracks as he saw a figure moving between the horses. Judging by her size and how she moved, the figure had to be a girl or a young woman. She wore a ragged cloak that covered nearly every part of her, the hem dragging over the dusty ground and a hood pulled down deep over her face.

Why was she here in these stables, all on her own, for Odin’s sake?

But he got no time to further think about *why* she was here, when the fact *what* she was doing became a more pressing issue.

“Don’t get any closer!” he said, voice calm but urgent as she was about to approach near Chomp. “And don’t make any noises!” If she actually wanted to pet one of these beasts, either she had no idea how dangerous those creatures could be, or she had a death wish. Probably the first, as she was at least smart enough to heed his warning. She didn’t squeal or whirl around when she heard him, just flinched slightly and stood still, which was at least something.

“Those are the war stallions that came with House Jag’r, right?” she asked calmly. So she *did* know? A death wish then, after all? At least she didn’t move towards the dangerous horse… but also not away from the sixteen-hands-high charger, and that made Hiccup nervous. The high-strung warhorse had a tendency to bite on a whim – resulting in his nickname – and his hooves were deadly. It would be a bad start if his first day in command of these animals would end in a fatal accident with some local girl.

“Yes, they are,” he said, fighting to keep his voice calm so as to not agitate the horses. “And I highly recommend you slowly move away, and—” He didn’t get the chance to continue his instructions. The girl made some noises, a complicated mixture of cooing and clicking sounds, sounds he knew all too well, and then took another step toward Chomp. The beast shifted his weight, moved, and turned until his head was close enough for her to hold her hand to his nose. In wonder, Hiccup watched as the stallion sniffed at her while the girl kept cooing. She placed her other hand on Chomp’s neck, lightly scratching it until the animal turned his head away again, and let her pet him freely.

“I… I guess you’ve dealt with horses like these before?” he asked, still baffled even after gathering
up his wits again. Even with knowing the right noises to calm these beasts, most stable lads had their problems with dealing with these horses. And she was a girl. She wasn’t supposed to have any skills in this area.

But the only answer she gave was a quiet, “Yes, I have…” before she continued petting and scratching this beast that could easily kill her with one well-placed kick – or even an accidental one.

For a few moments, Hiccup simply watched her. The sight of this slender girl and one of the most dangerous horses they’d brought, so peacefully side-by-side, was mesmerizing. Like two worlds colliding that didn’t belong to one another. She continued in her light singsong of cooing and shushing noises, and he felt how her voice calmed him as well. She had a beautiful voice, slightly nasal, but pleasant to the ear. A warm tingle spread through his body while he watched and listened to her, a feeling of ease and comfort. She was not like those girls he’d seen at the Grand Duke’s stud farm, not simply admiring some pretty animals. She understood them, saw deeper, saw the beauty of strength beneath, and respected it.

Quietly, he stepped closer, and emptied a water bucket into the stallion’s trough. As he did so, he tried to get a better look at her, but her cloak hid her well. All he could see were her delicate hands on the horse’s body.

“So…” he began hesitantly and trailed off.

“So?” she prompted.

“How come you know how to calm them? Does your father work here? Or your brother? Your... husband?” The last word had come more hesitant than intended. Hiccup suddenly found himself hoping for one of the first two options, and directly chided himself for those silly thoughts.

The girl chuckled quietly, one of the sweetest sounds he’d ever heard. “Yes… You could say that, I guess.” She paused, and when she continued, Hiccup thought he could hear a slight smile in her voice. “No husband, though.”

His heart made a hopeful leap, but he fought to ignore it. He didn’t know the tiniest bit about this girl, so there was no point in getting any ideas. Instead, he turned his attention back to the horse. He was still sweaty and dusty from the long journey, with dirt and road debris all through his mane and tail. “Would you like to help me rub him down?” he heard himself say, surprised by his own words. Usually, he hated to work with someone else. And why would this girl want to work, when she’d just come to see the horses?

Her reaction surprised him, though. She turned toward him, and he caught a spark of blue beneath her hood as she flashed him a radiant smile. “I’d love to!”

His heart made another leap, and something was fluttering in his belly that made him feel light and heady. “Alright,” he swallowed. “Do you need me to show you how?”

The girl cocked her head in thought, but then nodded. “I’ve seen it done frequently, but I’ve never done it myself. Is there anything special I need to do?”

Smiling, Hiccup showed and explained to her how to brush and groom the big horse, and she mimicked his actions easily. Soon, they worked side by side, the companionable silence only occasionally interrupted by talking.

“So, do you live in the city then?” he asked after a few minutes. That was an innocent enough
question, right?

Again, the girl chuckled, and once again he felt butterflies swarming his belly. “No, I don’t,” she replied. “I live nearby, but not in the city... exactly.”

He nodded, not prying any further. She probably was the daughter of some local farmer, and any more precise description wouldn’t mean much to him anyway.

“And you?” she asked after a short pause while brushing down one of the stallion’s legs. “Are you new to House Jag’r’s services? I have never seen you with them before.”

A pang of pain shot through him at her words, and he froze. The pain wasn’t as strong as it usually was when someone mentioned his past though. “Yes. I... I only started to work for them a few months ago,” he confirmed, wondering why talking about it didn’t affect him as much as usual. “But how do you know? Do you spend much time at the stables when the Grand Duke and his men are here?” Was she just interested in the animals? Or was there a special someone for her among the Grand Duke’s men?

She dug her head, and he couldn’t read much from that reaction. “Yes, I usually spend a lot of time with them,” she stated simply.

For a while, they kept working and exchanging simple questions until Chomp was ready to be led into one of the stalls. But when Hiccup stepped outside and closed the gate, he noticed that the girl had seemingly frozen in place, staring past him. He turned to follow her gaze – toward Markor.

“Odin, he’s beautiful,” she breathed, her voice barely more than an awed whisper.

A proud smile tugged at Hiccup’s lips, and he nodded, “That he is.”

“May I...?” she made a hesitant step toward the gelding, but then turned back to Hiccup. She looked at him, actually looked, and he felt his heartbeat quicken. Gods, she was beautiful as well. But even more than her pretty face, there seemed to be something beneath, something calling to him. Belated, he remembered that she’d asked a question.

“I don’t know,” he said hesitantly. Biting his lip, he tried to think it through, but was too distracted to really do so. “Markor... He’s supposed to be a birthday present. For the Princess. I don’t think...” He paused, threw her another glance, and then made a snap decision. Stupid maybe, because he knew he only did it to impress her. But who would it hurt?

He looked around carefully to make sure they were still alone, and then nodded. “Alright. But be careful. I’ve heard people are a bit weird around here when it comes to the Princess.” He grimaced slightly, but the girl just rolled her eyes.

“Right,” she snorted. “Nobody is allowed to touch the Princess or any of her belongings. ‘Weird’ is the right word there!” she said sarcastically.

“I’ve heard people who touch her even get executed,” he added in a lighter tone, not really believing those rumours. “But that has to be exaggerated, right? I mean, that’s-“

“No... It’s true,” she interrupted him, face hidden beneath her hood. “Not everyone. But it already happened. There was this man who touched her once and was hung from the sacred tree...” She paused, shoulders slumped. Had he been someone she’d known? Hiccup tried to think of a way to cheer her up again, but before he could think of anything, she shook her head, and changed the topic herself. “But isn’t it weird to give a male horse to a woman? I don’t think the King will be all too happy about that.”
At that, Hiccup shrugged. “I thought so, too. But Markor is a gelding and not a war stallion, after all. And my master claims that it would work out. Apparently, the Princess has her own head when it comes to things she can and can’t do.” She had sounded interesting when Eret had talked about her, this Princess who was like a little sister to him. According to him, the Princess was quite different from how people saw her.

The girl laughed quietly, and shook her head. “Your master might be right there,” she mused. “But I wouldn’t want you to get into trouble. Although…” she paused, thoughtfully, and then nodded. “It’s still three months until her birthday. So, technically, this gelding is not hers yet, right?”

“I guess so,” Hiccup agreed, grinning. “I think she’s meant to get him earlier already, but you’re right. For now, he still belongs to House Jag’r, and therefore is in my care.”

She returned his grin with a broad grin of her own that sent his head spinning. “So, master of horses. What do you say? May I?”

“You may,” he declared ceremonially, and made a gesture to follow him as he walked past her toward Markor. “And I’m Hiccup, by the way.”

“Nice to meet you, Hiccup,” she replied, smiling, and then turned her full attention to the horse.

He wanted to ask her for her name, but decided it wasn’t important right now. Instead, he watched her again as she approached the big animal with the same caution as before. The way she moved, careful yet sure, slow but not intimidated, was captivating. It almost seemed like a dance, the way she let the horse sniff at her, how she petted and caressed him, how she seemed so fragile next to the heavy body and yet, at the same time, absolutely seemed to belong there. She leaned against the horse’s broad neck, cuddling into his warmth, murmuring and chuckling quietly to herself.

Hiccup found himself fascinated by this young woman who seemed to know no fear. It went beyond every interest he’d ever had in any girl before, and he didn’t even know her name.

Slowly, he approached girl and horse, not wanting to interrupt their apparent connection, but also not able to keep himself away.

“Do you want to help me with him as well?” he asked, more out of courtesy then out of any real doubt. She nodded eagerly, and they began to work again. Hiccup took his time, worked slowly on purpose. Markor was the last horse that he had to care for, and he wanted to spend as much time with her as possible. They kept talking lightly, about the horses, House Jag’r’s visit, and about unimportant things like the weather, anything to listen to her voice.

The first time was an accident.

His more capable left hand, holding the brush, glided down from Markor’s back just as she reached up to begin the next stroke down his side with her right. Their fingers met, and Hiccup felt lightning shooting up his arm and through his entire body. He froze just as the girl gasped, and she quickly pulled her hand back against her chest. They shared a stunned look, before Hiccup made a step backwards. Biting his lip, he turned his eyes away from her and toward the floor.

“I’m sorry,” he mumbled, confused. He hadn’t meant to touch her. It wasn’t appropriate in the slightest. But then, it hadn’t been simply touching her that confused him. Thor forgive him, he’d never felt something like this internal lightning before. “I… I didn’t mean to-“

“It’s alright,” he heard her whisper. When he looked up, she was still clutching her hand, rubbing the spot where he’d touched her. Had she felt the same?
There was an awkward silence, neither sure what to do now. Hiccup’s heart was racing, and he was almost sure that she could hear it. But then she resumed her work as if nothing had happened, and Hiccup followed suit. Suddenly, it was hard to concentrate.

The second time was probably not an accident. He couldn’t be entirely sure though, as it was her who touched his hand this time. He’d been lost in thoughts, trying to figure out why this girl affected him so much, when he again felt her fingers touching his. They both froze, but didn’t pull away this time. It was just her little finger brushing over his, but it lasted longer. He stared at their fingers, before cautiously glancing at her. She seemed equally confused, but when she noticed his look, she gave him a tentative smile, and then resumed working as if nothing had happened.

After that, Hiccup lost count. Every now and then, their hands touched or their elbows bumped against one another, but it didn’t serve to interrupt their work anymore. They kept talking lightly, nudging each other playfully, laughing, and teasing.

Despite the relative warmth of the stable interior, she kept her cloak on and her hood up all the time. All he could see of her was the lower half of her face and her hands, occasional flashes of blue when the light caught in her eyes, and glimpses of more blue from her dress when the cloak fell aside every now and then. But somehow it didn’t matter. He didn’t need to see her to get to know her, to realize what a warm and funny person she was.

He didn’t know how much time had passed since he’d first spotted her, although it was at least two or three hours, almost assuredly. Markor was long since in his stall, as was Cassie in the stall next to him. All of the horses had been provided with hay, oats, water, and more scratching and cuddling than usual, and Hiccup felt lighter than he had in months. Hel, in years! Not even his leg was giving him any trouble anymore.

She sat on one of the straw bales, the same one he’d sat on earlier, while he brushed straw and dust off the stone ground. She was talking about some prank her brother had played on their father when they were kids, but he was only listening to her words with half an ear. Instead, his mind was wandering a strange road, one he definitely hadn’t expected only hours ago.

He didn’t believe in love at first sight, or soulmates. Those were dreams, fairy tales old women told young girls to make them wait for ‘the right one’. But right now, with this girl’s pleasant voice in his ears and her company making him feel so light and comfortable…

Right now, he believed.

In this enchanted moment, the idea of accepting the Grand Duke’s offer seemed even more appealing than before. An image rose in his mind, an image that tore at his soul more than he’d ever expected. The image showed a small but neat house amidst a small garden of flowers, vegetables, and herbs. As he came closer, he heard a dog bark inside, and not long afterwards, the door opened. The girl he’d spent the last hours with greeted him with a loving smile, a giggling toddler in her arms. He saw himself as he took them into his arms and kissed them both, before entering their house with his family.

Their house…

His family…

Suddenly, there was a longing in his heart, one he hadn’t known before. A longing for this peaceful life that made accepting and forgetting his past so easy. A life he hadn’t dared to dream of. But right now, here, with this girl, he could see it. He wanted it. And it was easy… He could go to her father and ask for his permission to marry her right after he was finished with his work. And then,
he had three months before he was to return to the Duke’s stud farm. Three months to get to know her, to court her properly, and then to ask her to become his wife.

*His wife.*

The thought brought a dreamy smile to his face. Maybe, hopefully, she would agree. He only knew her for a couple short hours, and yet he knew. He *knew* that she was the right one for him, felt it deep in his guts, in his very soul. Something was pulling him toward her, closer, inevitable.

“Hiccup? Are you in there?”

Hiccup flinched as her voice was suddenly much closer than it had been only moments ago. He blinked, almost regretful as the image of that small house faded away, but found himself with an even more pleasant sight.

The girl stood right in front of him, her face only inches away from his. She peered up at him past her hood, and it was the first good look he got at her. At those endless sky-blue eyes, of which he’d only caught glimpses and flashes of before. At the strands of golden hair that framed her face which he hadn’t even noticed until now. And at her uneven rosy lips, the thin upper one and the plush lower one.

Hiccup didn’t think. If he *had* thought, he probably would have stopped himself, but he didn’t think. He just did what felt right, because it was the most natural thing to do, because he felt that it was how it *should* be.

He leaned down to kiss her.

At first, he didn’t feel anything. The shock over what he’d done numbed him, and he stood like frozen in place, his prickling lips brushing against hers. There was a small gasp, a faint breeze running over his face, accompanied by that small noise of hers that sent his whole world spinning.

And that was her only reaction. She didn’t bolt, didn’t slap him, as he deserved, didn’t scream or yell at him for having acted improperly. She just stood there, frozen in place just like him.

He retreated to look at her. He tried to guess her thoughts, tried to guess how she felt. Had he ruined his chance with her by that rash action? *Oh please, Freya, Frigga, and Odin, please no!*

But his fears were in vain. Because, in her eyes, he could see the same confused longing that was glowing in his heart as well.

He couldn’t say which of them moved first. He didn’t know whether his hands cupped her head and waist before hers were in his hair, didn’t know whether he pulled her closer or whether she pressed herself up against his chest. And it didn’t matter either.

This second, or first real kiss was even more intense than that first touch of their fingers. The moment her lips touched his, an entire thunderstorm was crackling through him, like feeling the air crackle on the summer days when Thor and Weyland worked together on the great cloudy anvils visible for miles over the open sea and the whole of the world felt alive and in motion, the sea churning and the air smelling of clean rain and salty spray.

He pulled her even closer, needing her like he needed the air to breathe, and yet it wasn’t enough. Her cloak fell off – first just the hood, and he caught glimpses of her golden hair, practically glowing and sparkling in the late afternoon sun. Then the loose knot at her front opened, and the cloak fluttered uselessly off her shoulders. His hands met soft fabric – silk, velvet, and lace – and he might have wondered about the high quality had he been able to think at all. But he wasn’t able
to think. He felt as if his entire being, his very soul was reaching out for her, searching and –

“Astrid?”

The voice cut like a sharp knife, popping their heated bubble of want and connection. The girl – Astrid? – pulled away from him in an instant, one delicate hand pressed to her lips. Her eyes were filled with what only could be called panic as she stared at him for a second, before she hastily picked up her cloak. She mumbled quietly as if only to herself, but he could hear her anyway.

“No, no, no,” she repeated over and over. “No, no, this can’t be happening. Oh, please, please not….”

“I… I’m sorry,” Hiccup murmured in confusion, still dazed from their kiss. He’d thought she’d wanted it, too, but…

She looked up at him, and shook her head, only briefly, but he thought he saw her smile - which confused him even more. Then she hastily fumbled with her cloak again, tried to put it back on in time, and –

“Oh, finally! Here you are,” a man’s voice sounded through the stables, and Hiccup turned to see a young man standing in the gate, dressed in a fine tunic and hose. He had long blonde hair that fell in strange untidy braids around his equally long face, which was set in a relieved expression. Her brother maybe?

“I’ve been looking for you everywhere. Daniel sent me. Your father is not happy!” Or... maybe not her brother then? The man came closer, and ignored Hiccup completely as he critically eyed Astrid behind him. “You’ve been playing with these animals again, haven’t you? Frigga, why couldn’t you have at least put on some sensible clothes first? Did it need to be this dress? It will take ages until it’s clean again!”

The man kept rambling, and Hiccup’s confusion grew even more. Why had she been so afraid, when all this man seemed to care about were her clothes? It didn’t make any sense. He turned – and stared wide-eyed at the woman that stood there amidst the straw and dust of the stables.

Her golden hair was braided in a complicated pattern halfway around her head until it hung in a long plait down her back. It was ornate with colourful sparkling stones, jewels no doubt, that had been pinned into the tight pattern with tiny needles. She stood straight, head held high, and it didn’t take her expensive silken dress – indeed adorned with luxurious velvet and lace and embroidered with swans in fine bullion wire, and wholly, entirely, obscenely inappropriate for the stables – to give her an air of dignity. Some buried part of his mind understood right away what, or rather who, she was, but his consciousness wasn’t able to accept it yet.

“If I’d gone to my rooms to change, you would have stopped me,” she stated flatly, brushing aside this man’s words as if they meant nothing to her. Was this really the same girl he’d laughed and joked with only minutes ago? The girl he’d kissed, had fantasized of as his future wife?

“Yes, we would have!” the man replied agitatedly. “What were you thinking? The King expected you to be there to greet the Grand Duke and his son, and you know that perfectly well.”

“No, he didn’t, and you know that, Tuff.” The woman waved him off, and pulled on a pair of thin calfskin gloves that she’d produced from the cloak’s pockets. “Father knew exactly that I wouldn’t be there, even if he doesn’t want to admit it.”

It was then when all pieces finally fell into place.
Hiccup fell to his knees, not entirely by choice, but completely appropriate. “Your Royal Highness,” he gasped, head pressed against the dusty ground. “... I’m sorry. I didn’t...” Didn’t what? Didn’t want to kiss her? That would be a lie! And, sure, he hadn’t know who she was, but would that matter? He’d touched her, more than once. He was as good as dead. She’d practically told him so.

“Who’s this?” the man, Tuff, asked in bafflement, as if it was the first time he’d even noticed Hiccup.

“Ah, he’s one of the Grand Duke’s stable lads,” The Princess explained in a blasé tone. “He was so kind as to show me the horses House Jag’r brought this year.”

Hiccup couldn’t stop himself, he needed to peek up at her. He needed to see her reaction. Had he really just imagined in all? This deep connection between them? This feeling of rightness? He lifted his head, just enough to glimpse at the two people standing above him, not sure whether this alone might be against the protocol already. It didn’t matter anymore anyway.

He saw the unperturbed expression on the man’s face, but his gaze wandered on immediately to the Princess, who stood in the background. And when their eyes met, he saw it.

He saw the glint of sorrow in Astrid’s eyes, saw her quietly mouthed I’m sorry. And he saw her confusion, mirroring his own heart.

“Huh. I see,” Tuff shrugged, and reached one hand out to help him up. Hiccup took it, bewildered, and fought to keep his eyes away from her and on her warder instead. “Thanks for making sure she didn’t harm herself.” The man said, winking, which confused the Hel out of Hiccup.

“Y-you’re welcome,” he mumbled, not sure what else to say. He bent to brush dust and straw off his knees, glad for the excuse to avert his eyes for a little bit longer.

“Alright, we should go back to the castle. Now. Getting you ready for dinner is going to be a challenge,” Tuff tsked, and reached for a bit of straw that stuck from her hair.

The Princess sighed, but nodded her consent. They made their way toward the exit, but she paused once more as she passed him. “Thank you, Master Hiccup,” she said in a light voice. “For showing me the horses.” She held one arm out toward him, and it took Hiccup a moment to realize what he was supposed to do.

With a thumping heart, he placed his hand lightly beneath hers. He could feel her warmth even through the thin material of her glove, and it seemed to burn into him, up his arm and into his heart. Trembling, he bent to breathe a cautious kiss into the air above her covered knuckles, remembering how their bare skin had felt clasped in his own hands.

“It was a pleasure, milady,” he answered dutifully, and he meant every word. Gods, if he could, he’d do it all again...

When she retreated her hand, it was trembling as well, Hiccup noticed. She covered it quickly by wrapping her other hand around it, nodded once with a pleasant smile, and then followed Tuff out of the stables.

For a long while, Hiccup stared at where she’d disappeared from his view. His head was a mess, emotions still whirling like one of those summer storms – but like he was standing out in the middle of one without shelter, instead of admiring its raw power from a safe distance. Odin truly had a twisted sense of humour, if this was the sign He’d chosen to send him.
Chapter End Notes

For the future: I plan to post one chapter per week, let's see how that works out :o)

Another thing: The chapter titles are (mostly) going to be chosen from a random playlist my streaming service played to me in the early phase of plotting this story. It became my personal soundtrack for this story as titles, lyrics, and even the instrumental pieces fit so wonderfully, and I'm going to say something about the songs as I see fit. Feel free to skip that if you're not interested in that ^^.

The Title of this story "For The Love Of A Princess" is from there as well, a part of the OST of Braveheart by James Horner. The title struck me, but it also sums up the bittersweet setting perfectly IMO.

This chapter's title "The Wish I Whispered When It All Began" is from The Wolven Storm (Priscilla's song) by Sharm, and you're probably going to see other parts of its lyrics as chapter titles later on.
In a daze, Astrid followed Timothy – or Tuff as everyone called him – out of the stables. All of her efforts went towards ensuring that her outward appearances were calm, typical, even placid – which was almost more than she could manage. Inside, her heart was racing and her head was a jumbled mess of thoughts and emotions, all centred around a single question.

What had just happened?

It had started so simply. She’d gone to the stables to see the new horses that House Jag’r had undoubtedly brought, hoping to spend a few hours in pleasant company, and, most importantly, not being the perfect Princess for a while.

And she’d found that, all right...

But she’d also discovered something quite... unexpected.

What just happened...

As discretely as she could, she took a shaky breath as an old memory surfaced in her mind. She remembered a visit to the southern seashore when she was a child. She remembered watching the tide come in, a wave of water that had quickly drowned the beach that she had walked across only hours before. Some of the children on the beach, digging for clams and the like, had barely been able to outrun the rushing water.

What just happened... it had felt like that. She’d been swamped by these unexplainable feelings and that... that vision... Like something was pulling her toward him, seemingly as inexorably as the tide.

Nothing made sense.

She fought hard against the urge to lift her hand to her lips, to trace where he’d kissed her. It was of supreme importance that, whatever she did, Tuff mustn’t notice anything. He couldn’t learn about what had just happened.

It was weird in a way, ironic even. It hadn’t been her first kiss. That she’d lost to Snotlout when she was seven. And it hadn’t even been her first real kiss either, because that one had gone to Eret three years ago – as part of an experiment.

No, it wasn’t just that he’d kissed her. It had been so much more than that.

She had felt it almost immediately, when he’d treated her like a human being, and not as an adornment or path to power. When he’d talked to her, had joked and laughed with her, had made her work, and had teased her. Even in those early moments, there had been something between them already, something more than just the thrill of being treated like a normal person. There had been a lightness, a feeling of rightness, something she’d never felt before, not with her brother nor with any of her friends.

When he’d first brushed against her, she’d felt like something inside had shifted into place that had always been slightly off before. She couldn’t describe it any better, but it had felt so... so... right! It had felt right to touch his hand, right to carefully caress his fingers, and so very right to nudge him during their bantering, as if she’d known him all her life. As if she should know him.
But when he’d kissed her…

There were no words to describe that feeling. The images his lips had conjured to her mind’s eye, and the sheer longing it had stirred within her. Longing for what she’d seen, but, even more so, a soul-deep longing for this man, this stranger who’d captured her heart and soul in merely a couple of hours.

And yet, it could never be.

Astrid balled her hands into fists at her sides to keep them from trembling. She needed time, needed to think and to put some order into her head. Right now, everything was just this chaotic mess. Just an hour of peace, that was all she needed. But she probably wouldn’t get an hour today anymore.

She wouldn’t even get a few minutes.

Almost without intending to do so, she wandered away from Tuff and the pathway back to the castle. Her gaze drifted to the small lake at the forest’s edge, and, as always, a peaceful smile crept across her face. It was a beautiful lake, a real lake, not some hand-dug pond full of gasping ornamental fish. The banks here were covered with reeds and cattails, and teeming with wildlife. It was her favourite place on the castle grounds.

Well, maybe except for the stables.

Her eyes were caught by the majestic swans gliding over its surface, and, as usual, there was this strange yearning deep inside her. A yearning to be as free as they were, and also a bit of jealousy at how they could chase off people that annoyed them and people seemed to respect that.

“Hey, hey, don’t you run off again, young lady!”

Astrid rolled her eyes, and sighed. Of course, Tuff wouldn’t let her have any more moments of peace today.

“I’m not running away, Tuff. I’m just…” she shrugged, trailing off. What should she say? She wanted to run away! She didn’t want to return to the castle, to the stiff rules, and the even more rigid expectations. Instead, she wanted to…to return to the stables, and back into those arms that had held her tightly, so tight that they’d almost crushed her.

She inhaled sharply at that thought. Freya, what was going on with her? Her mind drifted back to that toothy grin, to those lively forest green eyes beneath that mane of auburn hair, and she couldn’t help but smile briefly.

But it was nothing but a dream. As much as she might wish otherwise, she knew that nothing could ever come of it. She had to keep telling herself that. Her father would never allow it. As right as it had felt, and as much as she wanted it to come true, it still could never be. It was too dangerous, and she would not risk –

“Astrid, if you’re not coming with me right now, then I’m not responsible for my actions anymore.” Tuff had probably meant for his voice to sound threatening, but it just served to make her lips twitch in light amusement, despite her troubled thoughts. And it served to distract her, for which she was grateful. She shouldn’t think about this, about him. It could never be.

“Alright, Tuff,” she gave in, turned, and walked ahead of her warder, back toward the castle. “I’ll be good now. Just for you.”

“Oh, I’ll never understand women,” she heard him mumble almost incoherently. Then he added
louder, “That’s good to hear, but I’m sure you’re not doing it just for me. Because I know that you wouldn’t want to miss Eret’s accolade. No, you can’t fool me. Even you can’t ignore an event like this.”

Astrid whirled around, and stared at him, eyes wide. “That’s today?” she asked disbelievingly. “His accolade is today already? Are you sure?”

Tuff shrugged. “As far as I’ve heard, yes. You see, I’ve been looking for you everywhere. Of course, I thought you’d be at the stables, and that’s where I looked for you first. At the main stables. But those were filled with hundreds of horses and dozens of stable staff from House Jag’r, and none of them had seen you there, although the old goat was there, shouting orders and making everyone stressed out.”

“Tuff! You know better than to call Eret’s grandfather that!” Astrid chided him, glancing to see if anyone had heard the impolitic remark, and then leaned in to whisper, “At least so long as we’re not behind closed doors.” And regardless of how true it was, she thought with a grimace.

Tuff shrugged and continued with his tale of woe. “Then I went to Fishlegs at the physician’s chambers, because I know how much time you spend there watching him mix all those weird tinctures and paints for his master. But he said he hadn’t seen you all day, so he sent me to his wife in the kitchens. Which was a great excuse to swipe one of the pastries Heather had just made, by the way. You know, these small ones filled with — oh, never mind. She hadn’t seen you either, but she said she wouldn’t even have noticed you with all the extra work they had because of the accolade. Looks like your father decided on that one on a whim. Or your brother persuaded him to do so, which is more likely, I guess. That way, we can get rid of the old goat – pardon, Eret the Elder faster. Anyway, Eret is the only sensible candidate, so it has to be his accolade today.”

Astrid rubbed her forehead as she filtered the small bit of important information out of Tuff’s extended monologue. “And why haven’t you said so sooner?” she inquired, and turned to hurry up the path toward the castle again.

“I would have if I’d found you sooner. You see, after Heather and the rest of the kitchen staff confirmed that you hadn’t been there all day, I went to every other place I could think of. I looked at your herb garden, at the archery range… Odin, I even went to the library, before I remembered that House Jag’r sometimes uses these remote stables as well. And then I had to come all the way out here. Honestly, you can’t expect me to remember every tiny bit of unimportant information after such a hike.”

She took a deep breath, but didn’t comment any further. She could point out any number of responses; that Eret had been her best friend since they were children, that she felt closer to him than she did to her own brother, and that his accolade was something he’d been looking forward to for years. Of course, his accolade was important. But Tuff already knew all that, so where was the point. Instead of wasting any more time and energy, she hurried on up the hill, Tuff on his long legs right behind her.

Once they reached the castle’s main gate, however, she paused. She waited for Tuff to quickly put her hair back into order as best he could, his nimble hands working to get the braids back into what he considered acceptable condition, and then shook the last bits of dust and straw out of her skirts. He gave her appearance a last once-over, and then nodded grimly.

With deliberate calmness, she stepped out into the open.

As always, several people greeted her as she walked along the road that led through the gate, minor noblemen who lived in town, merchants who bowed in their usual exaggerated manner, and
common people who gazed at her in wonder before hastily scrambling out of her way. Calmly, she walked past them, smiling pleasantly as it was expected of her. Astrid hated this public part of the castle. She hated always keeping up appearances, always making a show of dignity and aloofness. She hated being this puppet, this royal figurehead. She understood why it was necessary, why the royal family needed to show strength and control. Those were subtle reminders as to who was in charge – to the kingdom, to the distant offshoot branches of her own House, to the other nobles, to the Temple, and to the common folk. Although to those commoners and peasants, it was less a threat and reminder of who was the boss than it was a calming reassurance of prosperity and stability.

But she hated wearing this mask nonetheless. Because it simply wasn’t who she was.

The inner courtyard was surprisingly busy for the time of day. There were merchants with full waggons blocking each other’s way, and servants bustling about hastily. Meanwhile, the usual groups of children were running around, playing games, but their numbers seemed greater than normal, especially with the smaller groups of youth that stood off to the sides, taking breaks.

The commotion confused Astrid, but then she remembered what Tuff had said. Eret’s accolade was tonight. Of course, the castle was in chaos, trying to prepare an appropriate feast in time.

Inwardly, her pleasant smile turned into a smirk. All this effort, and the person of honour would certainly enjoy it more if the celebrations for his grand day would instead consist of telling scary stories around a campfire. But that was, of course, out of the question.

“Oh, hey!” a familiar voice called out to them, and Astrid turned toward the plump man running in their direction. When he reached them, Fishlegs dutifully bowed to her, and then turned toward Timothy.

Right… public ground meant that her friend wasn’t even allowed to talk to her.

“I see you’ve found her,” the physician’s apprentice said, gasping for air from his short sprint. He threw her a careful smile, hidden behind a hand over his mouth which she answered with a slow blink of her eyelids. The only form of friendly greeting they could risk, even with the wedding band glinting on her friend’s finger.

“Yeah, I did,” Tuff replied, lazily leaning against a stone column that supported a gallery overhead. “Guess what? She was at the stables after all. The other stables.”

“Not surprising,” Fishlegs nodded. “I thought that’s where you had looked first, or I would have suggested it.”

Astrid gritted her teeth as the men kept chatting as if she wasn’t there. It was the law. Lowborn as they were, they were not to address her directly. And in return, as a woman, she was not allowed to speak up anyway.

It was infuriating!

She was Astrid of House Hofferson, daughter of King Osmond the Kind and sister to the Prince and future King Daniel. Since the death of her stepmother four years ago, she had been the First Lady of the kingdom. And yet she could do nothing but stand and wait until her warder was finished with his chat. She wasn’t even allowed to walk on her own, for Freya’s sake!

Not wanting to listen to her friends joking around without being able to participate, she tuned them out as best she could. It was a skill she’d learned early in her education, mostly in regards to her
And Eret really arrived already? Are you sure?"

The mention of her friend’s name caught her attention, and Astrid turned her focus to the conversations around her without turning or looking in their directions. There were two young women standing close-by, chatting animatedly, and Astrid grinned inwardly at their topic.

“Yes, I’m telling you, he’s here already. So there’s no point in waiting near the road to accidentally fall down in front of him. Besides, my brother said he rode one of their stallions. You know, one of these really big horses House Jag’r breeds in the eastern plains. He probably would have simply trampled over you.”

“Oh, but I wouldn’t have minded. He’s so handsome, dying at his feet might be worth it.”

“You’re hopeless.”

Out of the corner of her eye, Astrid watched the girls walk away, chuckling quietly to herself. They were right, of course, Eret was handsome with his warm brown eyes, the broad chin highlighted with a few tribal tattoos, and the even broader shoulders. She’d noticed that much, alright. She wasn’t blind. And yet, it was still funny to listen to those girls swooning over him, when she knew that his heart belonged to someone else.

Cheered up by this encounter, Astrid kept listening to the conversations around her while she waited for Tuff to go on. Those other conversations weren’t as interesting and she listened to several at once instead of keeping track of a single one. Everyone was talking over everyone else, and keeping track of the individual conversations was quite a challenge.

“So, what is it about these apples you wanted to show me. Are they any special?” one young servant said to another.

Nearby, a pair of young men were chatting. “I’m thinking about taking the King’s shilling and joining the Prince out west for next year’s summer campaigning.”

“Well, they look delicious, don’t you think? Too bad we have orders to get the other ones. I would have loved to swipe one or two for later,” the second servant said.

“Huh, Trader Bartek. You’ve got a good haul this visit. What changed?” asked one of the Chamberlain’s men to a nicely dressed merchant, inspecting his cart.

“I dunno, Bobby. It’s still fighting, right?” the second young man said with trepidation.

“Oh, you would do that, wouldn’t you? Ah, but I agree. It’s not like it would actually attract attention if a dozen apples or so go missing,” replied the first servant.

Meanwhile, the first young man scoffed. “Aye? So? I’ve heard André got in on one of the nobleman’s ransoms from those skirmishes, and has been showing off the purse and that awesome scar on his calf. Ever since he got back, he’s had a bevvy of girls to choose from. So, what do you think, are you coming, too?”

“No, I’m not. He didn’t get that scar from falling off a horse, or something. And not everybody comes back, remember? Jack the miller’s grandnephew got killed. I don’t think I can do that to my mother and sister,” the second young man said.

"Ah, well, with that business out west, the high roads are safe to travel again," the merchant said,
“Don’t be such a coward, Greg. The chance of actually dying in one of the skirmishes is less than for the proverbial cripple to court the Princess. Practically non-existent,” the first young man said.

“Do you think we could get away with buying an additional bag of these? The Mistress surely gave us enough money for these orders,” the servants chattered.

"Oh? I know the knights usually don’t bother merchants, but what about the bandits? They used to be quite a pest," the Chamberlain’s man said.

“Hush, she’s right over there, you fool!” the second young man hissed.

The merchant cackled. "Aye, the new lord has a way with bandits. Join the army, or hang from a tree. One forest road was just filled...”

Suddenly shaking, Astrid forced herself to stop listening. With unseeing eyes, she stared at the cobblestones beneath her feet, trying to fight off the images those last words had conjured up in her mind. She needed to get away from here, to distract herself, as those images threatened to overwhelm her. She audibly cleared her throat to catch Tuff’s attention, and gave him a stern look when he looked up at her.

“Oh, right,” he said, pushing himself off the column. “We need to get going. Still lots to do for tonight.”

“Ah, yes. Me, too. Master Mulch wants me to get more caraway, centaury, and fennel. We’re going to need those after tonight’s feast. Lots of stomach trouble to be expected. Well, I’ll see you around, I guess.” He waved shortly, and then hurried to one of the merchant’s wagons on his short legs.

Without exchanging another word, she continued on her way, Tuff close behind her, watching her. She strolled down the hallways and up the stairs, past servants who swiftly made way for her, no matter how heavy the burden was they were carrying.

Once they reached her private chambers, her shoulders slumped down, and she let out a heavy sigh. She’d successfully run the gauntlet through the public part of the castle without inflicting harm on either herself or her reputation. It might have been only a few minutes, but the role was exhausting regardless.

“No time to lose, come on,” Tuff urged – ignoring the time he’d just wasted talking with Fishlegs – and dragged her on. “Ruff? Are you here? I found her.”

Ruff appeared from the dressing room, and rolled her eyes when she saw her mistress. “How do you do it?” she asked incredulously. “It’s mid-afternoon. I braided your hair this morning. How is it possible that it already looks like you were rolling in the hay with a stable boy? Unless that’s what you did, in which case I don’t want to know.”

Astrid flinched slightly, but covered any further visible reactions by walking past her servant and entering the dressing room. Ruff’s words were awfully close to the truth, but she couldn’t let her see that.

“Close enough. She was playing with horses again,” Tuff replied.

“I didn’t play with them, I rubbed them down,” she corrected, sending a small prayer of thanks to the Gods over this change of topic. She knew the twins wouldn’t be happy to hear that, either, but
it was a fairly safe bit of information. Something that wouldn’t get a certain someone into trouble.

A someone with an incredibly dazzling smile, and an irresistible laugh.

“You did what? Oh, nooo. All the dust and dirt of days on the road, and it’s all on your dress now. As if my usual work wasn’t hard enough already,” Ruff grumbled, but Astrid didn’t pay her much attention. Rachel and Timothy had fairly little work to do in comparison with the other castle servants – even taking into account Astrid’s... tendency to rattle the bars of her gilded cage. “Okay, okay, over here now. Tuff, go and heat a little water while I get her out of this dress.”

As usual, Astrid’s focus relaxed a bit while the twins buzzed around her. Out of the dusty dress, a quick wash, and into a new, even fancier dress. Then it was endless combing of her knee-long hair before it got braided once again. She would have done parts of that herself, if only they let her. But no, works like these weren’t suitable for a Princess.

With nothing else to occupy her mind, her thoughts wandered back toward those wonderful hours at the stables earlier. She remembered how happy she’d felt in his presence, how her heart had felt so warm and her head so light. She remembered how his lips had felt as they’d moved with hers, how he’d tasted. Without her help, her hand began to wander up to her mouth, but she caught herself quickly. She mustn’t give away anything.

She remembered how hot his hands had felt on her neck and waist, how his heat had seemed to flood into her and ignite her heart and soul. How she’d never felt anything even close to the bliss that merely thinking about him at this moment kindled in her chest.

Then another, older memory rose in her mind, of another pair of eyes bulging out of their sockets, and a body twisting and twitching desperately beneath a tree branch.

With a low gasp, Astrid tore herself out of her memories. With wide eyes, she stared at her reflection, fighting to keep her hands from shaking and her breathing at a normal pace.

This was different!

What happened today… It was different from what had happened all those months ago. It wasn’t the same. It couldn’t…

Astrid was well-versed at keeping her emotions locked inside her. But it was still a blessing that the twins, who probably could read her better than anyone else, were busy getting her hair in order, or else they surely would have noticed the turmoil within her.

These blissful moments she’d spent with this man, with Hiccup, had been wonderful. And all she really wanted to do right now was to go back. She wanted to hide from the world, and pretend to be just a normal girl. But that was nothing new, she often thought those things. But today was different. Today, she didn’t just wish to be a normal girl for herself. Today, she wished she could be a normal girl, because the Princess could never be with a simple stable lad. Today, she wanted to be a normal girl so she could be with him.

But she wasn’t a normal girl.

This wish, this dream could never come true.

And she would almost certainly never see him again anyway.

. o O o .
It took almost an hour, but finally, Ruff placed the swan-shaped coronet onto her hair and Tuff declared her presentable. With mixed feelings, Astrid made her way through the castle and toward the main audience chamber where the accolade would be held.

It would be one of those events she usually dreaded the most. She wouldn’t need to do anything. She just needed to be present, to smile, and to behave while the men went about their business. She would need to wear this mask of aloofness and fake smiles all night, during the accolade itself and during the elaborate dinner afterwards. That alone would usually be reason enough for her to find some excuse, any excuse, to arrive as late as possible, to leave early under the pretence of a headache, or to not show up at all.

But for her best friend she could endure it all.

She arrived just in time to slip through the royal’s entrance into the massive, high-ceilinged and splendidly decorated room. She took her place in the smaller but still quite ornate chair next to her father’s throne. Daniel, who sat on the other side, gave her an amused smirk at her late arrival while her father threw her an irked and scolding look. Of course, he wasn’t happy about her absence earlier, but, honestly, what had he expected?

Beside them stood some of the High Priests, here to witness the accolade as well. Lord Alvin, the Priest of Odin, who was one of the King’s oldest advisors. Lord Throg, the Priest of Thor, who also was the King’s loyal general and defender of the kingdom. Lady Gothi, the Priestess of Frigga, who was older than any living being remembered, and who was said to be able to tell truth from lie, just like every member of her order. And Lady Mala, the Priestess of Freya, a beautiful woman who Astrid assumed to be more than simply another advisor to her father.

They stood to either side of them, the men next to Daniel and the women next to her, and, as usual, their presence made Astrid nervous. She wasn’t sure whether Lady Gothi needed spoken words to detect a lie, or whether she was able to see right through her mask anyway. And the services Lady Mala offered in the name of the Goddess of Love – well, no, they didn’t make her nervous. They made her curious.

Beyond from the small group of people up on the dais, the room was brimming with people; the benches had been removed, and it was standing room only. Only a few strides from the foot of the dais stood the witnesses and guests, with the higher ranked members in front, and whatever servants had managed to sneak in or who were circulating through the chamber as needed.

Eret the Elder was front and centre, having emerged from his semi-retirement in managing his House’s third-largest stud farm for his grandson’s accolade, and leaning on his cane. Flanking him was what seemed like half of House Jag’r’s vassals, plus all of her father’s own immediate vassals. But that was to be expected; House Jag’r was one of the three great Arch-dukedoms – what had been princedoms in their own right before her grandfather had unified the kingdom – and their horses were widely seen as superior in quality among all of the local kingdoms. Other dignitaries, officials, a few prominent subjects from the cities, and anyone else that could beg an invitation were here.

And each and every single one of them seemed to be chattering on and on, their voices echoing off of the stone walls, the tapestries insufficient to swallow the noise.

“All Gods above, I probably don’t even need to fake a headache,” Astrid murmured, sure that nobody could hear over the deafening noise in the room. But Lady Gothi shook with what probably was silent laughter at her words, and her father threw her an exasperated look. Before he could say anything to berate her, however, the fanfares sounded. They drew everyone’s attention toward the
big front gates that opened now to permit a small group of men.

At the front came His Grace Sir Eret II, Grand Duke of Eastervale, Head of House Jag’r. He looked regal as usual, and the sight of him served – somewhat – to calm Astrid’s unease. As annoying as all this was to her, it was still about people she cared for. Lord Eret had always been like a second father to her, and he was more like family to her than the distant branches of House Hofferson scattered all over the country.

Behind the Grand Duke walked the person of honour for this night. Astrid had to bite her lip to not laugh at the almost comically exaggerated formal outfit Eret wore. It was customary, of course. He was to become a knight in a few minutes. Of course, he had to look stately and noble and all. But she knew very well that he enjoyed dressing up like a pompous monkey just as much as she did. That being said, he did look very dashing in the brocaded silks and silver-chased chainmail, although the rampant horses embroidered on his deep blue tabard seemed almost excessive. The finely tooled riding boots, on the other hand – utterly impractical for actual riding, with the elaborate patterns embossed into the leather that would quickly be worn smooth and filled with dirt during any actual riding – were most assuredly over the top, however. And they looked so stiff and new that she marvelled he could walk in them.

As his party came closer, Eret threw her a wide grin and winked, and she couldn’t help but grin back. She hadn’t seen him in months, but those gaps had never been able to tear down their friendship. Of course, she could have met him earlier already if she’d been there to greet him and his father. But then, she actually had expected him to ride with their horses instead, so it was his fault alone that they hadn’t met earlier. Kind of…

Not that she actually blamed him. If Eret had been there to tend the horses, she wouldn’t have spent those wonderful hours listening to that voice like molten honey and watching those beautiful eyes gleam excitedly.

Eyes that suddenly flashed at her from behind Eret, and that made Astrid’s heart burst with joy and sink with fear at the same time.
“You should come, too.”

Hiccup looked up from his work – rubbing down Hunter, the Grand Duke’s stallion – and gave Eret a confused look. “Where to?” he asked; he hadn’t been paying much attention to what Eret had been saying until just now, and had no idea what he’d meant. His thoughts were still whirling around what had happened before, unable to fully grasp what it meant.

The Princess. She was the *Princess*. The very Princess Astrid of whom Eret had told him so much about.

Of course, Hiccup had heard about the beautiful Princess before, but not in the way Eret talked about her. She was his childhood friend, the only girl he’d ever met who could beat him in an archery challenge – or in throwing knives. The girl who cared more about horses and her freedom than dresses and dancing lessons. It had amused Hiccup to hear all these stories about their ‘fair *Princess*’, stories that stood in direct contrast to what people told each other in the taverns. He had been interested in her, had been looking forward to maybe meeting her once or twice during his time at the castle.

He had *not* expected her to steal his heart within just a couple of hours.

But that seemed to be what had happened. Hiccup couldn’t get her out of his head, not her witty remarks, and not her unaffected laughter. Not the way she’d moved with and cared for the horses, and definitely not how she’d tasted and how she’d seemed to meld with him for that moment.

But she was the *Princess*!

“Where do you think?” came Eret’s cheerful answer, and his voice effectively tore him out of his daydreams. “To my accolade, of course.”

With a thumping heart, Hiccup reached for the horse brush, a fantastic excuse to avert his face. “W-Why?” he sputtered. Did Eret know? That he would give *anything* to see her again? But no, how should he know? And it wasn’t a good idea anyway. It wasn’t like he could *talk* to her, not like they’d talked earlier. But… he *had* to talk to her. He had to know whether what he’d felt had been true, whether she really had felt the same. Whether it made sense to keep thinking and pondering. Gods, what was he supposed to *do*?

Only an hour ago, he’d been ready to visit her father and ask his permission to court her. He’d been ready to leave his past behind him, to accept the lot fate had given him, and to start anew. With *her*. It had seemed so easy, so simple. She’d been the answer, the sign he’d asked for. But now?

“Well, you are my cousin,” Eret interrupted his thoughts again.

Hiccup snorted. “Yes, but that doesn’t mean much,” he said bitterly.

“Maybe not,” Eret replied with a frown. “But we are family. And you are my friend. I want you to be there. It’s my grand day, after all. And it also would be a great opportunity to introduce you as my squire, in case you’ve decided yet. The King would approve, by the way. Father and I already talked to him. Besides, there will be tons of the best food you’ve ever tasted. You can’t turn that down, can you?”

Hiccup inhaled sharply. He hadn’t decided yet what to do with his future. He’d thought meeting
Astrid had been a sign sent by Odin, the Foreseer, himself. At first, he’d thought that it meant he should go on and accept the simple life of the Grand Duke’s stable master, and fulfil that image of the peaceful, rustic home. But, obviously, that wasn’t true. If he became simply Hiccup the stable master and, once and for all times, renounced his birthright, then he would never… never be allowed to be with her.

And if he became Eret’s squire instead? He would at least acknowledge his noble blood by doing so. He could travel with Eret, follow wherever his duties would lead him. Maybe he could even gain something of a name for himself, enough to earn himself something of a title again. Or, he could even keep his eyes and ears open, and, maybe, someday, he might hear or see something, anything that told him what had happened. And if he could reclaim his birthright…

He’d been wrong. Astrid hadn’t been the sign for him to forget his past after all. But maybe she was the sign, the answer he’d asked for anyway. Because if he ever wanted to be deemed worthy of her, then there was only one way.

“You’re right, I can’t turn down such an opportunity,” he heard himself mutter. “I’ll come with you to your accolade. And I will become your squire.”

Hiccup was nervous. For the umpteenth time, he tugged at the unfamiliar sleeves of his new shirt - House Jag’r’s deep red to indicate in whose court he served now - beneath his old leather tunic. This tunic was one of the only items he still owned from his former life. It was sturdy and functional, with leather pauldrons attached to it by belts and buckles, and a pattern of dragon scales embossed into it. Scaring off your enemies was always a good tactic.

This tunic was the fanciest piece of clothing he owned, and it also was the only indication that he wasn’t actually a part of House Jag’r. It had felt weird to put it on again after so long, exaggerated and a bit ridiculous. But now, standing behind Eret in his elegant outfit and between the Grand Duke’s vassals in their expensive robes, he felt small and unimportant - which he was. Of course, the silk sashes and finely tooled leather belt and boots that he’d been lent for the accolade helped offset its battered functional dignity, but the loans were that he wouldn’t embarrass Eret by looking like a crow among swans.

In another life, he might have stood beside his cousin right now, proudly wearing similarly elegant clothes in deep green and with his father's crest, a dragon curled in on itself, embroidered into his chainmail. But that life didn't exist anymore, and he had to accept that.

When the doors opened and he followed Eret into the elaborate throne room, the noises from inside were deafening. The room was brimming with people, everybody talking, and, for a moment, he lost all sense of direction. His head began to spin as hundreds of voices rolled over him, and he barely even noticed as he followed Eret and the Grand Duke’s party practically unbidden, his feet working to keep him within the safe group of familiar figures.

And the knowledge that she was in this room as well didn’t help to calm him, either.

She had to be here, right? Eret was the heir to one of the three most powerful noble Houses, and, next to the other heirs – Dagur of House Berserker and Snotlout of House Jorgenson – the first of these three to become a knight today. It was one of the biggest social events the capital had seen since Prince Daniel’s accolade two years ago. And Eret was her friend, right? Surely, she would be here?

Hiccup’s nervousness grew nearly unbearable as he followed Eret down the long aisle, limping
slightly as his leg began to sting. Gods, why did it always start to act stupid at the worst moments possible? He couldn’t see much past the endless rows of people, only that there was a raised platform at the other end of the room, and that there were people standing on it. As they came closer he could see the high-backed throne of King Osmond, even recognized the tall man from when he’d met him many years ago. Then he saw the High Priests, standing to the sides as was customary. He saw Prince Daniel, recognized him just as he’d recognised the King. Now that he knew who she was, Hiccup saw a certain resemblance between the siblings. The Prince had the same bright hair and blue eyes like his sister. And then, when their small group reached the steps that led up to the throne and Eret made a step to the side, he finally saw her.

The Princess had a warm smile on her face, even though she seemed tenser than he remembered her from their shared afternoon. She also looked even more sublime than before in this equally ornate dress – deep red this time – and a delicate golden coronet depicting a swan on her head. He felt even smaller and more insignificant than before.

And then she saw him.

For a moment, for the fraction of a second, she lit up. Her eyes gleamed brighter, her smile becoming radiant, and Hiccup could feel the mutual joy and longing rising in their hearts. It hadn’t been just his imagination, of course, it hadn’t been. She’d felt the same, must have felt the same, or nothing made sense anymore.

And then the moment ended. Her face fell, and her joy turned into panic and fear. Her gaze flickered to the side, to where the Priestesses of Freya and Frigga stood, but before she actually turned her head in their direction, she caught herself again.

It had passed in the blink of an eye, and before Hiccup could react in any way, it was already over. Her gaze was back on Eret and the Grand Duke, her smile faultless and warm.

What in Thor’s name had just happened?

.o O o .

The pleasant smile felt like someone had used a knife to cut it into her face. Astrid had to maintain it at all costs, but it was hard. So unbelievably hard!

What was he doing here?

He shouldn’t be here.

What if anyone had noticed their shared look just now? Or worse, what if he approached her, tried to talk to her?

She couldn’t let that happen.

Keeping her gaze on Eret and the Grand Duke – away from him so as not to encourage him in any way – took all her concentration and focus. But she had to do it. She just had to. Everything else was unacceptable. And keeping her eyes on them, away from him, was all she could manage. She wasn’t able to listen, didn’t register the words her father said. But then, it probably wasn’t that much of a speech anyway. All Eret had done to be granted the honour of getting knighthed was being born into the right family and reaching the required age of twenty-one, after all.

She saw how Eret kneeled down in front of her father and rose again as Sir Eret III. She saw how Eret received the traditional helmet of the castle’s guard and an ornate sword and scabbard, but it barely registered in her mind. For such a long time, she’d been looking forward to this special
moment for her best friend, but now that it was here, she hardly noticed any of it.

Because all she noticed was how Hiccup’s eyes rested on her at every single moment.

Belatedly, she joined in into the general applause, and sighed in relief when her father declared this part of the night to be over. The vast crowd turned and filed out of the throne room to go to the great hall for the banquet, and now that there were no longer hundreds of eyes on her, she dared to let her guard down a bit.

Without intending to do so, her gaze flickered toward Hiccup for an instant, and their eyes met. He was watching her with an expression of confusion and longing – the same emotions that had ruled her every thought since he’d kissed her. And it didn’t help to see them so blatantly and obviously mirrored on his face, not one bit. He made an attempt to take a step in her direction, but she shook her head, once, and turned away again. Not here, not now.

It was a good thing that Eret was just done accepting her father’s personal congratulations, and now turned toward her and Daniel. He was a welcome distraction, and she forced herself to turn all her attention to him.

Before he could say anything though, Daniel smirked and nodded towards their father’s private office. “Let’s go over there. It’s still a little too crowded here for my taste.” And he was right. There were still people lingering, obviously hoping to speak with the King or Grand Duke, and it wasn’t an audience either of them liked.

As the three of them entered the office, Daniel immediately lounged down on a couch standing in the more informal corner of the room, while Eret walked past her and stiffly sat down on a chair. Astrid was about to follow them, not really caring about whether her wide skirts would fit into the armchair, when she noticed that they weren’t alone.

Hiccup had followed them, and now stood timidly by the door.

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Hiccup wasn’t able to tear his eyes away from her. Yes, this was Eret’s accolade, one of the most important moments in his friend’s life, but Hiccup simply couldn’t concentrate on anything but her. It helped that he probably wasn’t the only one, that there surely were dozens of people in this room who covertly had their eyes on her. It wasn’t like he stood out.

At some point, Eret kneeled down and stood up again, received the symbols of his new status, and then there was a bit of a commotion as everyone turned to leave the room. Hiccup made attempts to leave as well, but Eret held him back.

“Stay with me,” he whispered, but then left him standing.

Unsure what to do, Hiccup stayed where he was, awkwardly singled out. His gaze shifted through the room, as he tried hard to not look at the Princess. He watched Eret getting congratulated by the King, and noticed another older men standing to the side, scrutinising him dismissively. From his look, he had to be Lord Eret I, and Hiccup quickly looked away, hoping the man wouldn’t recognise him. Gods, this room was a political battlefield. Why had he agreed to come here?

The answer was easy, though. Without being able to keep himself from doing so, he looked back at where Astrid stood, just as she looked at him for a brief instant, too. When their eyes met, he unconsciously stepped towards her – but froze again as she shook her head at him and then turned away.
He swallowed at the motion, and somehow found the strength to likewise look away. Firmly keeping his eyes on Eret, he saw how his cousin bobbed his head in agreement at the Prince’s comment, and, without another word, the royal siblings went for the indicated door. Eret let them walk past him, and then beckoned him to follow.

Hiccup hesitated, not sure whether doing so really was a wise idea. The Princess hadn’t wanted him to approach her, hadn’t wanted him to get closer. But Eret repeated his order to follow him, more urgent this time, and Hiccup couldn’t defy him. He was his master for real now, no pretending anymore. With a sinking heart, he limped toward the door that Eret still held open for him.

Beyond the door turned out to be an L-shaped sitting room, cosily appointed and well-lit from fine glass windows. Straight ahead stood an impressive writing desk with an ornate chair behind and two simpler ones in front of it, but they were all empty. To the side, however, was a more comfortable and informal looking suite where the Prince and Eret just sat down. Not knowing what to do with himself, Hiccup jerkily stood by the door at attention, shifting his weight to relieve the pain in his leg. The two royals and Eret, however, all visibly relaxed, as if some invisible weight was lifted off their shoulders.

Hiccup did his best to ignore them, to not listen in on their probably private conversation, and to not stare at her like the pathetic failure he was.

Her first reaction was panic. But he wasn’t looking at her, didn’t make any approach to talk to her. He just stood there, looking at no-one in particular, and seemed to wait for something.

Astrid forced herself to calm down. Neither Daniel nor Eret seemed to notice or worry about his presence, so making a scene now by sending him away would only attract too much attention.

With deliberate calmness, she sat down as well, trying to ignore his presence, just as Daniel leaned over toward Eret, and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Ah, look at you! You’re more dressed up than a prized goose for the high table!” he snickered, and then ran his fingers down through the hem of the embroidered tabard.

Eret groaned. “Don’t remind me. I’m walking this stiffly in self-defence, mind you. The leather is so new that I dare not move too quickly for fear of my blisters having blisters.”

Astrid forced herself to join in on the laughter at that comment, even though her mind was fully occupied by the silent figure standing by the doorway. Only a couple of hours ago, she’d been sure that she would never see him again. But now, here he was, standing only a few steps away from her, and all she could think about was how she wanted for Eret and Daniel to… to not be here so that she could walk over and cuddle into his warm embrace again. But to do so would...

Her thoughts were interrupted by Eret turning to her.

“Hey, Swanja,” he greeted her, calling her by the playful nickname he’d used for her ever since she remembered. Everyone thought he was referring to House Hofferson’s heraldic animal, and only she, Eret, and few others knew better. “You know, I’m a little hurt you weren’t there to greet me earlier. I was so looking forward to seeing you again.”

It took her distracted mind a bit longer than usual to notice the mockingly reproachful look he gave her. But then she remembered how to appropriately react, rolled her eyes at him, and they both laughed. “If you wanted to see me, you should have come to the stables.” she replied. Yes, he
should have been there. And she still couldn’t decide whether she was grateful for his absence or not.

“Just wait, by the end of your visit in three months, you’ll be fed up with her again,” Daniel commented dryly. “And you’ll need the nine months of summer before you can endure her again next winter, just like every year.” The fond smile with the impish gleam in his eyes served well to take the edge out of his words, but she knew her brother well enough anyway. They adored each other, even though that didn’t keep her from throwing him a deadly glare.

Daniel grinned, before turning back to Eret. “But in earnest now. Congratulations. You already look more respectable with that sword and helmet under your arm. And with that cloth confection.”

“Thanks,” Eret said with a dry smile, placed the mentioned sword and helmet onto the low table between them, and then nodded in her direction. “But I’m not so sure about her. Is she really still as annoying as she used to be?”

As so often, they made a show of talking about her as if she wasn’t there. In their case, it was a game and only meant to tease her. Usually, she didn’t mind that as much since she knew they weren’t serious. Not like so many others were. But today, getting left out of the conversation only served to let her concentration waver. And that could become dangerous today.

“I mean, look at her,” Eret continued, winking. “She’s all grown up. My little Swanja almost looks like a real lady. I might even fall for her.”

“Right…” Astrid rolled her eyes at him. She knew very well that Eret wouldn’t fall for her, but she couldn’t exactly say so. Not with Daniel right there, and their fathers right on the other side of the door.

“Oho! Now there’s a joyous event looming on the horizon,” her brother exclaimed, grinning. “I wish you good luck with her, but at least you already know what you’re bargaining for. Better you than some other poor fellow. But maybe you’re right,” he added after a short pause, throwing her a playful smirk. “She certainly has some new more ladylike hobbies. Ask her about her flower garden if you have an hour to kill.”

Eret looked at her questioningly, and Astrid sighed.

“It is not so much my garden as it is Master Mulch’s,” she explained, grateful for finally being able to participate in the conversation. She still could feel Hiccup’s presence in the room, and ignoring him was becoming harder with every second. “And it’s not a flower garden, either. It’s his physic garden. You know, where he grows all his herbs and healing plants. Fishlegs taught me their purpose, and I sometimes help him to tend and treat them. It’s really fascinating.”

At that, Eret nodded. “That makes more sense. I was worried there for a moment, you know.” He smirked. “Feared you might turn into a Princess after all. But learning to become a healer of some sort instead? Yeah, that sounds more like you.”

Astrid poked her tongue out at him, and then they all began to laugh. This playful banter with Eret and her brother, it was so easy, so liberating. With them, she didn’t need to wear this mask, and at least now, for this short moment, she could be herself.

“But tell me, Astrid,” Daniel said, changing the topic. “Since you’ve certainly seen the horses already, do you think there’s a suitable replacement for Bento among them?”

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She hadn’t even reacted.

Biting his lip, Hiccup stared at the plush carpet beneath his feet, woven with a vivid pattern of a woodland meadow and lake filled with swans, and tried to ignore the growing desperation in his heart. She’d seen him standing here, in this secluded room and with only her brother and his cousin being here, too. He didn’t know what he had expected, maybe a nod or even a silent word. Or, if she thought him impertinent for showing up, then she could have sent him away.

But she didn’t react in any way. As if he wasn’t important enough to even think twice about.

Instead, Astrid laughed and smiled, and Hiccup’s heart ached at seeing the familiarity between the three of them. Rather than listen and intrude on their cheerful reunion, obvious in the playful banter and teasing, he tuned them out completely as Eret greeted her in a familiar tone.

Seeing her like this, carefree laughing and smiling… It served to raise a painful uncertainty in his heart. If this was how she behaved naturally, who she was when she didn’t need to be the Princess… Did that mean that he’d interpreted too much into those hours they’d spend together? Was it possible that this behaviour, lighthearted and open, was how she always was? It certainly fit with how Eret had described her. That she'd just been friendly to him because that was how she always was. She surely hadn't encouraged him when he’d wanted to approach her.

Was he making a fool of himself? What had he expected anyway? He’d accompanied Eret without the slightest bit of a plan. All he knew was that he’d wanted to see her again, and that he hoped that...

...that what?

That she felt the same for him as he felt for her, this strange longing that seemed to pull him toward her, unexplainable yet unavoidable? That they could talk somehow, solve this confusion, and continue where her warder had interrupted them earlier? That they could make this work, whatever this might be, despite the difference in their status?

All these wishes were absurd. And they had been so right from the beginning, even before he'd formulated them in his mind just now. But now that he saw her with her friends and family, saw how he hadn't been anything special to her...

No, he'd been a fool. He shouldn't be here. It had all just been a pipe dream, conjured up by his mind as a reason to keep fighting against forgetting his past, a reason why he should keep pursuing his search.

Biting his lip, Hiccup partially tore himself out of his thoughts to look at her one last time. The idea that he might have been wrong after all hurt. But in a way, it hurt even more to see her laughing so freely again. He yearned to be the one who made her laugh like this, who made her happy. But he was fooling himself, and the sooner he accepted that the better.

The Prince said something, words he didn’t quite take in, but they had quite an effect on her. She sobered up in an instant, paled slightly, and he thought her eyes flickered in his direction. But just like before, she put back on her warm smile in an instant, and it confused him even more.

Before he could think about this, however, Eret turned and beckoned him over.

"Right, good thing you remind me," Eret said, his words directed at the royal siblings. "Daniel, you were asking whom I trusted enough to take care of our horses. Well, this is a cousin of mine. He's also going to be my squire; his name is Hiccup..." Eret trailed off at the end, apparently uncertain
whether or what to add. But there was nothing to add.

Both, the Prince and the Princess rose and turned toward him, but he fought to not look at Astrid. It wasn't customary, he reminded himself. She was a woman, and therefore, in opposition to the customs he was raised to, not as important. So he kept his eyes on the Prince, bowing appropriately, and somehow he was glad to avoid the direct contact with her. "Your Royal Highness," he murmured. "It is an honour."

The Prince hesitated, but then reached out his hand toward him. "Hiccup," he said slowly, eyeing him thoughtfully as they shook hands. He shared a brief glance with Eret, and Hiccup could practically hear the silent communication between them. Then the Prince nodded briefly, and threw him a weird look, just as if he knew... "I'm glad Eret already found a squire in you. It's good..." he trailed off, not spelling out what Hiccup could clearly see in the Prince's eyes. Yes, he definitely knew who Hiccup was. And accepted the fact that Eret didn't say any more.

"Thank you, Highness," he said, trying to keep the uncertainty from showing on his face as he smiled. "I'm grateful to House Jag'r for taking me in, and to Sir Eret for offering me this position."

Talking to this man who would be his King one day felt weird. It should be a formal setting, but the atmosphere in this little office was too familiar for that, and it affected him, too. He felt himself relax, and it became increasingly harder to maintain formal behaviour. And thinking about how things could have – no, should have been made this conversation even more awkward.

He also was painfully aware of the Princess standing beside them, listening but not saying a single word. She seemed distant and aloof again, not at all the witty girl he'd met in the stables or who he'd watched just now, laughing with her brother and friend. He should turn and greet her now, knew it was what was expected of him, but he couldn't do it. He didn't know how or what to say. There was a moment of awkward silence, before the Princess interrupted it, ignoring him completely. "To answer your question," she said, directed at her brother. "Yes, there are suitable replacements for Bento, I'd say. But I'd like to ask you to take better care of them. These animals are incredible, it's such a waste to lose them at the rate you do." It sounded playful, but Hiccup thought he detected a slightly bitter tone in her voice. However, neither of the other men reacted to that, so he'd probably just imagined it. They knew her far better, after all.

"Hey, it's not my fault if those malarian cowards keep attacking our horses instead of fighting fair, man against man," the Prince exclaimed. "I'd happily settle those disputes in a fair duel, but no, they keep ambushing us in the strangest places. I honestly have no idea how they are able to guess where we will be."

The Princess frowned, and was about to reply when Eret forestalled her possible tirade.

"Wait, wait, you've seen the war stallions already?" he asked disbelievingly. "But..." he trailed off, looking perplexedly at Hiccup who shrugged and nodded, and then groaned. "So you've seen Markor, too? Odin, and here I thought I could surprise you only once. But I should have known you would go straight to those stables."

A sly smile crossed the Princess' face. "Yes, I've seen him. And thank you so much. He's magnificent!"

Grumbling, Eret accepted her thanks, but then blinked and perked his head up again. "But... then you already met Hiccup here, right? You could have mentioned that, you know?"
Those last words were directed at Hiccup, and he nervously scratched his neck. What should he say now? What could he have said earlier? That the Princess had been there, that she’d already seen her gift, that Eret’s surprise was spoiled, and – oh, he’d kissed her, by the way, was in the process of falling for her, and falling hard… No, he hadn’t been able to tell Eret anything of that. But before he could come up with a believable excuse, the Princess spoke up again.

"Don't be angry at him," she pleaded. "I... I asked him not to tell you. I didn't want to spoil the surprise."

Hiccup looked up in astonishment, finally, actually looked at her, and saw the hidden plea in her eyes to play along. Perplexedly, he nodded when Eret looked at him questioningly, but couldn't bring himself to say anything. What game was she playing?

"Well, if it was on your order, I can't blame him, I guess," Eret mumbled.

"Thank you," the Princess said, beaming. Then she turned toward Hiccup again. "And thank you, too, Master Hiccup," she said, holding out her hand toward him, just like she'd done at the stables already. "For showing me the horses."

Those were the same words she'd said before, and they gave him a painful sting. Was that all she'd cared about? The horses?

Dutifully, he bent to breathe another kiss over the back of her hand, and repeated his answer, "It was a pleasure, milady." The words left a bittersweet aftertaste on his tongue. They were still true, but now thinking about this fact just hurt.

He straightened, and planned to bid his farewell and flee her presence, when she added: "And for everything else."

The words came out as barely more than a whisper, and he wasn't even entirely sure whether he'd heard them correctly. They had sounded heavy and meaningful, calling to him and trying to emit more than could be said with those few words. Hiccup dared to look up at her once more, to look her in the eyes and search for a sign, any hint as to what was happening inside her head right now. And for a brief moment, he saw it. The confusion, the fear, and the desire. He saw this unexplainable longing that seemed to pull him toward her in her eyes as well. He saw it all, clear and undilated, before she closed up again, smiled, and turned her attention back to her brother again.

And left his head spinning and his heart racing once again.
Astrid didn’t like to wear her mask of lies. But she was good at it by now, and tonight, she had plenty opportunities to use it.

Instead of a full formal meal with all of the usual courses, her father apparently had decided on a more leisurely meal, with a table set according to the Northerner custom of a ‘smorgasbord’. Along the center of the room, one of the grandest tables had been set out with platters, bowls, and other serving dishes, all filled with a variety of foods available for people to serve themselves as they saw fit. It was appropriate for the occasion, she guessed. Technically, House Jag’r didn’t belong to the Northern Tribes, but living in close proximity to them had resulted in many traditions swapping between them. But it also meant that she didn’t even get a break while everyone ate. For the rest of the night, during the social gathering and mingling, she would need this fake smile on her face, the well-practised mask. It was all outsiders ever saw of her. Although, she had expected as much for this event. Presenting her mask to outsiders? That was normal, that was her day to day existence.

What she hadn’t expected, however, was that she would need to wear this mask when talking to those close to her as well.

But she didn’t dare give a hint of what she was actually feeling. Not when she could feel Hiccup's presence at any given moment, felt his eyes on her like the warmth of the sun during a summer noon. She was used to people looking at her, but this was different. Hiccup was different. She was so aware of him, easily noticing him whenever he crossed her peripheral vision, and kept spotting him among the crowd without having to look hard for him. It was so confusing.

Everything was so confusing.

He was Eret's squire, his cousin even. He wasn't just a simple stable lad, not a common man, but one of noble blood. Maybe there was a chance after all, maybe...

She needed answers, needed to know. She needed to know who he was, needed to know whether there was a chance, whether he was important enough that her father would allow –

Stop it! she berated herself. She couldn’t let herself think like that, not here. Not when she was surrounded and watched by dozens of people and every tiny slip of her facial expressions could get observed. Slowly, she shook her head from one side to the other, just like the small figurine in that music box Grand Duke Oswald had given her many years ago. It was one of those intricate mechanical devices that occasionally made their way in merchants’ packs from distant realms, and the big harbour of Southshore, House Berserker’s hometown, usually was the first place those showed up.

With her eyes closed, Astrid called forth the memory of the tiny dancer and the odd piece of music, forcing herself to concentrate on this memory only. How it would turn and whirl in time with the melody, and how it would get stuck, always at the same place until a thorough shaking set it right again. The familiar image served its purpose, and Astrid felt herself calm down again, if only a little.

Gods, what was going on with her? Marriage had never been an appealing idea to her. She knew that, as the future king's sister, she would need to participate in a political marriage once she turned
twenty, and had always dreaded the idea. And now she was honestly considering marrying a complete stranger? All because of a couple of weird images she’d seen, and those confusing feelings this man inspired in her? It was insane.

And who said he even wanted to marry her? Certainly, he had kissed her, but... well, men were more free in such things. He might have wanted her on a simple basis of being a woman, but that didn't necessarily meant that he... liked her.

And yet his eyes never seemed to leave her, and she couldn't stop thinking about him. It was unbearable.

She needed answers to her questions. Asking Eret about him would be the easiest way, but she didn't dare to give away anything, not even to him. And she couldn't simply approach and ask Hiccup himself, not here. Not with remembering what had happened at the stables, and not with so many eyes watching. She couldn't risk him doing something he shouldn't... mustn't do. No, all she could do was try to ignore him as best she could and hope for an opportunity to talk in private in the near future.

Seeking distraction, she decided to finally greet the Grand Duke, and apologise for her absence earlier. He, his elderly father, and her own father all sat at the King's table, up on a small dais, behind a light and sheer privacy curtain, allowing it to be a little separated from the noises and ever-prying eyes and ears in the rest of the room. When she stepped through, they were in deep conversation.

"...telling you, these title disputes are getting worse with every month, much less every year. If we don't find a way to placate--"

"Astrid!" her father interrupted his friend as she came closer. "How nice of you to come and finally greet our guests," he said dryly, making her glower at him and Lord Eret II chuckle.

"Oh, don't be too hard on the lass," he said, smiling warmly at her. "I vividly remember how we were at her age, never listening to rules and always out seeking adventure. Now, tell me, my dear. How are you doing? Is your bow still as unerring as it used to be? Just so I know whether it makes sense for me to participate in the hunts during the next months. I don't fancy getting beaten by a girl again!"

"I'm fine, your Grace, thank you," she replied politely as Eret the Elder rolled his eyes. "I'm not sure about my bow though, as I've had little opportunity to use it lately. But be assured, the hunts aren't of any interest to me anymore, so your pride will be spared."

The King groaned, but Duke Eret just chuckled, and Astrid felt herself relax. She could still feel Hiccup's eyes on her back, but here, where she couldn't see him out of the corner of her eye and in the presence of these men who still saw her as a rebellious child, she felt a little more like herself again.

"I came to apologise for not being there to greet you, your Grace," she went on. "And also to thank you for the magnificent gift you brought me. Markor is a wonderful animal."

Sir Eret's face softened at her words. "Ah, you've seen him already? Yes, a magnificent horse indeed. I knew you would appreciate him."

"You brought her a **male** horse?" the King threw in incredulously, and threw up his hands in exasperation. "How is she ever supposed to become a lady if everybody keeps treating her like a
"What's she to do with a horse anyway?" Eret the Elder interjected, and then gave a sly grin at her. "A fair maiden like her is to be ridden, not to ride herself. She would make a fine mare for young Eret. You two should seal the contract right away."

"Father!" Eret II chided as Astrid resisted the urge to reply in kind. Smirking inwardly, she wondered how Eret the Elder would react if he ever learned of his grandson's choice of partner.

"What?" protested the elder. "I didn’t see you making such complaints when I found you your blushing bride."

"She’s my daughter, Uncle Eret," her father said, exasperated, rubbing at his eyes as Astrid glowered at the prune of an old man. "Not some of your prized bloodstock on the stud farm. Besides, she’s too young to marry yet."

Eret the Elder leaned back in his chair and folded his arms. "Feh. I don’t see the difference. You all come from good stock, and the cross would be splendid. And as for her age, I honestly don’t see the point in waiting for a certain age. Nature tells you when a mare is ready to conceive, so—"

"Aaaaaand I think that’s enough, father," Duke Eret said firmly. "As for the horse, my friend," he said, unsubtly yanking back control of the conversation, "it is just a gelding. And he comes with an ornate bridle and side-saddle, embellished by my younger daughters."

This time, it was Astrid’s turn to groan.

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Hiccup wasn’t able to tear his eyes away from her.

After they’d left the King’s office and joined the crowd of people gathered loosely around the smorgasbord, Eret and the royal siblings had been greeted cheerfully. Hiccup had stood to the side, not wanting or deserving any attention, and his eyes had rested on the Princess’ slender figure practically at every moment.

Of course, she was hard to miss in that elegant deep red dress with the wide flowing skirts and the elbow-length gloves that left her upper arms bare, with her endless golden hair braided in an intriguing pattern he was just dying to unravel by running his fingers through it, and with her beauty that seemed to radiate through the entire room, enlightening it with her mere presence. But it wasn’t just that, not just her literal divine beauty, not just how she looked. Other high-born daughters wore similarly extravagant dresses, likely trying to copy her style, and, surely, some of them had to be pretty, too. And yet he only had eyes for her.

No, it wasn’t simply a matter of how gorgeous she looked. And it wasn’t the fact that she was the Princess, the First Lady of the Kingdom. It hadn’t been those superficial things that had drawn him toward her in the first place, and they didn't matter to him now, either. If anything, they were impediments.

No, what was pulling him toward her, made it unbearable to stay away from her, was something else. It was the memory of that other side of her, of how she’d behaved in the stables when he’d thought she was just a farmer’s daughter, and of how she’d behaved in her father’s office just now. It were those images of her, standing in the door to their home and with their son on her arms, the
overwhelming longing for this vision to come true, the wish to spend his entire life with her at his side. And it was the fact, that she apparently had some sort of feelings for him, too.

And for everything else.

Those words, and the look in her eyes... No, there was no mistaking what that had meant. She felt it too, this strange bond between them, the urge to... to connect. But she wasn't willing to show any of that, for some reason. Of course, he hadn't expected her to directly throw herself around his neck, and in front of all these people she couldn't say much, but... Freya, she could at least have said something while there were only Eret and her brother around, right? Or she could include him in their conversations like Eret and Daniel did, even if her brother only did so occasionally. Or she could at least look at him.

Hiccup knew that the rules of courtship down here in the capital were much stricter than he was used to, but, surely, she was allowed to look at a man that wasn't her intended, right? She had no such qualms when it came to Eret, after all.

His gaze followed her as she made her way up to the table where her father, the Grand Duke and... Eret's grandfather sat, and a crazy idea crossed his mind. What if he followed her up there? What if he introduced himself as who he really was, officially claiming his title and birthright, and asked for the Princess' hand? It was too early, she was too young to marry, according to southern standards, but that didn't matter. He would happily wait another two and a half years to marry her, if only he could be sure that he would marry her.

And maybe the King would even help him to enforce his legal claim.

And, maybe, just maybe, Thor might even lend Mjölnir to Loki for a day, just for a lark.

Hiccup's eyes landed on the old men sitting next to the Grand Duke, and his expression grew bitter. No, going up there wouldn't get him anywhere just now. Why should the King give up valuable resources and men just to help him regain a title worth marrying his daughter? There surely were dozens of other suitable candidates already. Maybe Lord Eret might support his request, but the old man surely would not. And, from a logical point of view, he would be right.

Hiccup had nothing to offer. No House to support him, no land or trade contracts to make him a worthwhile candidate, no vassals to offer for the royal army, no political power to support the King. No, he had nothing but his honest feelings for his daughter. And no matter how affectionate the King looked at her when she wasn't looking, no matter how much he seemed to care for his daughter, he wouldn't... couldn't agree to Hiccup's requests. She was too valuable. Thinking of her that way felt wrong, but it was the simple truth, from a strategic point of view, at least. The Princess was a valuable resource. Her marriage would forge an alliance between the throne and her husband’s House, and the King would be a fool if he didn't use that to keep up stability within his kingdom.

For a little while longer, he indulged in the daydream of going to her and talking to her father, until the conversation between Eret and Daniel turned to a new topic. Hiccup hadn't been interested in the latest gossip of the capital or the Prince's ideas of testing new methods in architecture, but this new topic now drew his attention.

"Okay, but now onto more pressing points. Seriously, Eret, what are you going to do now? I'm sure Father would agree to your wishes in case it's something reasonable. You can't seriously want to spend the next few years guarding your father's stud farms," the Prince said with an amused tone in his voice.
Hiccup let his gaze wander through the room, unseeing, as he focused on listening to them. They didn’t seem to be aware of him standing only a few feet away – or at least they didn’t care, if they did – and while it might still be a more-or-less private conversation between two friends, this topic affected him as well, in his position as Eret’s squire.

"Oh, I don't know," Eret replied in a light voice. "Guarding the farms would be a comfortable way of earning money. It's not like anyone would ever actually try to steal those beasts." Both men chuckled, but then Eret went on. "Although, I could just as well ask to be sent to the South. Guarding the sunny beaches around Southshore surely would be equally comfortable. I mean, there's the royal armada under Grand Duke Oswald's command, it's not like anyone would dare to attack there, either."

"Guarding the beaches?" the Prince asked, poorly suppressing his snickering. "You Northerners and the sun. As if you would last even one day standing in the heat with your gambeson on, much less the full armour. Besides, you'd also have to endure the Deranged’s company."

"Ah, Dagur is not so bad if you know how to handle him," Eret said with a grin, and Hiccup couldn't keep his lips from twitching into a smirk. Dagur of House Berserker was an enigmatic person beyond those who knew him, to say the least. And Eret surely knew how to handle him.

"But just for the protocol, I'm still not a Northerner. The city of Eastervale might be far up in the north from here, but the people of the Northern Islands would protest if I ever claimed to be one of them. And rightly so, I might add... You don't want to mess with the Tribes, believe me."

"You're right there, I guess," Daniel said thoughtfully. "I never had much contact with them, and only visited their High Chief once or twice when I accompanied Father. But it has become quiet around them during the last few years, since..." he trailed off as a practically tangible uneasiness grew between them, but before it could dampen the mood permanently, he changed the topic again. "But that's not what I wanted to talk about. I meant what I said earlier. You should accompany me to the West come summer. I could use a fighter like you. I mean, you're welcome to accompany me in a few weeks already, but I'll just be travelling around – I'm planning on working my way through the counties around Loki’s Teeth this year – to see where we need to make repairs on the defenses, or how we could improve specific outposts. There won't be any fighting as long as the mountain paths are sealed by the snow, but it surely would be good to get a feeling for the terrain. And--"

"Daniel," Eret interrupted the Prince with a smile and a raised hand. "Of course I'll accompany you. I know that Father doesn't like the idea of me 'going to war,' as he always claims that I'm the only one capable of leading our House once he retired, and he’d surely like me to stay at the stud farms forever. But he can't ban me from doing what he’d done, too. You've fought back those Malarian raiders in the mountains on your own long enough. This year, I'm old enough to decide for myself, and I will fight at your side. We all will, even though that means that you'll have to deal with Dagur and Snotlout, too. We'll fight together, just like our fathers did."

Hiccup closed his eyes and stopped listening. Their fathers... The irony was incredible. These four young men would be the leaders of this kingdom once the older generation stepped down, the future King and his three loyal friends. Just like their fathers before them. And now, as Eret's squire, Hiccup would fight at their side as well. Oh yes, the Norns really had a twisted sense of humour.

But he wouldn’t complain. As ironic as the whole situation was, it was also a chance he could benefit from. He had two-and-a-half years until Astrid reached the traditional age of marriage, although she was technically of legal age already. It was not much time, really, to earn himself a reputation or influence, much less a title, but it was a chance. Because if there was one place in the
entire United Kingdom of Volantis where he could accomplish that deed, it was at the western mountain ranges bordering the princedoms of Malardur, where, every summer, raiding parties and war bands crossed the mountain passes looking for loot to plunder, towns to conquer and ransom, and farms to burn – and their own people pushed them back, and tried to do the same to the Malarians. For the last two years, since his own accolade, Prince Daniel had been in the thick of it all, so fighting at his side nearly guaranteed that Hiccup wouldn’t return empty-handed.

A small smile tugged at his lips, and for once, he didn’t even try to fight it. This was a real chance. He had two summers, not much in general, but under these circumstances it might be enough. Enough to become a knight at least, and to gain the Prince’s favour – which surely would prove helpful when he stepped forward to ask for his sister’s hand.

The thought made his heart beat faster. It was a real possibility, a plan to follow. He just needed a little luck – and her consent. He looked up at the King’s table, but found that she wasn’t there anymore. Instead, she was walking straight in his direction, a disgruntled expression on her face that made him squirm nervously.

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Once the three older men were done laughing at her disgruntled expression, Astrid left them; they had returned to their discussion about the territorial skirmishes among the lesser nobility before she’d even gotten past the privacy curtain, although it wasn’t as if they’d include her in such ‘weighty matters’. But while she wasn’t involved in the political discussions – Eret the Elder’s attitudes about her being little more than a broodmare were more common than she liked – it was hard to censor the knowledge that it was a growing problem in her homeland.

It was her House’s fault, really. Her grandfather had united the five princedoms and thrown out all of the old corrupt nobility, and then turned around and given out the newly vacant titles to his men. To his closest friends, he’d given the former princedoms, now the grand-dukedoms. To the generals, he’d given the duchies, the captains the counties, and to the soldiers who had distinguished themselves, the baronies. But now the men who had fought alongside her grandfather were nearly all gone, and after two generations of alliances and squabbles and marriages and petty rivalries, there were dukes who held a dozen titles, counts with five or six, and a great many landless nobles. And it seemed that every single one of them wanted more than they had. But, with the oceans in the north and south, the borders to the east stabilized with treaties, and the west being a constant stalemate over defensible mountain passes... there was no place to get more...

Except from each other.

And the disputes were growing worse.

She knew all this, but it was not like she could do anything about it. Or that anyone would let her do anything, even if she could. She was just a woman, good for nothing but forging alliances and bearing children.

Bah!

But getting agitated about an old man’s words wouldn’t get her anywhere. Instead, she sought out two of the few people who treated her like an equal. She quickly found Eret and Daniel near the serving board, piled plates in hand, surrounded by people loosely standing around, chatting and laughing.

Hiccup was close by as well, nervously shifting his weight from one foot to the other. His gaze flickered away from her as soon as she got closer, wandered through the room, but soon shifted
back toward her again. Her heart made a funny jump at that sight, but she didn't let herself react in any visible way. The tug that seemed to pull them toward each other was growing stronger and stronger, and had been ever since she'd spotted him behind Eret at the accolade. She yearned to go and talk to him. Even if it would be just some unimportant small talk, it would be worth it just to listen to his voice. But every time Eret or Daniel had included him into their conversation so far, his few words alone had served to remind her of their afternoon, of the low gasps and groans he’d made in the back of his throat as he’d –

*Stop it!*

Once again, she deliberately shook her head to chase those memories away. *Think of something else,* she reminded herself. *Anything else!*

"Please tell me you brought a normal saddle as well. I doubt any of mine will fit Markor, and I don't think I can get away with letting one be made for him," she blurted out as soon as she was close enough for Eret to hear her.

All things considered, it wasn’t much of a pressing point, but it still served to occupy her mind. A handy distraction. And *everything* that helped her not to constantly remember how *he* had kissed her was helpful at the moment.

She tried to retrieve the disgruntled expression from before, tried to remember how irritated she’d been only minutes ago, and her acting seemed to be good enough.

Her brother had an amused smirk on his face when he looked at her while Eret grinned and winked. "Of course I brought a normal saddle, what do you think of me, Swanja? It’s hidden with the servants’ baggage, which should have reached the castle by now. You’ll get it tomorrow, or the day after, depending on how quickly I can smuggle it to you from their quarters."

Astrid sighed in relief, and was about to thank him – in earnest, even though her complaint had only been kind of a pretence – when Eret stiffened, his gaze directed past her.

"Oh, mighty Thor..." he mumbled, rolling his eyes.

As she and Daniel turned, she spotted a small group of people approaching them, led by the Countess of Whitevale, and only managed to keep herself from giggling by biting her lip. Daniel wasn't as skilled in repressing his emotions, and groaned. Turning away again, he beckoned Hiccup over with a small gesture.

"I know that you’re not a simple servant, but we're *far* too sober for what’s about to happen," he stated, gesturing to Eret and himself. Eret snorted and nodded in pained agreement. "Could you get us something to drink? Something stronger than that watered wine? Please?"

Hiccup nodded mutely, visibly confused by the virtually panicky tone in the Prince's voice, and turned to follow the order.

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For a short moment, Astrid considered to reach out for him under the pretence of asking him to get her something to drink, too. She wanted to feel his wiry arm, even if it could only be through the fabric of his shirt and her gloves. She wanted to look at him without fearing people might find it suspicious. She wanted to talk to him in a low voice, even if it was just to ask him to bring her a glass of wine.

But she managed to hold back. She feared that she might say something she shouldn't say, that she might give away more than was sensible by looking him in the eyes, and that touching him would
only serve for her to want to touch him even more.

Biting on the inside of her cheek, she forced herself not to look at him as he came in her direction. It was bad enough that her heart was suddenly racing and her throat had gone dry just from thinking about –

Astrid gasped as the loose fabric of his sleeve brushed against her arm as he passed by.

She couldn't keep the small sound from escaping her. She doubted it had happened on purpose; there was a bit of a crowd around them and she thought someone had just stepped into his path, forcing him to sidestep that someone. Surely, it had just been a coincidence, and he didn't even react beyond hesitating for a fraction of a second before continuing on his way.

But it had been enough to make her heart pound as quickly as a galloping horse’s hooves, and for her mind to blissfully blank out for an instant. Freya, he’d been so close. Somehow, this accidental brush had felt even more intense than the kiss he’d given her on her hand in her father’s office, this first renewed contact that had been more than she’d expected to ever happen. It was all so confusing. How was it possible that this virtual stranger had such an effect on her?

Still determined to ignore him as best she could, Astrid kept herself from turning her head and following him with her eyes. Or from actually following him. She would make it through this night, she would wait for the right opportunity to talk to him. She could do that.

Fighting for her self-control, Astrid turned to greet the Countess with her usual pleasant smile. Right now, she was genuinely relieved over the older woman’s arrival, even though she was accompanied by three of her many daughters, and Astrid knew exactly what would follow.

"Prince Daniel, it is so good to see you," the Countess chirped happily, not letting herself be interrupted by curtsying. She gave a brief nod of acknowledgement towards Astrid, the minimum required by courtesy, before she turned her attention back to her actual prey. "And Eret – no, Sir Eret now. Such a delight to have you here again. Don’t you think so, too, my dears?"

Astrid made a small step backwards, grinning inwardly at Eret’s and Daniel’s helpless expressions. For years now, the Countess had never missed an opportunity to promote her many daughters as possible brides for every nobleman of considerable rank. She had at least five, as Astrid could recall, and, naturally, Eret and Daniel were two of her favoured targets. Everyone knew that her brother wasn’t interested in settling down with a wife of his own, and nearly everyone assumed that she and Eret were a couple already. But since nothing was official yet – and never would be – the Countess hadn’t given up yet.

The girls, used to their mother’s attempts at match-making, smiled pleasantly and bobbed their curteys, even though it was obvious how uncomfortable they felt, to Astrid at least. They, too, were bound to the same customs that left them with only few options.

“Thank you, your Grace,” Eret replied with a tight smile. “It always is a delight to be here.” His gaze wandered over the row of her daughter, courtesy demanding superficial interest at least. “But it seems like two of your lovely daughters are missing. Is there cause for congratulations?”

Astrid noticed the surprised look on her brother’s face, and felt a small smile tugging at her lips. He probably wouldn’t have noticed this as he only rarely paid attention to things he wasn’t interested in. But Eret had always been more observant when it came to people.

“Ah, yes,” the Countess sighed happily. “Azure, my second daughter, married the Duke of Greenhill and moved to live at his estate near Westhill. Not the safest place these days with the
Malarian raids, but we all hope those might be ended one day.” She gave a beaming and significant smile at Daniel. “And as for Claire, my oldest daughter… Well, she joined Freya’s Sisterhood last year, and I’m proud to say that she has already completed her time as Acolyte – and in near-record time, I might add! – and will be promoted to Gythja at the Midwinter festivals. She’d been studying as an Initiate for years, and finally decided last year to devote herself to it as a calling, and I just received the news last month on her upcoming elevation. We’re so proud of her!” She beamed at Daniel, and Astrid quirked a smile at her enthusiasm. This was a side of the Countess she didn’t often see – honest pride in her child’s accomplishments, instead of a merchant boasting about her wares. “You might remember what a kind and caring girl she’s always been, and caring for other people’s needs really does make her happy.”

“That sounds wonderful,” agreed Eret, just as Daniel seemed to remember that he, too, was supposed to participate in this conversation.

“Right… Now that you mention that, I think I remember seeing her during one of my last visits there,” he threw in, thoughtfully. “But she’s not yet an Ástir, right? If I remember correctly, she was treating an impressive wound on a boy’s arm.”

The Countess nodded eagerly. “Yes, that is very likely. She’s been in training to become a healer, and Fyrir Mala praises her skills, her calm hand, and her compassion for her patients regularly. And she really thrives at her work, she’s such a good girl. But she wouldn’t be suitable as an Ástir just yet. Her education in pleasing men only started after she joined the Sisterhood, of course. However, we expect her Bloodnight to be sometime before Spring festivals. Too bad you are not one of her suitors, Highness, it would be such an honour. Or what about you, Sir Eret? I’m sure Claire wouldn’t mind to add you to her list.”

And there’s the merchant again, Astrid thought tartly.

Eret shifted from one foot to the other, and let his gaze wander through the room – subtly looking for his drink, Astrid assumed – before he answered. “Well, I’m sure Fyrir Mala will choose a worthy candidate for this special occasion. Someone with enough experience in such matters.”

“Oh, you are too modest, milord. I’m sure you must be an exceptional lover,” the Countess said with an insinuating smile and a wink, that made Eret react with a tight smile as Daniel clapped him on the shoulder.

“I’m sure he is. But he’s a little picky, our Eret. Only accepts certain Priestesses to take care of his needs.” he said, grinning, and Astrid bit back a smirk. If only they knew…

The girls, however, all had their eyes cast to the floor, cheeks bright with embarrassment. Technically, their mother was violating one of the rules of proper decorum right now. While young maidens were taught the basics about sex by the Order of Frigga after their first moonblood, it was also with the admonition that such ‘women’s secrets’ were not to be discussed by them until their wedding day. The idea – as Astrid understood it – was that keeping the topic from being raised would hopefully keep premarital encounters from occurring.

Of course, the rules were different for men. They had needs, and the Order of Freya fulfilled those. Dedicated to love of every kind, the Priestesses of Freya spend the majority of their time taking care of the people’s needs. While the Order of Odin acted as advisor and sometimes as executioner, and the Order of Thor oversaw the training of soldiers, the Order of Freya was of a more charitable nature. They made sure that whoever came to worship their Goddess, regardless of their status or fortune, would get a meal at least once a day, would get his wounds treated, would find an open ear for consolations of more personal matters, and would see to it that the desires of men did not turn sour and curdle for lack of fulfillment.
Astrid, too, stared at the ground, her cheeks burning, though not because of the Countess’s public breach of decorum. She’d grown up with her brother and what amounted to a number of step-brothers, and she’d overheard more than her share of them talking about sex when she was younger not to be shocked. To her, it was more irritating that she wasn’t allowed by decorum to join in on their talks and ask some long-held questions of hers. No, it wasn’t them talking that made her blush.

It was because she could barely keep herself from scanning the crowd, knowing that she could lay eyes on him in an instant.

All this talking made her think of Hiccup again, of how he’d held her so tightly while he’d kissed her. She vividly remembered his hot hand on her waist and her neck, his demanding lips seeking more and deeper contact. Gods, if only Tuff hadn’t interrupted them! She wanted more of this, wanted to feel his touch, his closeness, and in return wanted to touch him, too. She wanted to feel him, skin on skin, like that first brushing of their fingers over Markor’s silken fur. But before her daydreaming could continue, and possibly be revealed by her dopy smile, the Countess luckily tore her out of her thoughts.

“Ah, but enough of that now. It surely is not a suitable topic for the innocent ears of young maidens,” she chatted on, oblivious or deliberately ignorant of how she’d been the one who’d brought up that topic in the first place. “I mainly came to thank you, Prince Daniel. It is so good to know that someone as capable as your Highness is defending our beautiful kingdom.”

Daniel frowned slightly. “We have many capable men serving in our army, soldiers and captains alike. I am but one among many, and I only try to do my best, just like everyone else,” he replied tersely. He was used to flattery, had been subjected to it all his life, and didn’t fall for that anymore. And if there was one thing he didn’t indulge, then it was slighting the men who fought along his side in battle.

“Oh, I didn’t mean to imply otherwise, Highness,” she backpaddled. “It was meant as more of a personal expression of gratitude. You see, Azure told me of her husband’s younger brother. You might not be aware of that, but he was one of that small group of noblemen who were captured by Malarian troops last summer. The whole family was in shock, devastated even. But thanks to your ransom-negotiations, he was returned unharmed.”

Daniel’s face lit up again. “Ah, yes, I remember. We had to give up a considerable amount of our booty and trade for a watchpost on the western slopes that we’d captured with almost no casualties, but getting our men back alive is more important.” He quirked his lip in a half-hidden smile and said in a tone of forced economy, “And it was just as well that we hadn’t begun repairs to any of the damage to that watchpost.”

“Oh, that would have been wasted effort indeed,” the Countess agreed. “But isn’t this tedious work?”

“What do you mean, ma’am?” Daniel asked, cocking his head in confusion. Astrid, who had all her attention on the conversation least her thought might wander again, found herself enjoying watching this; she could guess what was coming next, and was being reminded of the castle cats chasing each other.

“Well, the border is hundreds of miles long... Keeping track of all these outposts, castles, towns, passes, knowing who is where, remembering which fortifications need looking after, organizing men and supplies... How do you manage to handle it all, and still find the time to lead your men into battle?”
Astrid hid a smile as Daniel took the bait.

“Oh, certainly, keeping track of the logistical concerns and assorted baggage trains for the various units and detachments is a full-time endeavour for me and my men. But, while I know my way with a blade and on horseback, my calling has always been as a builder.” He shrugged. “Not the most martial of callings, I know, but I have turned it to the defence of our kingdom. So for me, assessing the defensiveness of a given castle, or drawing up plans to increase its defences against siege with minimal effort... well, those are the moments I most deeply enjoy.” He smiled warmly. “I dream of a day when I can build a castle so imposing that the raiders take one look and turn around to go home.”

Eret, his voice almost a little too innocent, chimed in, “But you do complain mightily about the logistics. I think that your exact comment in your last letter was ‘one twentieth part glory for every nineteen parts shovelling dung and juggling food supplies.’”

Daniel sighed. “I wish it was that good a ratio...”

Astrid caught Eret’s gaze and waggled her eyebrows, and there was no doubt that Eret had seen it too, as he raised a hand, pretending to rub at his nose when, in reality, he tried to hide the wide grin on his face.

The Countess, her eyes gleaming, said cheerfully, “If you don’t mind my input, Highness. I have the perfect solution for your problem.” She turned slightly and gently placed her hand on the shoulder of her youngest. “Viola here is also something of a budding scholar, with interests in all sorts of topics.” She grinned at Daniel, who had suddenly frozen like a deer hearing the snapping of a twig. “While she surely doesn’t reach your Highness’ skills, she has become quite proficient in her letters and numbers from the Priestesses of Frigga, and she has a fair and neat hand, with an aptitude for the clerical skills – organizing and the like. She could easily accompany you on your next expedition, to help you keep track of those lists and logistics.”

Daniel looked slightly trapped and started to stammer excuses – just like he’d done last year. Astrid managed to catch Viola’s eyes and gave her a brief sympathetic nod as her brother tried to explain that it wouldn’t be safe or suitable for a young maiden to accompany him; he’d be leaving soon, and winter travels were no respecters of rank. Viola, a year or two younger than Astrid, replied wordlessly with a grateful nod of her own, and Astrid would certainly admit that, for her at least, it had been entertaining to watch her brother squirm a bit. Between the Countess’ hopeless attempts, her daughters’ discomfort, and Daniel's stony expressions, it was honestly quite hilarious from her perspective, and she saw how Eret’s lips twitched traitorously, too.

But then the older woman turned toward him instead, and began her praises about her other daughters, pointing out how fond of animals Alicia was and how her sister Marian used to help out in her father’s stables occasionally. Astrid stood back and resisted the urge to make funny faces at her back – he’d scolded her for doing that two years ago. Just like Daniel, Eret was terrible at hiding his emotions, but, luckily, the Countess was equally blind to his reactions. Only her daughters looked like they wished the ground would open up and swallow them, and Astrid felt sympathy for them. They were actually nice girls, friendly and modest, just like young noble ladies were supposed to be. And if only half of what their mother said about their skills in tending to a household were true, they surely would make fine wives one day. It wasn't their fault that their mother was this annoying person, or that neither Eret or Daniel were interested in any way.

The Countess kept babbling on, and Astrid stopped listening, already knowing the script quite well. It was more or less the same at every given opportunity, after all. Absentmindedly, she
stepped closer toward Eret as he moved his arm a little to the side, a clear invitation for her to wind her arm through the opening. It was a game they often played, pretending that there was more between them than friendship to deter unwanted admirers. It probably wouldn't work on the Countess, but one never knew.

She'd meant to make a further step to his side, distracted by the effort of keeping the pleasant smile on her face, her arm already halfway lifted, when it happened. Someone bumped into her, and everything happened at once.

A loud crash sounded through the room as a pair of glass pint mugs filled with beer – House Berserker's dark and strong brew, judging by the smell – landed on the floor beside her. She stumbled at the unexpected contact, and all eyes in the room were on her – drawn by the loud noise – as she was about to fall and land in the shards-scattered puddle.

And then a hand closed around her upper arm, a strong arm catching her around her waist. She didn't need to turn in order to know whose breath brushed over her neck, whose already so familiar gasp reached her ear, and whose hot skin was burning into hers right now.

Chapter End Notes

Comments of any kind are very welcome ;)
For an endless moment, time seemed to stand still, and Hiccup wasn't sure what or how to feel.

Holding her felt amazing, with her weight resting on his arm around her waist, and her warmth against his chest. His hand was on her arm to stabilise her, his bare palm on her bare skin just above her elbow-length silken glove, and just like earlier at the stables, a sensation like lightning shot up his arm and through his entire body that left him dazed and tingling.

And yet he knew that taking pleasure from holding her was a mistake. She’d staggered when they’d collided, and he’d caught her from falling on the glass on reflex. There was nothing wrong with that. But he knew that basking in feeling her weight and warmth, and enjoying her surprised gasp echoing in his ears was a mistake when uncountable pairs of eyes had to be glued to them. He should let go of her and back off, now that she had regained her balance. But right now, all he wanted was to hold her for the rest of his life.

But then time began to move again.

Astrid pushed herself away and out of his arms in an instant, eyes wide and panicky as she stared at him. With a sinking heart, he remembered what she'd told him: touching her was punishable by death.

Her eyes flickered off to where Eret and the Prince stood, only a few feet away. His cousin had an amused and oddly grateful expression on his face, his gaze curiously shifting from Astrid to him and back again. The Prince’s jaw tensed, however, his teeth visibly gritted and his brows furrowed as he excused himself from an older noblewoman with a few curt words. Hiccup saw how he laid a hand on Eret's shoulder and whispered something, saw how Eret nodded before he went toward the Princess and led her away. Somehow, he was uncomfortably aware of the growing distance between them, but he had no time to think about that.

Still dazed by the sensation that touching her arm and being so close to her had elicited, Hiccup barely noticed as the Prince stepped toward him. Only when the man stood right in front of him did he look up. A part of him realised that he should be afraid of what might happen to him now, but the larger portion simply didn't care. There had been nothing wrong with keeping her from falling. On the contrary, holding her had felt right, as right as barely anything else in his life.

If he got punished for that now, then so be it.

He looked up to meet the Prince's eyes straight on. That alone might be an affront, but did it matter anymore?

Daniel held his gaze, and it was as if Hiccup could see something in the other man's eyes, recognition and regret. "Hiccup," he said after a long pause. "You're... Valka's son, yes?"

_Valka's son._

Not Stoick's.

Not part of his father's House or heir to his title. But also not a name anyone would necessarily recognise, if they were to listen in.
"I am," Hiccup confirmed. As always, getting reminded of his family hurt, but he fought not to show it. This was not the time to show any weakness.

"As I thought," Daniel nodded. He seemed to consider for a moment, and added, "I am sorry for your loss. And I meant what I said earlier. I’m glad you found a new place with House Jag’r and as Eret's squire." He paused, took a deep breath, and then continued with what had made him approach him in the first place. "What you did just now, laying hands on my sister... I could have you hanged for that."

Suddenly feeling insecure after all, Hiccup bit his lips, and averted his eyes downwards. "I – I just wanted to keep her from falling into the shards from the mug."

"You could have accidentally bumped into her on purpose. You wouldn't be the first one to try that." At the top of his vision, he saw Daniel nod decisively. "But I believe you. Honour and honesty are the most valuable virtues of your people, if I remember correctly. And I trust Eret's judgement of your character. He wouldn't have brought you here if you weren't trustworthy. I'll let this incident slide, but consider yourself warned. I won't... No, I can't be that lenient the next time. Understood?"

Hiccup swallowed, and nodded. "Yes, Highness."

The Prince left without another word, and for several minutes Hiccup simply stayed where he was. Servants approached to clean the mess on the ground, and he could feel the eyes of the people around on him, but he barely paid attention to either. Absentmindedly, he flexed his hand at his side, the one that had touched her. It was still prickling, his arm numb, as if he’d slept on it funny for an entire night.

Slowly, he lifted his head, his eyes shifting to the distant corner where they landed on her without having to look for her. He'd known where she was. He felt it, like an inner urge, like something was actively pulling him toward her. It took all of his self-control to stay where he was, to not walk over toward her. The moment his gaze landed on her, she looked up and toward him as well, as if she’d felt his eyes on her. She looked just as dazed and confused as he felt, not understanding what it was that was happening to them.

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"Hey. Are you all right?"

Astrid flinched as Daniel's voice sounded to her ears. Hastily, she turned toward him – and away from Hiccup where he stood at the other end of the dining hall. Her hands were shaking, and she quickly drew forth her usual calm front. She couldn't let her brother see how much this small incident had affected her. He would only misinterpret her reaction.

"Of course I’m all right," she said, rolling her eyes. "Why wouldn't I be? He just caught me so I wouldn't fall. That's hardly a crime. I hope you weren't too harsh on the boy." Her voice was as blasé and dismissive as she could muster. Calling Hiccup simply a boy felt wrong when he had to be older than her – and when he was so much more than simply some boy to her – but it would emphasise just how unimportant he had to be. Lying to her brother also felt wrong, but she couldn’t put that into consideration. All that mattered right now was that her acting seemed to have convinced him. It mattered that Hiccup was safe.

Daniel pulled over another chair to her side and sat down, reaching for and squeezing her hand reassuringly. "No, I wasn't. I just warned him. It was obviously just an accident, and I wouldn't want to rob Eret of his squire on his first day of being a knight." He threw a sardonic look at Eret.
“Imagine how hard that would make it for him to get a new one!”

"Someone care to fill me in what you’re talking about?” Eret asked from the side, having observed their small exchange with an increasingly confused and now worried expression. "I mean, I know the law is strict. But I agree with Swanja, the last time I checked keeping someone from falling down wasn't a crime. So why would you ‘rob me of my squire’, as you put it?"

Daniel stood up, a troubled expression on his face as he looked at their friend. "Shortly after you left last year," he began in a grim voice. "There was an... an incident. And to deter against something like it from happening again, Father and I decided on a new law. Touching the Princess is strictly forbidden and, depending on the case, the offender will either have the hand removed, or be suspended from the neck at the sacred tree until dead."

Eret's eyes widened in surprise, and he threw her a questioning look, as if he needed a confirmation of his Prince's words.

"This doesn't affect you, of course," Daniel added in a slightly softer voice. "You are like a brother, to both of us. It is more about strangers who might try their luck. But I still need to ask you to keep the contact at a minimum, at least where people can see you. It's all about appearances, as you know." His gaze wandered through the room, landing on the high table, and he sighed. "I see that Father wants to speak to me. I guess he wants a report. We can talk more later."

With an appalled expression, Eret watched Daniel head off to where their fathers were waiting, and sat down on the recently-vacated chair next to her. Just like her brother before, he reached for her hand, hesitated for the fraction of a second, but then finished the movement. Apparently, he wouldn’t let this cruel law deter him, and Astrid found herself unspeakably grateful for that.

"What happened, Swanja?" he asked in a low voice. "I mean, I know we always made fun of these strict rules. But this? It's completely over the top, even for your family. That... that incident. It was something big, right? Something bad. What was it?"

But Astrid couldn't answer, didn't want to talk about it. Memories flashed through her mind, memories of a rough hand, of bad breath, crushing pain, and of terrifying helplessness. And, inevitably, of the sacred tree and how she'd been made to watch it all come to an end.

Her hand tightened around Eret's, seeking his strength and support. She hadn't thought about that day in months, but this was already the third time in the space of an afternoon. And now...

Many memories whirled through her mind, old and new ones fighting for dominance in her head. A painfully bruising grip on her arm against a cradling one and crackling heat, a restraining arm around her waist against supportive wiry strength. The stench of rotten flesh on a man’s breath against sweet temptation. Feeling helpless against feeling safe. Finally, the memory of how it had all ended that day... and, glancing at where she knew Hiccup stood for a scant second, she shuddered.

Before she had a chance to try to centre herself against the demands of keeping her mask in place, however, an unwelcome voice intruded.

“Milady Astrid, I saw what happened just now. Is anything the matter?”

The voice was all-too-familiar, and not particularly welcome, especially at the moment. Suppressing an irate groan, Astrid balled her hands into tight fists and pretended to not have heard the man.
But, of course, he wasn’t that easy to deter. “Princess? Are you all right? Did that scrawny excuse for a squire hurt you?”

“Leave her be, Thuggory. She’s not your concern,” Eret growled at him. But trying to ward off the brutish man with polite words was futile, and they both knew that very well.

“Oh, but she is yours?” came his snide reply. “Were you finally able to wheedle the King into giving her to you? Congratulations, I must have missed the announcement.”

Eret’s face darkened at that comment, but before he could reply anything, Astrid laid a hand on his arm. “Don’t,” she murmured calmly, just that one word, but Eret relaxed immediately and nodded. The young Duke of Meathead – whose father had deceased only recently, and under… questionable circumstances, to say the least – wasn’t worth starting a fight with. They’d all learned that by now.

“Heh, just kidding,” Thuggory sneered, his indicative gaze resting on her restraining hand on Eret’s arm. “As if she would ever let you ask for her hand. I bet even that lowborn cripple just now got closer to touching her than you ever will.”

It took Astrid a moment to realise that he was talking about Hiccup. And then it was her turn to fight the urge to reply in kind, to tell him off or maybe punch him in the face. It wouldn’t be the first time, after all. How dare he call him a cripple, when… when…

“Is there a problem here?” came Daniel’s dry voice from behind Thuggory.

The young Duke whirled around in surprise, took a step backwards, and slightly bowed his head. “No problem, Highness. I was just asking after your lovely sister’s well-being. I hope you’re going to punish that cretin for this malicious assault on our fair Princess as he deserves it.”

Daniel’s stony expression gave nothing away as he crossed his arms in front of his chest and gave Thuggory a long look. “If or how I will judge a crime doesn’t need to be of your concern, Lord Thuggory,” he finally replied coolly, and, with a pointedly raised eyebrow, he added, “And I suggest you better not accuse anyone of having performed a malicious assault without solid proof.”

“Of course, Highness.” Thuggory bowed, even the polite act seemingly tainted with sarcasm as his arm was slung over his silk-covered belly, and retreated without another word. It should delight Astrid to see that worm creeping away, but instead, his words had left a bad aftertaste in her thoughts.

Cretin...

Assault...

She knew that they didn’t apply to Hiccup or what had happened. But hearing those words assigned to him frightened her nonetheless. What if others thought the same? Almost against her will, her gaze flickered to where he stood near the grand table. He was looking at her – likely had been the whole time – and when their eyes met, the longing to walk over to him became almost irresistible. Trembling, she clutched at the chair to resist giving in. She couldn’t let that happen, couldn’t risk–

“Hey, Astrid?” Daniel sounded honestly concerned. “Are you really all right? You look pale. Was… Thuggory right? Should I have Hiccup punished?”

Frightened that he’d seen her glance, that he’d drawn the wrong conclusions and was about to order Hiccup’s hand chopped off – or worse – she looked up at her brother, and painted her well-practised smile back on her face.
“I’m fine!” she reassured him cheerfully, and then ostentatiously peered around him, searching for something to distract him. “Oh, and, just to warn you, the Duchess of Longgreen is heading this way, with both of her daughters in tow.”

Daniel whimpered, so her diversion had probably worked.

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Hiccup didn't know what to think anymore.

On the one hand, he was certain that the Prince's warning had been serious, had seen the determination in the man’s eyes. He had to stay away from the Princess or he would suffer the consequences.

But on the other hand, he didn't care. He'd already lost everything once, his home, his family, and the future he’d been prepared for. For two years, he'd tried to at least get back that future, had searched for answers and ways to regain his status. But meeting her today had shown him, in direct and impressive manner, how pointless and wasted those two years had been. Nothing, not even finding out the truth, would bring his family back, and nothing short of a miracle would be sufficient to rebuild his honour. No, his past was dead, and there was no way to retrieve it.

All he had left was this new path that had revealed itself to him today, this new future. She was his future. And if this strange connection he had with her turned out to be a false one, if this future he dreamed of was taken from him again, if he was forced to give her up… Did it really matter what happened to him then?

For over an hour, he watched her from a distance, barely able to tear his eyes away from her. It was as if nothing else existed anymore, nothing but her. Not the hundreds of people around them, not his questions about the past, and not the uncertainties of the future. Only her.

Every now and then, their eyes met over the distance, and with every look they shared, that pull toward her seemed to grow stronger. More than once, he found himself walking in her direction, only to remember that he couldn't approach her here, that he wouldn't get the chance to talk to her if he did. Of course, he had the excuse of having to stay close to Eret who never strayed far from her side. But that didn't mean that he was allowed to be near her, and the closer he got to her, the harder it became to keep his distance. It was maddening.

And every time their eyes met, he saw right into her, saw that she felt the same. No, he wouldn't be able to keep his distance for much longer. Something had to give, or they would both go insane.

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Astrid loved her brother, she really did. For all her life, he'd been there for her, had watched over her, and had taken care of her. And whenever something had happened to her, he'd taken it as a personal offence, had blamed himself, and made sure that there wouldn't be a repetition. All she ever had to complain was that he tended to overdo it occasionally. Like with this stupid law.

Although, truth be told… It wasn’t like he hadn’t had a reason to be worried. It wasn’t like that day all those months ago hadn’t left its marks on her, even if they weren’t visible. It wasn’t like that stupid law, no matter how overblown it had become, didn’t exist for a reason.

There had been a time only a few months past when even the smallest brush against her arm had freshly conjured up the events of that day, when one of her friends touching her hand had made her hyperventilate. She’d avoided going to any balls or dances, because no matter how casual or
innocent the intention, she hadn’t been able to stand anyone laying a hand on her waist or back.

By now she was able to cope better, but that didn't mean Daniel would override this law. He was determined that it was for her best, and wouldn't yield no matter how hard she tried to convince him.

Yes, she loved her brother and lying to him didn't really sit right with her. But telling him the truth of what she felt wasn't an option. He wouldn't understand.

For Odin’s sake, she barely understood it herself!

But right now was one of those times when she was intensely grateful for Daniel’s overprotective behaviour. She sat at one of the long tables, Eret and Daniel sitting on either side of her and making sure no-one was bothering her. Only a few seats away, Fyrir Throg, who served as one of her father’s military commanders in addition to his tasks as the head of Thor’s Order, was telling stories about the victories from the summer campaigning season to a rapt audience of listeners. Every now and then, her brother threw in an addition, another detail to give the story more depth. Astrid knew that those battles at the kingdom's western borders were important, that they needed every willing man to fight back the Malarian troops in those mountain paths. She knew that she should encourage the young men surrounding them to defend their kingdom, their homes, and families.

But she found herself unable to concentrate. Instead, her thoughts kept whirling around in her head, around Hiccup, everything that had happened today, and how… different it felt. His brushing against her arm earlier hadn’t freaked her out, on the contrary. She'd wanted more. And when he’d held her… Even now – protected by her brother and Eret, in her father’s presence, and with the palace guards everywhere around – she didn’t feel the same sense of security that she’d felt in Hiccup’s arms just now, and not just because he’d kept her from falling. She’d felt as if she could let herself fall, could discard all masks and pretences, and, no matter what, he would catch her. It was entirely different from how she’d felt during the last months, and it had been so right from the beginning.

Her thoughts drifted back to the afternoon, to when she’d first heard his voice behind her. She’d thought she was alone at the stables, had guessed Eret had to be outside for a moment, and hearing an unfamiliar male voice had startled her, even scared her. But only for a fraction of a second. There had been something in his voice that had soothed her fears immediately, that had told her that there was no reason to be afraid of him, not ever.

She couldn’t remember a time where she had ever felt as safe and secure as around him, when he’d held her, but also during their moments of simple companionable talking and laughing. She remembered the warmth that had spread through her as he’d smiled at her, and at his barely hidden attempts of flirting. It had been nice to have someone being interested in her for herself and not her title, but it had been so much more than that. She’d wanted him to be interested in her, had wanted to let him know that there was no-one else for her, had wanted to indulge in the idea of spending more time with him.

When he’d accidentally touched her hand, it had been intense, like the heated spark of a fire that had ignited something within her. Her heart hadn’t stopped racing and her thoughts hadn’t stopped wandering away from her task at hand and to him instead, to his hand, so close to hers that she’d felt as if she could feel his warmth even over Markor’s heated body.

Yes, Hiccup was different. No matter how many things today had reminded her of that day, his brushing against her arm hadn’t been one of them. His touching her hand had made her heart race and her breathing quicken, but for entirely different reasons than usual. And his hand on her
waist… She’d never experienced anything akin to the intense feeling of security elicited by his arm around her just now. And earlier at the stables… When he’d held her, had kissed her… Those images…

All night, she’d tried – and failed – to not constantly think of him, of those images and what they had meant. She’d been strangely aware of him before already, but ever since he’d held her in his arms again, it was nigh on impossible to think of anything else but him, and her awareness of him had become bizarrely intensified. She felt as if, at any given moment, she somehow knew where he was, as if the back of her mind kept focusing on him, as if he was all that mattered. She felt as if something was pulling her toward him, urging her to close the distance between them. All too easily, her eyes caught on his tall figure and his mane of auburn hair, landed on his gleaming green eyes that seemed to see nothing but her. She never allowed her eyes to linger, but it threatened to drive her insane anyway.

Daniel had warned Hiccup. That was good! Right? It meant that he wouldn't accidentally do something even more stupid than keeping her from falling. It meant that he was safe, that he wouldn't end like that other man. It meant that he wouldn't dare to touch her again.

Astrid swallowed the small sob that threatened to tear itself from her throat. It was wrong, so wrong. But, Gods, she wanted him to touch her. She wanted him to hold her again, to kiss her, wanted to listen to his voice while he talked about horses, wanted to watch him deftly handle heavy saddles and nimbly loosen small knots. She wanted to know who he was, not so as to know whether her father might consider him as her future husband, but for herself. She wanted to get to know him, where he came from, how he'd ended up in House Jag'r's services, wanted to know what he liked and thought. She wanted to get to know him for her own sake and his.

And she wasn't so sure anymore whether waiting a day or two for a good opportunity would be feasible...

She was intensely aware of Hiccup, standing by the side and watching her, and it made listening to the men talk about warfare and glory harder and harder. Pretending to be bored, she shifted in her seat and turned to let her gaze wander seemingly aimlessly through the room. When her eyes landed on Hiccup's once again, they shared an intent look that seemed to burn its way right into her heart. She saw the intense longing in his eyes, despite the warning Daniel had given him, and knew that she couldn't wait any longer. She needed to talk to him, needed answers, or she would go insane. And from the way he looked, he didn’t seem to fair any better. Only Odin knew what he might do.

As Fyrir Throg continued with a story about how cowardly the enemy’s ambushes were, Astrid laid a hand on Daniel's arm to get his attention. "I'll be right back," she whispered, putting a weakish tremble into her voice to play into his worries.

He gave her a troubled look, glanced at the gesticulating lord-commander, and then back at her. "You okay? Do you want me to come with you? Or Eret could--"

"No, I... I just need a few minutes of peace and quiet," she murmured, already pushing her chair back and standing up.

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the men exchanging looks, and Eret shrugged. "It's not like all that much can happen to her here, right? Besides, she's usually quite able to take care of herself, remember?"

She heard Daniel grunt in grudging agreement, and suppressed a relieved sigh. One day, she would tell Eret how incredibly grateful she was to him for treating her like he did – for not pampering her.
Without wasting any more time or giving Daniel chance to change his mind, she fled the crowded table. She had no choice but to walk past Hiccup where he stood nearby, and hoped with all she had that he wouldn’t do anything stupid. She herself felt the urge make a step to the side, to at least let her arm brush against his, if nothing else, but contained herself. She was sure that Daniel or Eret were still watching her, so doing so now was too dangerous. And, to her relief, Hiccup didn’t reach for her either, even though he surely looked as if he wanted to. Soon, she thought to herself. If her plan worked, then they would get their chance to talk soon.

Once she’d passed him, she strolled along the long table with the platters of food on it. Seemingly aimlessly, she walked around for a while, not paying much attention to those around her. It was a trick she often used to deter those who might be watching her. If she behaved unapproachably, people would stop watching her at some point. Usually, at least...

“Excuse me, Princess?” a voice intruded, but it wasn’t the one that she wanted to hear. She looked up and saw Unnr Losnedahl, the wife of Ketil Losnedahl, one of the richer merchants in the capital, walking up to her. She was dressed in the rich silks and velvets that her husband imported, with her hair arranged in an artful formation on top of her head. Astrid scowled, but before she could react, the older woman said, “If I could have a moment of your time, I have a matter of some importance to discuss with–”

“No,” Astrid said curtly, the tension she’d felt all night transmuting into irritation without a pause.

“Excuse me?” Unnr replied, clearly taken aback.

“No, I won’t excuse you,” Astrid said flatly. “I did not invite you to approach me. I was not opening myself to any audience. You ignored that, so that I could talk to my father on your behalf, again, thinking that this time it would work for sure, and I won’t excuse such behaviour. Now go away and leave me in peace.”

Unnr blinked, and Astrid had precisely zero sympathy at her confusion. Then she seemed to rally, and said, “But my lady, please, just a moment of your time, and I have this exquisite bolt of silk–”

Exasperated, her irritation growing into real anger, Astrid said, “No. You’re not interested in me, and I’m not interested in your bribery. What is it this time? Some kind of trade deal for your husband to make him even richer? You know that I’m not the one who decides such things, and even if...” She scowled and said sarcastically, “I’m not a wishing well with legs. Now go away, before I call you out even more publicly for ignoring protocol.”

Unnr scowled, bowed and said through clenched teeth, “Thank you, my Lady,” before retreating.

Astrid took a deep breath to steady herself again, and resisted rubbing at her temples. It wasn’t like she was deliberately deaf to people’s complaints or requests. On the contrary, trying to help those who needed it was one of very few opportunities where she actually could do something. But those who really needed help usually didn’t appear at these sorts of gatherings. Here, there were always the ones like her, the ones who thought that they could get away with ignoring protocol, and that their case was of such dire importance that the Royals would happily put everything aside and pay attention to their problem. Astrid was so sick of it.

But there was at least one advantage to Unnr’s arrogance. Publicly calling her out seemed to make other people avoiding approaching her, and some were even averting their eyes as she continued to wander around.

After taking a few more detours, she reached the partially-hidden door to an adjacent dining room – used for more intimate dinners of up to twenty people or so – and leaned against it. And waited.
During a feast like this, there always happened something. And that something – be it a broken glass, a slap across someone’s face, a challenge to a duel, a drunken declaration of love, a marriage proposal, or, Astrid’s personal favourite from last Midsummer, a flock of very confused pigeons – usually served to distract everyone for a few moments. And those few moments would be all that she needed. She scanned the room, looking for likely candidates.

There. A few tables to the left from where her brother and Eret were, a discussion was growing more and more heated; they’d reached the emphatic-gesticulations and raised-voices level. She looked up to actively seeking Hiccup’s attention as the discussion turned into a fully-grown argument, and when a shattering glass drew everyone else’s attention away from her, she made her move.

Holding Hiccup’s gaze, she opened the door behind her back and stepped backwards into the shadows; before she fully entered the small room, however, she made a seemingly random motion with her finger against the wooden door frame. She had no doubts that he’d seen her, and hoped that he understood. With a rapidly beating heart, she made a few more steps into the darkened room, only lit by the moonlight pouring in through the large windows, and waited.

When Astrid walked past him, it took everything he had to keep himself from reaching out for her. She was so close, not even half an arm’s length between them, and not lifting his hand to caress her arm hurt almost physically. But he was aware of her brother gazing after her, and he didn’t dare to give the Prince more reason to dislike him. His demeanour toward Hiccup had already cooled noticeably since the accident earlier, and he surely couldn’t risk angering him further. Not just because out of fear of the direct consequences, but also because gaining the Prince’s favour was one of his main goals from now on.

So, instead of sealing his fate by reaching out for her, Hiccup settled for simply breathing in the mayweed scent of her perfume, and enjoyed the memories it brought to his mind. Of warm sunshine on straw-covered ground, of her carefree laughter, and of the taste of her lips.

Gods, how was it possible that she’d captivated him so thoroughly? He should be listening to the High Priest of Thor who was talking about the war in the West, should pay attention to every detail that might be helpful in the future. But he simply wasn’t able to concentrate on the man and his words.

Turning slightly, he followed her with his eyes, and watched her wandering around the room. Aside from one audacious woman, people left her alone, didn’t dare to speak to her and made way for her wherever she went. Hiccup wasn’t the only one watching her, he noticed, but the longer she walked around, and especially after she’d turned down the woman’s request, the more people seemed to get tired of watching her and turned to other occupations again. He saw how she stopped wandering, and instead leaned against a wall on the other side of the room.

She seemed to be waiting for something, although for what he did not know. For several minutes she stayed where she was, her eyes wandering restlessly through the room, and Hiccup wondered what she was up to. Especially when she suddenly looked up and directly at him. Clearly, she was up to something – aside from driving him deeper into this madness.

God, how much he wanted to go after her! He wanted to talk to her, away from all-too-curious ears, wanted to know whether it would make sense for him to fight for her. And he wanted to hold her again, to feel her warmth in his arm. She still had her eyes on him, her look lasting longer than all night before, and it made looking away virtually impossible. Even as somewhere close-by a glass shattered, drawing everyone’s attention, his eyes stayed on her.
The moment everyone looked toward that unexpected sound – and away from her – her gaze seemed to become even more intense, her eyes drilling into his. The wall behind her opened into a hidden door, and, after making a small gesture, she slipped into the adjacent room.

His heart began to race.

She couldn’t be serious. He couldn’t – shouldn't follow her. It was not appropriate, regardless of who she was. The stables had been a fairly public place, but even spending those hours there alone with her had been borderline questionable according to proper decorum. Following her into an empty room, however? No, he shouldn't do that. It might lead directly to his own execution and her public shaming.

And yet he knew that he wouldn’t be able to keep himself from doing exactly that. Not when she’d gone to such length to make meeting in private possible. All he needed now was an excuse of some sort.

Hesitantly, he stepped closer to where Eret and Daniel still sat at their table. He was reluctant to address them at first, but then… This was Eret, his cousin, his friend. He might also be his master now, but Eret had insisted that that wouldn’t change much. After taking a deep breath, he made a last step toward them, which finally drew their attention.

“Hoy, Sir–”

Eret gave him a look, and then rubbed his hands on his face. “Oh no. Don’t you start.”

The Prince started to snort and chuckle.

“What?” Hiccup asked, confused, and then added, “Sir?”

Eret groaned, looked up at Hiccup, and said, “Hiccup, I’m still me. I’m not one of those knights who needs his squire to polish his ego along with his armour, alright? Unless we’re in a formal situation, you don’t need to bow and scrape like that.”

Unable to help himself, Hiccup pointedly glanced around at the formal setting, filled with fancy outfits and nobles by the score. Eret groaned.

Daniel’s chuckling reached a new height, and he pointed his spoon at Hiccup with an air of deep amusement. “I swear, the gods must have put you at Eret’s side on purpose. Oh, this will be great.”

Swallowing hard at the comment, Hiccup didn’t say anything, but gave a polite bow instead. He surely wouldn’t deny that the Gods were at least in some way responsible for his being here.

Eret finished his over-embellished moaning and said, “Hiccup. I’m not saying ignore ceremony. I’m just saying that in a more relaxed moment – like, say, a meal where I’m pretty sure those idiots—which he pointed his thumb at an increasingly loud and angry group nearby “—are going to get into a duel soon – you can address me as family, not as your knight. Fair?”

Hiccup shrugged and nodded, before giving a small smirk, and bowed deeply. “Sir Eret, heir to House Jag’r and all its vassals, Knight of the Realm, and three-time champion of the joust...”

Eret looked at him, appalled, as Daniel fought not to laugh out loud. “I really like him. Oh, this’ll be grand. My most informal knight and most formal squire.” Snorting, he shook his head in amusement before returning his attention to Hiccup. “But please, you were about to ask
Hiccup rose from his bow, momentarily unsure what to say. He’d enjoyed winding Eret up, but that hadn’t been the reason why he’d approached him. He was here because, he needed an excuse – any excuse – to leave his master’s side. “I–” he began, but got interrupted by his growling stomach, which reminded him that he hadn’t fed it yet this evening.

Both of the other men laughed until Eret said in an exaggerated manner, “Oh, yes, right. Squire Hiccup, you’re dismissed. Go, and get something to eat. And since you insist on acting like a servant: We’re still waiting for our beers.”

At that, Daniel sobered up a little. Grimacing slightly, he added, “Right. But only after he’s eaten something, the boy needs filling out. And Hiccup? No more accidents this time.”

“Of course, Highness,” Hiccup replied, swallowing. He bowed again politely and retreated.

Without wasting any more time, Hiccup approached the smorgasbord at the centre of the room. Ignoring the painful memories this form of a feast – traditional to his people – brought up, he began to pile up a plate of various tasty morsels. His stomach growled again, loudly, which drew a laugh from some elderly nobleman nearby.

“Ah, I remember what it was to be a young man,” the fellow said, and pointed with his hand – which was missing three fingers – to a couple of dishes. “Here, try this veal, it’s so tender. And those meatballs. I know they might not look like much, but they’re made after a special recipe. They are an exquisite delicacy from the North, and quite worth a try.”

Ducking his head as to not show any visible reaction, Hiccup took one of each indicated morsels. Even hungry as he was, his stomach revolted against the mere thought of eating the köttbular, as he’d never liked this delicacy, but he didn’t want to offend the man. After bowing slightly in both gratitude and parting, Hiccup moved down the length of the table, gathering some additional bits just to avert the noblemen's attention.

Finally, his plate was loaded; he made a slight act of trying to find an open seat at a table, but, thankfully due to the sheer size of the crowd, that was actually impossible. So, with a deliberate shrug, he stepped toward the door Astrid had disappeared behind, opened it after easily finding the mechanism, and stepped inside, hoping that he wasn’t making the biggest – and possibly last – mistake of his life.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you to everyone who commented so far. You have no idea what that means to me! :D

Also: I realise that it might have been confusing when, in the last chapter, the King called Eret the Elder uncle. However, they are not actually (closely) related. But those two Houses are rather close, and always have been. Eret the Elder was a close friend of Astrid’s grandfather, and, much like Eret II is like a second father to Astrid, Eret the Elder was/is like an uncle to the King.
Chapter Notes

So, first things first: I have one important announcement to make. In roughly another four chapters or so, Part I of the story will conclude. (Originally, it was only planned as a short introduction of 2-3 chapters, but... oh well...) The issue is... Summer is coming! (Quick, let the Starks know!) And between summer holidays and our family vacation, I won't have as much time to write. So, after Part I is posted (which should wrap up by June 1st), I'm going on a short, scheduled hiatus of four weeks (Meaning that I'll resume posting on July 6th). The simple reason for that is that I want this story and the individual chapters to be as good as I can make them. So, I'm going to use the hiatus to build up a buffer of written and edited chapters.
I promise that there won't be a mean cliffhanger for this hiatus, and if the dates change from what I have posted above, I'll edit this A/N and announce the change in a subsequent AN. And, since he's been so much help and to bridge that gap, if you're looking for something to read, you could give A Thing Of Vikings a look (he just hit 500,000 words for his fic!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The room behind the door was dark. No lights burned in here, not lanterns or candles. Only the moonlight pouring in through the large windows gave any amount of illumination, and it took Hiccup’s eyes a few moments to adjust. What he saw then was a smaller dining room, small only in comparison to the splendid hall on the other side of the door. A long table with at least a dozen chairs stood in the middle of the room with display cabinets, cupboards, and sideboards around the periphery of the room, with paintings occupying the scant wall space that wasn’t covered with fine dishes and glass tableware.

At first, he thought he might be alone in this room after all. Had she left it through another door? Should he look for her, follow her? Indecisively, he shifted his weight from one foot to the other, but before the doubts could become any stronger, he spotted her. She was barely more than a shadow against one of the sideboards, and he more felt her presence than actually saw her.

Hiccup swallowed against the rising lump in his throat. For the first time since he’d seen that vision – since the idea of asking her to become his wife had become more than just an imagined fantasy – he actually was alone with her and able to freely talk to her.

And yet, he didn’t know what to do.

A part of him wanted to approach her directly, wanted to treat her like before, like during the hours they’d spend at the stables. He wanted to simply talk to her, joking and lightly, unrestrained by any social rules of decorum. Hel, if he was honest with himself, he wanted to take her in his arms again and feel her warmth like before. He wanted to caress her cheek as he got lost in her eyes, to listen to her voice, and to kiss her again. He felt as if he already knew her, felt strangely close to her, and every bit of formal behaviour seemed so wrong now that there were no prying eyes and ears around anymore.
And yet, she was the *Princess*. She was the highest ranked woman in the entire kingdom, so far out of his reach that simply being here in this room with her seemed like a miracle. As much as he wanted to, that wasn’t a fact he could ignore.

The internal debate confused him even more.

“Yo-your Highness–” he finally said carefully, but she interrupted him directly, her voice sharp like an axe.

“Don't!”

Gulping, he shifted his weight, suddenly insecure after all. He didn’t believe – *couldn't* believe that he might have misinterpreted her signals, but…

“I… I'm sorry, Highness. I didn't mean to–”

“No,” she interjected again, softer this time. “Don't call me that. Please. Not when we're alone.”

His eyes widened as the meaning of her words sank in. *He’d been right!* Taking in a deep breath to steady his suddenly-racing heart, he placed the laden plate – his excuse to come here in the first place – down on one of the nearby shelves, and made a careful step in her direction. But paused again, still not sure how to behave. He knew what he wanted, what his heart longed for, but he didn’t dare to act on it out of fear that he might scare her if he acted too bluntly. The silence stretched on, awkward and heavy. He’d waited for this chance all night, but now that it was here, he just didn’t know what to do.

“Could you… say something?” she whispered, sounding small and insecure. “Or do something? Anything? Please?”

Did she feel the same? This confusing longing that went against every instinct on how to interact with a stranger? “What do you want me to do?” he heard himself ask, voice low and much calmer than he actually felt. Maybe not the most intelligent words, but his head was a mess as hope and fear, despair and anticipation whirled around inside him and kept him from forming sensible thoughts.

The rustling of heavy fabric was audible in the otherwise entirely silent room as she made a hesitant step in his direction. He heard her take a deep breath, and, after another endless moment of silence, she whispered, “I don’t know… what… what *would* you do if I were not… who I am? If I were the titleless peasant girl you met this afternoon.”

Taking a deep breath, Hiccup closed his eyes at her question. What he would do if she wasn’t the Princess? Many thoughts crossed his mind, many ideas and images that didn’t belong anywhere but in the rooms of an Ástir. Or to the life of a married couple. But thinking like that was wrong, he wasn’t supposed to–

A pained smile crossed his face as another thought occurred to him. It was an even truer one, although it might even be a crazier and blunter thought than the improper ones from a few moments before.

But she’d asked what he would do, and, if he listened into his heart, then there was only one honest answer.

“If you weren’t the… the Princess,” he whispered. “If you were a farmer’s daughter like I’d thought you were… Then I’d be at your father’s house right now, and asking his permission to court you.” He heard her breathe in sharply, but that was her only reaction. So he added with a hint
of nervous laughter, “Which is ironic, because... I am at your father's house right now. I could go and ask him, easily, but…”

... but I have nothing to offer, nothing but my honest feelings, and those wouldn't be enough for the King.

“You… You'd ask for my hand? Without... knowing me?” she asked in a shaking voice, and it was as if he could hear this strange longing and confusion in it again. She made another step in his direction, and now that she stood in the patch of gleaming moonlight coming from one of the windows, he could finally see her face.

And the expression of longing, confusion, and... and hope on it.

“Yes!” he blurted out without hesitation or further thought. Yes, he would ask for her hand, even if the different wording sounded foreign in his own ears. He would marry her, right here and now if he could. Because he felt as if did know her. He couldn't say why, knew that it was completely stupid, mad, insane. But it was the truth nonetheless. “Yes, I would.”

The silence after this confession was unbearable. What was she thinking of him now? That he was a lunatic, completely insane? That she should leave and get away from him as fast and far as she could? He wouldn't even blame her if she did.

“Does that mean…” She took a deep breath and asked in a slightly more level voice, “Did you see it, too? That vision?” She had her arms wrapped around herself as if she was cold – or self-conscious, her eyes wandering around in an uncertain fashion. It made him want to cuddle her, to hold her warm and safe in his arms, to reassure her. Even just thinking about doing that felt so right. And he might actually have done it, had her words not distracted him.

“What did you see?” he asked, his eyes wide in disbelief. He remembered the vision he’d seen this afternoon, what he had presumed to be a sign from Odin. It seemed indelibly etched on the inside of his mind, and he could recall it with no effort. The small house amidst the garden, and her standing in the doorway with their son on her arms. But... if that had been a sign, then it had been the answer to his prayer, right? It should have been meant for him only. Slowly, he made a cautious step toward her, unable to stop himself as she began to speak; hesitantly at first, she even stammered, but quickly became more confident.

“W-when you... kissed me... I saw it. This vision. I...” she trailed off, slightly shaking her head, and then began anew. “I saw myself, sitting at a table and I was... I don't know... mending clothes, I think. I was sitting in a simple yet cozy room, with a warm fire burning in the hearth and a kettle with stew cooking over it. There was a... child sitting on the ground next to the fire, a little boy, playing with a dog. It was so... so peaceful. And then the dog suddenly bayed, and they both jumped up and ran toward the door. I stood up, too, smiling, just as the boy squealed 'Daddy! Daddy's back.' I picked him up and opened the door, and... and it was you. You came walking up the path toward us, toward the house... our house. And when you reached us, you took us into your arms and kissed us and... and it just felt so...”

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As she’d spoken, he'd slowly stepped closer, and now was standing right in front of her. With him right there, she trailed off, his presence somehow both comforting and confusing.

“...it felt so right,” he finished her sentence when she didn’t continue, his voice barely more than a rough whisper. Surprised that he used this exact word, she looked up at him and into those intense eyes that were gleaming in the dim moonlight enveloping them. His features softened a bit, and he
added, “Yes, I've seen it, too. Felt it. It felt as if it was how…”

“…how it should be,” she continued, and he nodded mutely.

Astrid was acutely aware of how close he stood to her now, not even a foot between their bodies. Not reaching out to touch him almost hurt physically, like a burning in her chest, her muscles quivering from holding back. The confused longing she’d felt all afternoon was getting stronger with every passing second, and resisting was becoming harder and harder. Her breathing grew heavier from the effort of fighting against the urge to connect, and she could see that he wasn’t any better off. And yet, she didn’t dare to cross that distance. Somehow she felt that, once she did so, there would be no turning back.

“What is happening to us?” she whimpered weakly, her hands clenched in her skirts to keep them from simply reaching for him, from grabbing his leather tunic and kissing him like they had this afternoon.

“I don’t know,” came his throaty reply. He seemed to tremble with the effort to keep the small distance between them, even as he leaned in slightly. “It’s… completely insane and—”

A shaky laughter escaped her. “Yes, insane is the word.” She pause, unsure whether she should say this. But he’d been honest enough to tell her his thoughts, she owed him the same courtesy. And opening up to him wasn’t hard anyway. It was effortless. “You know what’s insane, too? If… If I were that girl, that farmer’s daughter… I would have begged my father to agree to your request.”

Hiccup inhaled sharply at her words, the closest she could ever come to a proposal of her own. He leaned in, enough so that she could feel his breath on her skin as he spoke again. “Do you know what else is insane?” he aspirated, a torn smile briefly tugging at his lips. “It’s insane how much I want to kiss you right now.”

Astrid didn’t think twice. Without another moment of hesitation, she breached the remaining distance between them, and kissed him. At first, it was nothing more than a slight brushing of her lips over his. She heard his surprised grunt at her action, felt his breath on her skin. But then he leaned in to kiss her back, his mouth firmly pressed to hers. She felt his arms wandering around her in a loose embrace, just as her hands shakily fluttered up to curl around his rough jaw and the back of his neck.

It felt a little awkward to her, as she didn’t really know what she was doing, but once she stopped thinking about it, the kiss became more comfortable. Reflexively, she pulled herself closer against his chest, eager to feel his warmth, to feel him. She heard him gasp and felt his arms tightening at her back as he became more assertive.

The kiss had started slowly, soft and careful. But soon he was coaxing his way into her mouth with small licks, and she opened up for him without resistance, seeking more contact, deeper, more. As his tongue slid into her mouth, she couldn’t resist the low moan rumbling in the back of her throat, the vibrations running through her entire body. She tried to respond in kind, to mimic his actions, but was too lost in the sensation to process anything.

All she could hear were their low hums and gasps filling the air around them as they tried to breathe in-between kisses and nips. All she saw and smelled and tasted was him. All she felt was him, his soft hair beneath her fingers, his lips and tongue moving with hers, and his warmth enveloping her completely as he nearly crushed her to his chest.

Similar to before, she felt an emotional tidal wave rising inside her, flushing through her and
flowing over. She felt as if it was flowing out of her, and into him where an equally strong thunderstorm of emotions was running wild. Their hold on each other became tighter, desperate even, as those parts of them met, both sensations overpowering on their own already, but utterly inescapable when combined. This time, there was no Tuff to interrupt them, but even if someone had happened onto them now, she wouldn’t have been able to let go of him.

All she was able to do was cling to him with all she had, and he did the same. As they did so, it was as if their entire beings, their very souls seemed to reach out for one another, whirling around in mad circles that made her head spin, mixing, mingling, becoming one. Their souls became one in this moment; she could feel it, knew it in the core of her being. They connected with what felt like a lightning strike that rendered her blind and deaf and completely ignorant to anything but him, drawing a low whimper out of her as a part of him, of his soul, seemed to click into place inside her own.

When the storm calmed down again, so did their kiss. Slowly, her awareness floated back down into her own body, but she was reluctant to part, reluctant to break their connection, even though she felt that it was irrevocable.

She felt it with every fibre of her being, knew it with every part of her self. The confusion and weird longing that had pulled her toward him was gone. Instead, there was a serene calmness spreading through her now as their lips slid sensually together, a comfortable feeling of being complete.

When their lips finally parted, she retreated slightly to look up at him. She might have been shy to do so before, but now, there was no place for such feelings between them anymore. It was so bewilder ing. She knew what had happened, had heard legends and fairy tales about soulmates all her life. But experiencing it was something else altogether.

Slowly, she reached up to brush a few strands of his unruly hair out of his eyes. “Who are you?” she whispered, looking up into this stranger’s eyes who now held part of her soul in his heart.

His brows furrowed slightly, and his lips moved without a sound as he absentmindedly caressed her cheek. Then he reached for her hand, and tentatively placed it onto his chest, over his heart. “You… you know who I am,” he finally replied.

And it was true. When she listened into her heart, then she knew him, knew his being, his very core, had known it for all her life in some buried fashion. But that was not what she meant. As familiar as she was with his soul, she had no idea who the man around it was. So she shook her head, and said, “I thought you were just a stable lad. That I would never see you again, and that it would be better that way. But you aren’t. You’re a nobleman at the very least, or you couldn’t have become a squire. You’re even Eret’s cousin! If… if you belong to House Jag’r, then… I’m sure my father and the Duke would agree. I mean—”

Hiccup interrupted her by placing two fingers over her lips, a sad and torn expression on his face. “I don’t belong to House Jag’r,” he said with an empty voice. “I’m of noble blood, yes, but… but I hold nothing but an empty title. Your father would never agree… couldn’t agree without offending a great many powerful people.” Slowly, he shook his head. “Believe me, I’ve thought about it already. You’re too… valuable… to be allowed to… to marry me.”

Those last words gave Astrid a painful sting, and she grimaced. She’d heard that all her life, that she was a valuable resource, that, once she turned twenty, her marriage would serve to stabilize the kingdom and bring peace and joy to their people. She’d never liked that sentiment, but it was inevitable anyway, so it hadn’t really bothered her either. Not until today.
Instead of an answer, she leaned against his chest again, seeking his warmth. No, she hadn’t liked the idea of engaging in a political marriage. But right now, here in Hiccup’s arms – in her soulmate’s arms – the thought became downright unbearable. What was the point of the Gods weaving their fate together in this manner, when nothing could ever come of it? She pulled herself closer against him, seeking his comfort and finding it in his arms tightening around her.

“What can we do?” she asked, her voice nothing but a weak whisper. Once again, the vision of him embracing her in front of their home rose to her mind’s eye, and the idea of that vision never coming to fruition... of it staying nothing but a dream, made desperation rise in her heart. No, she couldn’t accept that. She would do whatever–

Hiccup exhaled shakily, his breath on her neck sending pleasant shivers down her spine. “There might be a way,” he breathed. He pulled back a little to look at her, his expression serious. “That is...” He hesitated, and many emotions scurried over his face, joy and fear, hope and uncertainty. “In case you want me to. I mean–”

Astrid didn’t let him finish whatever doubts he wanted to express, and stretched to press her lips to his once more. There were no doubts in her heart, and she wanted him to know that. Mad and insane as it was, she wanted him, this life with him, everything.

This time, she didn’t feel as insecure anymore. She still didn’t know what to do, but Hiccup didn’t seem to mind, so she didn’t either as he gave a surprised grunt, and then return the kiss.

It felt different from the one before. Where the other kiss had started cautious and slow, this one was more playful and teasing. She could feel Hiccup’s broad grin against her mouth as he nipped at her lips, making her gasp and giggle. His hands roamed up her back, over her neck to cup her cheeks and back down again, never resting.

And where the other kiss before had turned into desperate clutching and connecting, this one soon became deeper and more passionate. His tongue caressed the inside of her mouth, which made her whimper and tremble, causing an unfamiliar tugging sensation in her lower belly. Reflexively, she pulled herself closer toward him, melting against his chest.

Astrid couldn’t say for how long they kissed like this, too lost in the wonderful moment to care.

Until the rattling sound of someone working on the opening mechanism at the door startled them out of their bliss.

Chapter End Notes

As always, feedback and comments are very welcome and appreciated. :)
07: Things My Heart Used To Know, Things It Yearns To Remember

Chapter Notes

Yeah, the previous chapter was pretty corny, wasn't it? I'm not sorry :) But it certainly was a first highlight when it comes to the story arch, in my opinion at least. Here now a chapter that was meant as a short bridge toward the next events. But hey, the characters had other plans... And when it became twice as long as our aimed average, we decided to split it. That means: The planned hiatus gets pushed back by a week, meaning the last update will be on 8th June, and we start again on 13th July. For now, at least...

This chapter's title now is the first coming from another song. It's from Once Upon A Decembre from the film Anastasia, another great film not made by Disney. And it also has great music, and you will read quotes from its lyrics frequently here. The film and also the songs have some low-key parallels to this story, that intrigued me quite a bit. Might also be noticeable by the cover picture I made for this story that originates from a screenshot of that film. ;)

Astrid reacted much faster than Hiccup. It took him a moment to comprehend what even happened.

In one moment, they’d been kissing, and it had been more wonderful than he’d ever dared to dream. Her warmth had radiated through him as if she was his own personal sun, and the mayweed scent of her hair wafting into his nose had only served to captivate him even more. To him, this scent would forever be linked to her and to this moment, to when this confused longing suddenly had made sense. Everything had been perfect.

And then there had been this rattling noise coming from the door. It had ended their kiss with sudden harshness, and in the next moment, he’d found himself stumbling as he got pulled behind a cupboard.

“Hide,” she urged him as she pushed him against the wall. Then she quickly made a few steps backwards and away from him, just as he heard the door opening.

Still too dazed by their kisses and the overpowering sensation of connecting with her, Hiccup barely could do anything. He just stood still, his back pressed against the wood-panelled wall, and fought to keep his breathing as quiet as possible as he heard someone entered the darkened room. The harsh clicking of heavy riding boots on the tiled floor was almost threatening, even though the rhythm was weirdly familiar.

“Swanja? Are you in here? We were – Ah, there you are! You were suddenly gone. Daniel and I were worried,” Eret’s voice came through the room, and Hiccup heard the tone of concern with ease.

“Yeah, sorry,” Astrid replied lightly, and made a few steps towards Eret... further away from Hiccup’s hiding spot. “I just needed a moment to... to get my head straight. You know how being around so many people wears me out. I just needed a break.”

Hiccup knew the cheerful tone of hers wasn’t false. He felt it, too. A sense of incredible lightness
and ease was spreading through him; it seemed to erase all the confusion and troublesome emotions from earlier. He didn’t need to be close to her, to touch, or even to see her right now. They were one, two halves of a single piece, and nothing could ever change that again.

“Yeah, I know,” Eret replied, sounding relieved. “But you could have told Daniel or me where you were going at least. Not sure if you’ve noticed, but your brother tends to be a little overcautious sometimes.”

“I know,” she sighed. “But I’m not a child anymore. I just wish he would finally see that.”

“Oh, he does see it. That’s why he is so overprotective,” he stated dryly. “But let’s head back now, before anyone starts rumours about us hiding in a darkened room. Or, well... even more rumours...”

“Oh, no, we wouldn’t want that,” she agreed, chuckling lightly. Hiccup could hear how she walked to the door, the rustling of her skirts a clear indication as to where she was. Slowly, he let out the breath he’d been holding. Thank Odin, Eret hadn’t noticed him.

“Hey, what about your food? Don’t you want to eat it anymore?”

“Food?” she asked, momentarily bewildered. “Ah, yes... Thanks, I almost forgot.”

The scraping of porcelain over wood was audible as Eret picked up the plate Hiccup had placed there earlier. “Are you sure you’re okay? You’ve been distracted all day, don’t even try to deny that. I know you’ve tried to hide it, but – wait, are those köttbular? Since when do you eat köttbular? I thought you hated those.”

“Oh, that... Well... I-I acquired a taste for them lately.” Hiccup heard how she went back to where Eret stood next to the table. “See? They’re great,” she said, her mouth clearly full of food.

“I’m honestly impressed,” Eret admitted. “But forgive me if I still refuse to eat them. I vividly remember how my aunt made them once, and they were awful enough for an entire lifetime.” A shudder ran through Eret’s voice, and Hiccup grimaced as well. He, too, clearly remembered the exact meal his cousin was talking about. Oh, but what would he give if he could eat that admittedly horrible dish only once more...

The sounds of footsteps and rustling cloth was audible, growing quieter as both Eret and Astrid went for the door and left. Hiccup exhaled shakily as the tension left his body, and he slumped against the cupboard next to him. He wasn’t sure whether he’d really needed to hide from his cousin. He doubted that Eret would mind this... whatever it was that was between Astrid and him now. But she hadn’t told him, had even gone so far as to eat something she hated to keep his presence in the room a secret.

With a heavy sigh, Hiccup let his head fall back against the wall and gazed unseeingly out of the window and into the night. What was it that was between them now? It was as if he could still feel her presence in his heart, as if part of her was still here with him. And it made him feel light and happy, complete like he’d never felt before in his life. He’d been right, she was the one for him, his soulmate even.

And yet, it felt acutely bizarre. Even though a deep part of him seemed to intimately know and recognise her, he had to admit that he didn’t know her.

Who are you?

Her question earlier had confused him. Hadn’t she felt it, too? How their souls had melted together to be complete and whole and perfect? But, of course, she’d felt it. And by now, he understood her
That small conversation between her and Eret just now had shown that, in many ways, Hiccup and Astrid were still strangers to each other. The thought gave him an odd sting, one he recognised as a form of jealousy. He knew perfectly well that Eret wasn’t interested in her like that, but that wasn’t the point.

The point was that Eret knew her so well. He had a fond nickname for her, one she didn’t seem to mind. He was close enough to her that him searching for her didn’t raise any suspicions of ill intent. And he’d easily found her here because he knew her, had probably found her in here on similar occasions before already. He even knew which foods she liked and disliked, for Frigga’s sake.

Hiccup closed his eyes and swallowed. He wasn’t jealous of Eret, not really. He just wished he would know her just as well. He wished he could be that close to her and her brother, too, so that going to look for her or spending time with her alone wouldn’t be suspicious. He wished the King and Prince trusted him that much, too.

But then, that trust would be misplaced. Hiccup wasn’t sure whether the Prince knew of Eret’s secret relationship, but he at least rightfully trusted Eret to not make an inappropriate move on his sister. Unlike himself.

Hiccup grimaced as a bundle of conflicting thoughts whirled around in his head. He wanted to have this trust, but he didn’t deserve it. Not after what just happened. Being alone in a room with any girl who wasn’t an Ástir was against all rules of conduct. Touching her, kissing her, and… and wanting her was forbidden. If anyone ever learned of this, they would both be shamed or shunned, their reputations tainted forever, even if in different ways.

Gods, if anyone ever learned of what had just happened…

The Prince would have him hanged.

He’d already warned Hiccup, and had made it clear that he wouldn’t be lenient again. Whatever the reason for the excessive restrictions for the Princess, Hiccup would suffer the consequences if anyone found out what had just happened.

And yet…

It had felt so right. A content smile spread across his face as he called forth the memory of kissing her and of how their souls had melted together. No, that couldn’t have been wrong. Soulmate-bonds were forged by the Gods, or so the legends said. Sure, they were only that, legends, nothing anyone considered to be real. But what he’d felt as she’d been in his arms, that had been real. And what he still felt now was real, too.

Hiccup reached up and pressed one hand to his chest as if he could reach inside him to where he could feel her. It wasn’t this confusing longing anymore, not the urge to get closer to her. It was something else, soothing and calming, the assurance that they were one. She was a part of him now, ultimately and irrevocably.

Laughing shakily, he shook his head in wonder. No, it hadn’t felt wrong to kiss her, or to think and dream of more. The rules of decorum said that men were only ever allowed to touch – or to have the sorts of thoughts and wishes like he’d had earlier – the Ástir of Freya’s Order, and, one day, their wives. Anything outside those two situations was unacceptable.
And yet, it didn’t feel wrong.

Because, he realized, he already thought of and felt about her as his wife, in more than one way.

It had to be what the Gods wanted. Otherwise, why would they have brought them together like this? It was how it was supposed to be, so it couldn’t be wrong. He should be with her. But even more than that, he wanted to be with her. He wouldn’t deny that his body longed to be one with her, to complete this bond between their souls. But what he felt was so much more than that forbidden wish. He felt about her like… like a partner for life, just like his mother had been to his father. He could see how they would navigate whatever problem presented itself to them. It would be effortless. Perfect.

He wanted it all, Frigga’s vow and a life with her at his side. And he would fight for it. No matter what it would take, he would do whatever was needed to fulfil the future he’d seen.

Even if, for now, that meant keeping everything a secret.

With a smile on his lips, Hiccup waited for several minutes in the dark room, before he followed Astrid and Eret back into the crowded hall.

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As Astrid followed Eret out of that small dining room, she had to fight the urge to lift her fingers to her mouth once again, to trace where Hiccup’s lips had touched her. It was as if she could still feel him, similar to how it had felt this afternoon, and yet also completely different. She didn’t feel confused or bewildered anymore, didn’t question what had happened, or why. Because it all made sense now. All this confused longing that had plagued her all day, the unexplainable urge to get closer to him, everything suddenly made sense.

He was the one, the one the Gods wanted her to be with. Her vision had shown the future, no matter how little sense it made and how impossible it seemed. They would find a way. They had to.

“Ah, good, you found her,” Daniel greeted them as he spotted them. He was still sitting at the same table as before, but her seat, Eret’s and the formerly empty spots around were now filled with several young men. From experience, Astrid knew that it never took long before her brother was surrounded by men like these, and that he never minded that. These men were interested in joining the royal army, and Daniel was all too eager to answer whatever questions they had to encourage them.

But as she approached, the men became quiet, eyes wide in awe. It always baffled her somewhat at how easily they would talk to their Prince, but always would lose their voices in the presence of their Princess. They threw uncertain glances at each other, some even shrinking back a little, undoubtedly the result of Daniel’s stupid law.

But, also as usual, her brother seemed not to notice the sudden tension. With a smile, he turned back to the men, and said, “If you’re interested in joining our ranks against the Malarian cowards then I suggest to visit Thor’s Temple in the coming days. The Pristrs there can answer all of your questions just as well as I can.”

The men understood it as a dismissal – which it was – and the seats around them were quickly empty again. Knowing that most of them, if not all, would be joining the seemingly endless fight against the neighbouring princedoms usually gave Astrid an uneasy feeling. But today, nothing was able to darken her mood. Not with the presence of the little fragment of Hiccup’s soul within her.
As she went to retake her former seat, Daniel looked up at her, concern clear in his eyes. But it only took him one glance at her for that concern to change into surprise.

“You look… better,” he noticed, one eyebrow raised at her probably stupid grin.

Astrid put in some effort to school her expression, even if it felt quite different from how she’d needed to do so before. Somehow, keeping a straight face had become a lot more difficult, so she decided to just play along. “Well, I feel better, too,” she said with a twinkle in her eyes, and snatched a glass of wine off the platter of a passing servant. She took a sip to calm her nerves a bit, and then added, “I told you, I’m fine. I just needed a little break from all these people here and the noise.”

It helped that it was the truth. She’d needed the solitude of that empty room, had needed those calm minutes alone with him. She’d needed for the confusion to resolve and for this strange connection to build. And now that she felt a part of him, so deep in her chest, a part of his soul forever merged with hers, she felt free and complete like she’d never felt before.

“Swanja, your mood swings really are dangerous,” Eret shook his head in amusement. It was an expression he often used towards her on varying occasions.

“Only if you don’t see them coming,” she gave her usual reply, grinned, and nudged his arm with her elbow. He made a show of rubbing the spot as if it had hurt, but she wasn’t buying that. “But seriously, those few minutes of peace and quiet were wonderful,” she added with a dreamy smile.

“A few minutes?” Daniel asked, disbelievingly.

Eret chuckled quietly. “You’ve been gone for over half an hour,” he explained, and let himself fall down into his former seat. He reached for a half-empty mug of beer, took a big swallow, and then grinned up at her. “Why do you think I went looking for you?”

“Half an hour?” she inquired, puzzled, and sat down as well. “That’s… weird. It didn’t seem that long.”

“Time flies when you’re having fun.” Daniel gave her an understanding half-smile. “Not that I mind encouraging men to join our army, but it can become tiring. And Odin knows I can understand how being away from all this chattering can be fun.” With a sigh he lifted a hand to reach for a mug standing in front of him only to let it drop again when he remembered that it was empty already.

“I think we all agree on that,” Eret murmured, and stared into his beer before taking another gulp and placing the now-equally-empty mug back on the table. “Gods, I can’t wait for this feast to be over and to finally get some rest.”

Astrid, sitting between them and sipping at her wine, couldn’t agree more. She too wanted nothing more than for this party to be over, to retreat into her chambers, to let the silly grin spread over her face and the joy in her heart flow over. She couldn’t wait to lie in her bed and relive the last half-hour over and over without risking to reveal anything to curious eyes watching her. Of course, lying in his arms and repeating it all would be even better, but not really feasible. And somehow it wasn’t that… pressing, either. Sure, she would have loved to return into his arms, his warm embrace, and to taste his lips some more. And yet, she was content with enjoying the warm glow that simply thinking of him kindled in her heart.

For now, at least.
Secretly smiling into her wine, the sound of two full mugs being placed onto the table on either side of her startled her out of her thoughts. She looked up – and gasped quietly when her gaze was met by a pair of warm and impossibly green eyes that seemed to drill into hers for a second.

"Ah, our saviour," Eret said cheerfully. He reached for the beer Hiccup had brought and pulled it closer. "What took you so long?"

"I... I’m sorry," Hiccup said, blushing slightly. "The kitchens got a bit busier, refilling the smorgasbord and everyone’s drinks, so I had to wait."

"Huh, that sounds logical. Although, that serving girl who insisted on getting us drinks earlier didn’t seem to have any troubles.” He indicated toward the two empty mugs already standing on the table.

Astrid shifted nervously in her seat, but didn’t dare to interject. What could she say anyway? She knew what had taken Hiccup so long, but she couldn’t very well say so.

But Hiccup seemed to have already caught himself again. “Well, it also might be that they were reluctant to give me more drinks out of fear they might have to mop them up again,” he said in a cheerful voice that seemed to override any suspicions Eret or Daniel might have had.

“Alright, then let’s make sure there won’t be any more accidents,” Daniel stated with an unreadable expression, and accepted the mug Hiccup handed him.

“Of course, Highness,” Hiccup replied, bowing slightly, and then retreated to stand a few steps away from them.

Daniel threw him a thoughtful look as if he was pondering some options in his mind, but then nodded as if to himself, and beckoned Hiccup over again. “I can’t watch you just stand there anymore,” he said, and flagged down one of the servants. “Come here please!” He turned to Hiccup. “Come and sit. And have a drink. This is a night to celebrate, after all, and Eret is right. You’re no ordinary servant who just is to stand beside his master. And you should celebrate your new position, too.”

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Hesitantly, Hiccup sat down opposite of Eret, and threw an insecure look over at the royal siblings. The Prince was watching him with an unreadable expression on his face, and Hiccup wasn’t sure what to make of that. Astrid, however, visibly fought to not show any reaction as their eyes met for a short moment. It was strange. As if he could see right through her carefully arranged front, saw the turmoil beneath, the nervousness and the joy.

“You’re alright with this?” he heard the Prince ask in a low voice. It was obviously meant for Astrid as he nudged her lightly. But Hiccup had still heard it, acutely aware of anything that happened around her.

The small gesture seemed to have startled her as she flinched slightly and blinked as if waking up out of a stupor. “Sure,” she replied after a short pause, but with the same pleasant smile she’d worn for most of the night. “Why wouldn’t I be?”

Daniel seemed as if he’d wanted to reply to that, but got interrupted by a young servant girl. “Yes, Highness? What can I do for you?”

“Ah, yes. Could you bring this man something to drink? I wouldn’t want to send him over to the kitchens a third time.”
The girl nodded, curtseyed, and then suddenly all eyes were on him. Hiccup gulped at the sudden attention. “Ahm… A glass of wine? Please?”

“Of course, milord.” She curtseyed again, and left only to return a couple of moments later with his wine.

“See? I told you so, didn’t I?” Eret said, chuckling cheerfully. “There’s no need to be overly formal around here.”

“You did… Sir,” he replied cautiously, not really sure how to react. He’d expected to simply stand there for the rest of the night, and to covertly watch her as to not be too obvious. But this? This was a new situation, and he didn’t know what to expect now. Was he allowed to talk to Astrid? Was he supposed to do so?

“All right,” Daniel lifted his glass, an amused smirk on his face now. “To Eret, and the exciting new life that lies ahead of him.”

They all followed his example, but Hiccup couldn’t help his eyes flickering to Astrid for a scant second. An exciting new life… Yes, that was what was lying ahead of them.

Hopefully.

“So, Hiccup, tell me about yourself,” Daniel said after they’d placed their glasses back on the table. “How did you end up in House Jag’r’s services? And when? I don’t remember Eret ever mentioning you in one of his letters.”

“Daniel…” Eret interjected, but Daniel raised a hand to ward off his protest.

“I don’t need more details than necessary. I just want to get to know him. We’ll be spending a great deal of time together come summer, after all. And I prefer to know the men who fight at my side.”

Hiccup threw Eret a worried look, but his cousin just shrugged and made an indistinctive waving gesture with his hand. The sign for him to go ahead. Nervously, he took another sip of his wine to buy time. There were parts of his past he’d rather forget, parts he didn’t want to talk about, especially not here, at a public party, where one never knew who was listening in.

To add to his nervousness, he was aware of Astrid watching him, undeniable curiosity in her eyes. That was something he could understand all too well. If she was only half as eager to get to know him as he was for her… He wanted to talk to her. He wanted her to know him, every aspect of who he was. He even could almost picture it; how they would lie side by side, cuddled close to a fire, as he told her the story of his life. Maybe her knowing about it would even lessen the pain.

But now was not the time for all that, and those parts weren’t important right now anyway. His past didn’t matter anymore. All that mattered was his future. Again, his eyes flickered to her, and a comfortable warmth spread through him. All that mattered was the exciting new life that lay ahead of them, and how he could make it possible.

Besides, those painful parts were not what the Prince was interested in anyway. Surely, he already knew...

Hiccup took a deep breath, and let his eyes rest innocently on the tabletop between them. Or, more precisely, on Astrid’s hands around her glass. He didn’t dare to look up at her again, but her mere presence let a tingling warmth spread through him. A warmth that made talking easier. “A few months back,” he began in a firmer voice than he’d expected, “I happened to meet Eret here by chance in a tavern along the royal highway. I’d… been on the road for a while then and looked
accordingly. In addition, Eret apparently had thought me dead, so it took a while until he recognised me and believed what he saw.”

“Hel yes, that was a night,” Eret threw in, laughing. “I thought I was surely seeing an unquiet spirit, there to haunt me for the rest of my life.”

“It’s quite possible that the spirit you had in your glass wasn’t completely unblamable, that’s true,” Hiccup replied dryly, then dug his head a bit, and added, “Sir.”

Eret threw him a dark look, but both Astrid and Daniel chuckled, so Eret decided to ignore his formal attitude for now. “Anyway, it took Dagur a little while to convince me he was actually real.”

“Ah, your annual meeting to inspect the territory along the border?” Astrid threw in.

After a short moment of hesitation, Eret nodded. “Aye. Exactly that. Although, when we met Hiccup, I brought him to my father immediately.”

Hiccup saw the slight confusion on Astrid’s face. But there was no way of explaining why the Grand Duke had been interested in him, not here and not now. He would do so. In time, he would tell her everything. But that time was not tonight.

“I see. And then you decided to stay with House Jag’r?” the Prince asked, thoughtfully, which made Eret grin and Hiccup snort.

“We didn’t leave him much of a choice. Father insisted on keeping him there, at least until he’d gained a bit of weight again. You said earlier he needs filling out, but he actually already looks a lot better than when I found him. Besides, he was great help with the horses – the Jag’r blood showing, obviously.”

“Well, I guess that lessens the shame a little,” Daniel commented, smiling past his mug as he took a swallow. “Imagine how embarrassing it would have been if it had been a complete stranger who was that good with those beasts.”

“Gods, no. I don’t even want to think about that.” Still grinning, Eret threw his hand up in mock exasperation – even though Hiccup suspected that there was at least some truth in what he’d said.

Daniel shook his head at his friend’s antics, but then became serious again. He turned his attention back to Hiccup, and repeated his question from before. “But still, you choose to stay?”

Hiccup hesitated, but then nodded. “Yes… I’d been on the road for two years at that point,” he said quietly, and then added in a lighter tone, “It was nice to have a bed, a roof, and regular meals again. Plus I like working with animals. I did so before, too, so… Anyway, it was better than wandering around without a goal, so I stayed.”

“And became a squire,” Daniel mused. Then he added, lower and almost casually, “Did you learn anything?”

At first, Hiccup wasn't sure what the Prince meant. What he'd learned? He'd learned that even down here in the south, winter nights could become damn cold, and that even the dirtiest inn was better than sleeping under a snowy tree. And that catching rabbits could be far more difficult than he'd thought. But then he realized that was probably not what the Prince was interested in.

“No, Highness, I haven't found anything. No hints or clues, not even rumours,” he said quietly, looking down at his hands, which had turned white from how tightly they gripped the wine glass.
Letting out a breath he hadn't know he'd been holding, he forced himself to relax, and even lifted the glass to take another sip of the heavy sweet wine. He kept the liquid in his mouth, and concentrated on the pleasant taste until he'd calmed down again.

Two years wasted with the fruitless hunt for information. His eyes glided over Astrid's confused face as he forced them not to linger where they shouldn't – at least not while her brother was watching him. Two years gone, years in which he could have done so many more sensible things. Refining his fighting skills, for example. That would have been useful. Or, if he'd sought out his remaining family with House Jag'r directly, he could have met her two years earlier, and would already know her so much better.

“I see,” the Prince murmured with a concerned voice that tore Hiccup out of his thoughts. But when he looked up, the Prince was smiling again. “Anyway, Eret is right. There's no need for exaggerated formality. We'll be shovelling mud together, so you can leave the Highness for when formality calls for it.”

Hiccup felt his lips twitch, but didn't let the small smile show on his face. “As you wish… Milord.”

For several minutes, the Prince’s friendly interrogation went on. Talking to him and Eret while Astrid was quietly sitting between them was… weird, to say the least. He could sense her growing frustration at holding back with her own questions. But asking those probably far more personal questions surely would have raised suspicions, and there was nothing he could do. On the contrary, he would have loved to ask her all kinds of things himself, but couldn't do so.

He wondered, for example, what kind of food she preferred, as it seemed like most of the things he'd absentmindedly placed on her plate weren't to her liking. Or had she eaten before and simply wasn't hungry? She certainly didn't seem to mind for Eret and her brother to serve themselves. Idly, he wondered whether he could get away with doing so, too. Whether he could take the other half of that bit of cheese she’d eaten earlier, for example, or the remaining grapes. But despite his ever-growing hunger, he quickly decided against that. The Prince might have invited him into this small circle, but that didn’t mean that he already had the same status as Eret, who had known them for all his life.

“You know, Hiccup,” Eret said after his stomach had audibly demanded to get fed again, “you are allowed to get a refill, even if you’ve eaten already. There's no need to go hungry tonight. And if I may make a suggestion, try Heather’s pastries. They are absolutely delicious. In fact, if you get some, you might as well bring some for me, too.”

Hiccup threw a questioning look at his cousin, not sure what exactly Heather’s pastries were supposed to be, or where to find them amidst the endless display of food. But he got helped out by an unexpected yet exceedingly pleasant surprise.

“Eret, he probably has no idea what you’re talking about,” chided Astrid him in a playful voice. “But I was just thinking of going and getting a few for myself. Sitting still here all night is not for me anyway. Would you like to accompany me, Hiccup? If you want I can explain the different fillings to you.” She stood up, and threw him a questioning and yet completely innocent look across the table.

“C-certainly,” he mumbled, stood up, and bowed slightly in her direction. “Thank you for the offer, Milady.” She gave him the same pleasant smile she’d worn all night, and yet he could feel the honest warmth behind it. A part of him registered the worried glance Daniel threw at his sister, and also how Eret rolled his eyes at the Prince. But those were only unimportant sidebits, and he practically immediately forgot about it.
His heartbeat quickened as he went to where she waited for him to round the long table. She didn’t say anything, just turned and nodded him to follow her.

“So, you haven’t eaten anything yet tonight?” she asked once they reached the long food-laden table. It was a simple question, and yet it held so much more meaning. There was the silent acknowledgement of her knowing that he hadn’t eaten in the rather too innocent tone of her voice, and also the subtle reminder to keep the conversation casual.

“No, I haven’t, Milady,” he answered simply, staying half a step behind her as she walked down the long table. “I was… otherwise engaged, and didn’t get the chance so far.”

A small smile played around her lips, so utterly kissable that his thoughts drifted back to the minutes they’d shared in that darkened room, to when those lips had so effortlessly moved with his. He remembered how sweet her lips had tasted, how hot they’d been against his, and the small noises that had escaped them, when–

“I see,” she replied, and then suddenly stopped and turned toward the table. “So, what do you like better? Sweet or savoury?”

“Excuse me?” Hiccup blinked, fighting to keep his thoughts from wandering.

She turned, and threw him a quick glance that made clear she knew where his thought just had been. “Heather’s pastries,” she said, and indicated toward several plates with small morsels on them. “Would you rather have some with a sweet or a savoury filling?”

“Uhm…” he made stupidly, and tried to concentrate on the apparently many different types of food. “I’m not sure. Both? What’s in all of these? There must be at least twenty different kinds. And why Heather’s, anyway? Is it a special recipe?” he blurted out, momentarily forgetting that he was supposed to keep up at least some sort of formal behaviour. Remembering that was difficult when it was only her, even amidst a crowd of people who probably had many close eyes on them.

Astrid chuckled quietly, and the sweet sound momentarily distracted him again. Gods, he could listen to her laughter all day. “Heather is a friend of ours. She works in the kitchens, and she’s also… ah, never mind. Anyway, these are her speciality. There are some filled with apples, pears, plums, honey, berries, or nuts,” she indicated toward a few of the plates, and then went on with some others, “and others with varying kinds of meat, cheese, and vegetables. Eret and Daniel are going to want some of these.” She reached for an empty plate and began placing several pastries from the pile that she’d indicated as having meat fillings on it, along with some with berries and nuts.

On a whim, he took the plate out of her hand, careful not to touch her even though there was little he wanted to do more. She rolled her eyes a little, but rewarded him with a small smile nonetheless. It was, after all, only sensible for him to carry whatever she wanted to take back to their table.

“And what do you want?”

You!, he wanted to answer, but caught himself in the last moment. It was the simple truth as he would have liked nothing more than to bend a little closer and bring his mouth to her neck, to let his tongue tickle her ear, and to carefully nibble on the skin over her throat. He wanted to bury his fingers in her gorgeous hair, wanted to slowly disentangle it strand by strand. He wanted to hold her in his arms again, to feel so wonderful and complete.

Biting his lips, he ducked his head to keep his thoughts and emotions from being too obvious. “Which ones can you recommend?” he asked instead, voice low and rougher than intended. “What
do you like best?”

He could hear how she inhaled sharply, but didn’t react any further. She only sounded a bit shaky as she replied, “Well, my favourites are these, with honey and chopped nuts. And these here with apples are great, too. Or, if you prefer something more savoury, then these here with white cheese and–”

She broke off when he reached past her to take a few of each type she’d indicated. He was careful to keep a certain minimum of space between them, but it was still enough to make her breath go a little faster.

“How!” she gasped, nearly inaudible, but the warning was clear in her voice.

He retreated again as if nothing had happened, and began to rearrange the pastries after reaching for a second plate. “Your suggestions sound good,” he said matter-of-factly, a small smile playing around his lips. It was true, those would have been the fillings he’d have wanted to try anyway. But knowing that she seemed to have a similar taste to his made him happy for no particular reason.

Once he was done, he held up two identical plates laden with small tasty morsels. “One for you to share with your brother, and one for me to share with Eret, if that’s all right with you, Milady,” he said formally. “Are there any other types you want to add?”

She gave him a strange look – something between a warm smile, appreciation, and fear – and added a few more, filled with either blackberries or minced veal, to both plates, and then walked past him back to their table. “You need to be more careful,” she murmured just loud enough for him to guess what she’d said and without looking at him. “No one can know…”

Hiccup wasn’t sure whether she’d wanted to say more, but they got interrupted when he needed to dodge a middle-aged nobleman who came in their direction. And then they were back at their table, where she couldn’t say any more.

But then, her words had been clear enough. Nobody could know about what had happened or about that bond between them. The bond that felt like a reassuring hearthfire, glowing in his heart, reminding him of her at every second, and making him feel warm and light.

He would need to learn how to control these feelings, to not let them show on his face or in his action at any given moment. And he would need to distract himself until he’d learned how to do that.
08: I Just Wanna Be The One Who Makes You Happy

Chapter Notes

On we go :) The credits for all the technical terms in this chapter go entirely to athingofvikings. Thanks soooo much for your help! :D

This chapter's title comes from the song "Happy" by "Secrets In Stereo". It's not exactly one from my playlist for this fic, but rather a much older song (for me). It goes back to the time when I wrote I Should Go last year. Since then, this particular phrase became one of my Hiccstrid-core values. I just want to be the one who makes you happy. And it comes up here as well, so I thought it would fit. :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Astrid sat back down in her chair between Eret and her brother, fighting to calm down her rapidly-beating heart.

Looking back over the last few moments, she was no longer certain if getting food with Hiccup had been a good idea. Enjoyable, yes. But good? What had she been thinking? She’d hoped to somehow be able to talk to him, at least a little. But that hadn’t happened. Instead, he’d done something headstrong and risky, and it was clear that it was up to her to get some order into her head, for both their sakes.

But... it was all so... surreal. Only a few hours ago, she hadn’t even known he existed. When they’d met at the stables, he had felt like a ray of sunshine, warm and bright, fated to become nothing but a fond memory after they’d parted. She had been prepared to forget him. Meeting him again, learning that he wasn’t just a common stable lad, and connecting with him, ... it had distinctly unhinged her world. She understood what had happened, but it still felt as if the world had shifted under her feet.

And now Daniel had invited him to sit with them. She knew her brother well enough to guess what he had meant by ‘wanting to get to know Hiccup.’ For as long as Eret and his new squire were here at the capital, Daniel would want to include Hiccup into their small group. He would become a part of her daily life. It felt like a dream, nothing that could actually happen for real.

She’d wanted to talk to Hiccup to at least have something to hold on to. Something real, something to anchor her, him, and all this weirdness to reality. There were so many things she wanted to talk about, so many things she wanted to ask him. Like why he’d been ‘on the road’ for two years. Or what it was that he was supposed to find. It was so weird that, apparently, even Daniel knew so much more about Hiccup than she did, when she felt him so warm in her heart. She wanted to know him, too... But, of course, she hadn’t been able to get any answers. Instead, she’d just put him at risk again.

His behaviour just now had been careless, if not downright reckless. Not that she hadn’t enjoyed the subtle flirting and the seemingly innocent questions... but, surely, people were watching them, especially after the accident earlier. And he’d come dangerously close as he’d reached for the pastries. If she’d just so much as taken half-a-step to the side at that moment...

No, behaviour like that was too risky. As much as she wanted him to hold her again, and to joke
and laugh with him, she had to explain that, whatever he did, he mustn’t, couldn’t, raise any suspicions. For now, Daniel seemed to have forgotten the incident earlier, but she feared that it would take only one wrong word reaching his ears to raise his hackles again. She needed to talk to Hiccup in private again, but feared it might take a while until she got the chance to do so. So, for now, she just hoped that Hiccup had heard and heed her warning.

As she thought that, Hiccup, slowed by the necessity of manoeuvring through the crowd with two laden plates, arrived at their table, and set the plates down.

“Excellent!” Eret cheered, and both he and Daniel leaned forward to help themselves to pastries. Unsurprisingly, they both reached for the same type, filled with beef and the dark salty gravy which was so popular in the South. They shared a grin, and Astrid rolled her eyes at them. Adults they might be, but when it came to food, they behaved like boys again. Some things never seemed to change.

Shaking her head at their antics, she reached for one of the pastries herself. She wasn’t really hungry, but it served to occupy her hands and face, so she wouldn’t risk revealing how she felt inside. The sheer happiness feeling Hiccup in her heart elicited and the confusion about nearly everything else. From the corner of her eye, she saw how Hiccup also selected a pastry from their plate, and she notice that he’d picked one with honey and nuts. The type she’d told him was her favourite. The type she was holding in her hand, too. She hadn’t even noticed what she’d picked. As she leaned back and took a bite of her morsal, she dared to look up and into his eyes. It was fairly safe to do so, now that Daniel and Eret were distracted with their food. He looked at her, too, smiling briefly, before he quickly averted his gaze again and bit into his pastry.

Astrid let her eyes fall shut as if simply enjoying the taste. But, in reality, she felt so much more. The thought of Hiccup having the same pleasant taste on his tongue right now made her heart beat faster. It gave her a weird tingling sensation in her belly, and let warm shivers run down her spine and through her entire body. How could such a simple and stupid thought have such an effect on her?

“I swear, if she wasn’t taken already, I could marry Heather just for her cooking skills,” Eret mumbled, his mouth still half-stuffed with food. His words tore her out of her inappropriate thoughts, and she hastily composed herself again as he added, “Honestly, employing her was one of the best ideas your father ever had."

Attempting to appear normal, Astrid threw him an amused look, glad over this change of topic that served as a great distraction. “I’m sure you would have married her,” she replied, smirking. “But then, Fishlegs would have put up a grand fight over her.”

“True,” Eret sighed theatrically. “And even though he’s no fighter, I’d better not underestimate him. Love conquers everything, and all that…” He trailed off, looking through than at the pastry in his hand.

Being able to guess where his thoughts had gone, Astrid leaned forward to take another morsel from her’s and Daniel’s plate. Not because she really was that hungry, but mainly to divert the attention away from her friend. But Daniel wasn’t paying much attention to Eret’s suddenly gloomy mood anyway.

“Something that’ll probably never make any sense to us, eh?” he chuckled, and leaned back in his chair. “What about you, Hiccup? Have you ever been in love like that? As if nothing else matters anymore, and all you can think about is her?” He laughed, and, for once, Astrid was incredibly grateful for her brother’s ignorance concerning everything only slightly romantic.
Until Hiccup replied.

“No, Milord,” he said in a solemn voice, and Astrid felt a painful sting in her heart. What…? “Up until this day, I have never felt anything like that.”

She couldn’t help her gaze flicker up at him for a scant second, but it was enough. In his eyes, she saw everything, the reassurance that, from this day on, he knew exactly how that felt, but also that he’d understood her warning from before. Quickly, she averted her eyes again, but couldn’t help the small smile playing around her lips. She hoped that he saw it.

But this was a dangerous topic, despite Daniel’s ignorance, Hiccup’s caution, and Eret’s state of distraction.

Casting about for a conversational diversion, she knew the one thing that was guaranteed to put her brother off of the scent. “So, what was it again you’re planning to do at that fort by Loki’s Teeth?” she asked.

Daniel tried to speak, only to find his mouth full, and Astrid’s lips twitched in amusement. Her brother forced a swallow, and then grinned before answering. “Which one? There are several.”

She tried hard to remember which one he’d been talking about before, and only could recall a single name out of all the different places. “What was that one that bothered you so much? Redpeak?”

Daniel scowled. “Argh. That pile of rocks. It’s not close to Loki’s Teeth, though, but further north along the mountain range, closer to Westhill. And I’d dearly love to find the original architect for the place and let him swap with Loki under the serpent’s fangs for a few weeks.”

Hiccup made an incredulous noise, while Eret snorted. A traitorous grin tugged at Astrid’s lips, and she quickly nibbled at the pastry in her hand to hide it. Asking Daniel after one of his architecture projects was always a sure way to avert his attention from any unwanted topic. She looked up as Eret covertly nudged her elbow, and caught the grateful smile he threw her. She smiled right back, even though she’d done it for her and Hiccup’s sake just as much as for Eret’s. Daniel was great company most of the time, but sometimes he just seemed blind to certain subtle signs.

Daniel, however, started gesticulating intently. “It looks imposing, this high tower right over the mountain pass, made out of the native red stone… and it’s so poorly laid out that our best use for it has been as bait. Last year, we let the Malarians take it and then trapped them inside. They surrendered when they ran out of supplies.”

Hiccup scowled. “Argh. That pile of rocks. It’s not close to Loki’s Teeth, though, but further north along the mountain range, closer to Westhill. And I’d dearly love to find the original architect for the place and let him swap with Loki under the serpent’s fangs for a few weeks.”

Eret snorted. “So that wasn’t a rumour?”

“Nope. And the infuriating thing to me is that it’s such a well-placed site for a fortification! But the architect seemed to think that archers are cowards… and so there are no arrow slits or crenelations overlooking the pass! And cutting them now would be too expensive, and the way that the halls are laid out inside, there aren’t good places to site them, either!” Daniel huffed and sat back in his chair, clearly irked. “It’s one of the best places to barrack infantry… except for the fact that the primary gatehouse is in full view of a high overlook that hasn’t been fortified, and if you don’t hold that overlook, then a dozen archers can essentially pin down the entire contingent inside!” He crossed his arms in a near-petulant manner. “I’m sure, back when it was first built, it made quite the impression on people crossing the pass to see the drawbridge drop and squad after squad of soldiers emerge to take the Count’s tax… but now if I could just give it to the Malarians and let them deal with it, I would!”
Astrid grinned at his outraged enthusiasm... and at her successful diversion. She’d heard enough about it all to understand the basics, but didn’t quite get her brother’s energy for the wheres and hows of architecture. To her, they were all just buildings. They were useful, and she was glad that there were people like her brother who knew how to build them, but that was as far as her interest went.

“If I may make a suggestion, Milord,” came suddenly Hiccup’s voice, hesitant but thoughtful. “If I’m understanding correctly, there’s no place to keep watch...?”

“Except for the roof, which is small and exposed,” Daniel said sullenly. “And let me tell you, I’ve occasionally considered tearing the whole place down and starting fresh. I have some designs drawn out in my chambers, but they’d be way too expensive...”

Hiccup nodded. “But you can’t cut arrow-slits—”

“Not without potentially compromising the structure, no.”

“Was the building made with putlog scaffolding?” Hiccup asked.

Eret gave Astrid a questioning look, clearly asking Do you know what they’re talking about? She shook her head.

“Aye, although the old Count had the putlog holes filled in and plastered over so that his exterior would be seamless,” Daniel said caustically.

“But that means that they’re not integral to the structure, right?”

Daniel nodded. “Aye. Where are you going with this?”

“Well, why not pull out the fillings in the putlog holes and use them to place either hoardings or, if you have time, permanent machicolations attached to the wall?”

Daniel stared at Hiccup. Astrid saw how he visibly shrank in on himself at the attention. He seemed a bit uncomfortable, but held Daniel’s gaze nonetheless.

“That… might actually work,” Daniel admitted, seemingly lost in thoughts for a moment. “I was so focused on permanent improvements that I didn’t think of a temporary hoarding...” Then his face cleared and his full attention was back on Hiccup. “Wait… You know about architecture?”

Hiccup shrugged, and shook his head. “Not in detail. I’ve read a book or two about it, but that’s all. It’s just... if the building itself isn’t good enough to do it by itself, why not make something to help it?”

“That’s...” Daniel trailed off, then suddenly jumped up to round the table and sit down in the empty chair next to Hiccup, opposite of Astrid. She could only stare in mild amusement as her brother immediately began to talk with Hiccup over how to implement his idea. He even went so far as to pull out the small notebook she knew he always carried around, and seemed to make some sketches and plans. She watched as Hiccup replied something, and, after hesitating a moment, took Daniel’s charcoal stick and added something else to the sketch. Astrid couldn't suppress a bemused and relieved smile from crossing her face. Daniel and Hiccup seemed to get along well – for now at least. As good as this news was, it only heightened the sense of surrealness.

“What. Have. I. Done?” Eret groaned quietly beside her, his eyes likewise on the two men on the other side of the table who were now engrossed in a deep conversation. He didn’t seem quite as pleased with the situation as Astrid was, but then, the horror and desperation on his face weren’t
“I don’t see your problem,” she replied, leaning back in her seat, and enjoyed the fact that she could gaze at Hiccup without it seeming suspicious for the moment. How he seemed honestly invested in the discussion, enthusiastically gesticulating and eyes gleaming. He even seemed to have overcome his initial restraint and apparently had momentarily forgotten who it was he was talking to. “You were always complaining about how you don’t want to spoil his fun with his hobby but simply don’t get why he’s so excited about it. Now, he has someone else to talk about the boring stuff.” The way her brother and Hiccup were looking, their conversation seemed to be anything but boring. Even Astrid found herself enjoying it vicariously, given how happy they both seemed. But for Eret’s sake she added, “And you can stick to topics you’re both interested in. Like fighting techniques, horses, and who might be the first to finally marry.”

Eret snorted. “Yeah, all of that,” he said dryly, and, shaking his head, reached for yet another pastry. He ate it all in a single hearty bite, chewed and swallowed, before he continued. “But you’re right. It’s a good thing they get along. I was a bit worried after that… that thing earlier when your brother took his protector stance. Glad to see he seems to have gotten over that.”

Astrid nodded in agreement, but didn’t say any more. Instead, she kept watching the two men whose conversation appeared to have turned away from architectural questions and toward… forgery? Hiccup seemed to be a really interesting man, and she was dying to get to know him better.

After several more minutes, and many more pastries, Eret groaned again. “I can’t stand it any longer. Just wait, before long they’ll discuss folklore and legends. Think of the horror, Swanja. Think of it. They might even end up debating on whether the huldufolk are the same as the álfar, or if they’re two separate groups.”

She laughed; Daniel had the same attitude as Eret did towards such ‘uncanny’ matters, and she wouldn’t be surprised if Hiccup was much the same way.

“No, I’m serious! Isn’t that why we have the Temple in the first place?” he went on in a highly exaggerated manner. “So that they can worry about gods-touched things and let the rest of us get on with practical business?” He shuddered in mock horror, then reached for his nearly empty mug.

Astrid swallowed at the mention of ‘gods-touched things’, and took another sip of her wine to hide it. The little piece of Hiccup’s soul in her heart seemed to throb demandingly, and once again she reached up with her left hand to lay it on her chest. It was a calming motion, an inconspicuous way to acknowledge and savour this divine connection. And she’d seen Hiccup doing the same occasionally, which added a pleasant tingle to his warmth in her chest.

“Well, enough of that,” Eret’s voice brought her back into the present. When she looked up at him, she saw him throwing a scrutinising gaze around the room before his eyes returned to her again. He had a mischievous grin on his face. “What do you think, Swanja. May I ask you for a dance?”

“A dance?” Astrid asked disbelievingly, eyebrows raised in surprise. “But… Nobody is dancing. This is not a ball, and I doubt we would find the space for that anyway.”

“Ah, don’t be boring,” he teased. “Since when do you care about rules? Besides, who would dare to tell us no anyway?” He winked, stood up, and held one hand out to help her up as well.

Not one to turn down any challenge, she took his hand with a smirk. The prospect of dancing – for the first time in months – made her a little nervous. But then she reminded herself that this was Eret. If there was one man of whom she would never need to be afraid of, then it was him. Or,
Her gaze flickered to Hiccup who was still talking to Daniel, eyes gleaming with excitement. For a short moment, the wish to dance with him instead became unbearably strong. Oh, what would she give to be in his arms right here and right now, in front of everyone. To be able to lose herself in his eyes as he whirled them around on the dance floor without criticism, accusation or judgement.

But, of course, that wasn’t possible.

If Hiccup was honest with himself, he needed to admit that he was enjoying talking with Prince Daniel. Greatly enjoying it, in fact, and it seemed to be mutual. But that seemed bizarre.

It wasn’t just because of the great honour it was to talk to the Crown Prince, to the future King of Volantis. It was actually simple to forget with whom he was talking, as Daniel was straightforward and pragmatic, with very few airs of rank about him - judging by his wry comments, they’d gotten washed off along with the stink from the manure pile. Very much like his grandfather in that regard, from everything that Hiccup had heard about the late King Ragnvald the Blessed.

It wasn’t because he was Astrid’s brother, and making a good impression on him was important for a multitude of reasons, each of them crucial for the hope that now drove him. That might have been his original intention, but by now he wasn’t exaggerating any longer.

And it wasn’t because he’d desperately needed something to distract himself from thoughts of her. Certainly, that was an important reason, with her being so close and yet so far out of reach, and the tension from that contradiction had threatened to become overwhelming. But by now, the desire to sit and stare at her no longer seemed to rise with each frenzied beat of his heart. Feeling her warm glow in his chest was enough.

No, the reason why he was enjoying this conversation was that it was truly enjoyable.

Hiccup couldn’t remember ever having had a wide-ranging discussion like this one. So far, they’d spoken at length on architecture, and from there moved on to engineering from a discussion about the particulars of lifting cranes, and then to forgery – Daniel had mentioned some Malarian correspondence that they’d intercepted last year and Hiccup had commented about a technique he’d heard for copying wax seals – and then they’d ranged far and wide from there. Metal casting, alchemy, mathematics – one whole page was covered in equations that Hiccup had demonstrated for Daniel on finding unknown variables – and other more practical matters related to war, such as logistics and equipment design.

The prince’s eyes had bulged when, in response to a comment about the difficulty of moving carts down a hillside, Hiccup had sketched out an idea for a braking system that he’d designed in his head one idle evening last year, when he’d been sleeping in a hayloft and trying not to shiver too much. It wasn’t much, just a lever-handle with a strong mechanical advantage and a wad of low-grade rawhide attached just past the pivot that would be applied to the cart’s wheel when the lever was pulled upwards. But Daniel had taken the sheet of parchment and carefully folded and pocketed it.

They’d since moved onto other topics, and Hiccup’s mind felt like a buzzing beehive. This was a first in his life, having a conversation like this. Maybe he’d had the odd dialogue with his tutors when he’d been younger, but those had been far and few in-between, as most things that weren’t fighting dragons had been considered unimportant anyway.
But now, here he was, talking animatedly with the heir to the throne, and it was almost enough for him to forget everything else. Almost.

Every now and then, his hand rubbed that spot on his chest where he could feel her soft glow inside him, or his eyes flickered to the other side of the table, to where Astrid was quietly talking to Eret. They seemed to be talking about *him and the Prince*, as they watched them with amused expressions. But while Eret looked mildly despondent, Astrid was watching him with a fond smile that made his heart leap in joy. All in all, he had to admit that this night was playing out much better than he’d ever dared to hope.

Hiccup was just about to draw a sketch of an improved mechanism to easily lift heavy weights, such as heavy masonry stones, when Daniel suddenly sat up straight.

“Where are you two going?” he asked curiously.

Hiccup looked up as well, to see Astrid and Eret standing behind their chairs. His cousin was holding the Princess’ hand, and the sight gave him an odd sting. If only he could be in Eret’s place…

“We’re going to dance,” Eret announced cheerfully. “I’d invite you to join us, but unless you want to ask two of the Whitvale girls for a dance, you’d be without partners. Because I’m not sharing.” With a wide grin, he pulled Astrid closer to his side. She played along, poking her tongue out at her brother, but threw Hiccup a short, apologetic look.

“You want to dance?” The Prince sounded incredulous. “But… this is not a ball. And where would you want to dance anyway? There’s no space, and—”

Eret burst out laughing, effectively interrupting his friend’s complaints. “Seriously, if I wouldn’t know that you are siblings, one could mistake you two for an old married couple,” he snickered. “But to answer your questions: I’m pretty sure we’ll find space to dance, even if we need to push aside a few puffed-up barons. And the music is danceable enough for me, you know I don’t pay it much attention anyway. Besides, is this my party, or is it not?”

And with these words, Eret pulled Astrid away from the table. She had an amused smile on her face, but Hiccup also noticed something else. He saw her flinch slightly when Eret placed a hand on her waist, saw a certain tenseness in her features, and, when she glanced over at him for the fraction of a second, she looked regretful and apologetic.

It was weird in a way. There had been this odd sting before, but now, he couldn’t feel any of that anymore. Clearly, this was something she’d done before, something she enjoyed. Sure, he’d do nearly everything to be in Eret’s place right now, but that didn’t mean that he would begrudge her having fun.

The next time her gaze flickered over to him, Hiccup gave her a small encouraging smile. He wanted her to be happy. Yes, he also wanted to be the one who *made* her happy, but since that wasn’t possible right now, this was a good second choice.

After she’d caught his smile, she visibly relaxed, smiled as well, and even laughed as Eret began to whirl them around in time with the music. The musicians up on their balcony, who’d calmly played their tunes all night, even seemed to pick up on the Princess’ and the man-of-honour’s mood, and played something quicker and more cheerful now.

Hiccup found himself grinning for real as he watched them. It surely helped to know that Eret had no romantic feelings for her, but even if it were otherwise… Hiccup felt as if it didn’t matter. With
the bond that had built in that secluded room earlier, with the warm tingling and the reassurance also came a strange sense of trust. A trust that, no matter what, he and Astrid belonged together. And simply seeing her so happy made him happy, too.

“They make quite a pair, don’t they?” Daniel’s deliberate voice suddenly cut into his thoughts. Hiccup only nodded in agreement, the dopey smile still on his face, but the Prince didn’t seem to pay him much attention. “Sometimes I wish Eret would finally make a move and ask Father for her hand. They would be good for each other.”

With a start, Hiccup realised what the Prince was talking about. “Even if they don’t love each other?” The words were out of his mouth before he could react. He shouldn’t have said this. He was in no position to speak about either Eret’s or Astrid’s state of heart. But the Prince didn’t seem to mind his bluntness.

“Love…” he grunted dismissively. “In our position, we rarely can count on love in a marriage. Besides, my Father loved both his wives, but that didn’t do him any good. No, love is highly overrated, in my opinion. Far more important is to have a partner, someone who supports you and who can make you laugh.” He nodded at the small makeshift-dance floor that had formed around the pair. Astrid and Eret were now standing still, clinging to one another and laughing so hard that they had to press their hands to their bellies. “Love is a fickle thing, in most cases nothing but a fleeting infatuation. Basing a lifelong bond on such an emotion… that seems stupid to me.”

Hiccup didn’t reply as he didn’t know what to say. He couldn’t really argue against the Prince’s reasoning. Hoping for true love when destined for a politically arranged marriage was bound to end in disappointment. That’s what he’d been taught, ever since he’d become old enough to understand. But he remembered the love his parents had shared, despite the fact that it had been a political marriage.

His gaze still rested on Astrid as she lifted her head to look in their direction – to look at him. She threw him a radiant smile across the room, her eyes gleaming brightly, and it made his heart vibrate with joy.

The rest of the night went uneventfully. The Prince and Eret kept including him into their easy conversations and playful teasing, even though neither he nor Astrid dared to interact directly. He feared that if he did so, he might give away more than intended, and no matter how skillfully he would articulate a personal question to her, it wouldn’t be enough anyway. And, judging by the occasional glances they shared, she seemed to think the same. They longed to talk to each other, but it was not the right time.

In addition, the Prince’s words kept echoing through his mind at any given moment. Hiccup couldn’t deny that his reasons against a marriage out of love were understandable, on a simple basis at least. But later that night, as he finally lay on his makeshift bed, the wind outside and the horses’ heavy breathing inside lulling him into sleep, he decided that he’d also been wrong. Those reasons didn’t apply to Astrid and him. What was between them wasn’t just some fleeting infatuation, he was sure of that. He could literally feel the bond between them even over the distance now, felt it thrumming like a second heart, warm and soothing and consistent. Nothing would ever change or dull this bond the Gods had forged between them. Not time, nor rules or laws, and certainly no human reasoning.

With a happy sigh, he drifted off into sleep, her smile following him into his dreams.
As always, every feedback is welcome and highly appreciated. :)

09: We Were Strangers, Starting Out On A Journey

Chapter Notes

Important notion: The planned hiatus gets pushed back yet another week. This chapter is ridiculously long already, but the next is about to become a mammoth. So it's going to get split. Meaning: The last chapter of part 1 will get posted on the 15th June, and we start again with part 2 on 20th July.

This chapter's title also comes from a song from Anastasia. It's from the end-credits song At The Beginning by Richard Marx & Donna Lewis, and it really has some very interesting lines. You'll definitely read more of them here.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

That morning, Astrid woke to the sounds of the morning birdsong coming in through her window. The dim autumn sunshine sketched patterns of light on her wall, and she wasn’t entirely sure that she wasn’t still dreaming. For what felt like an eternity, she stared at the painted ceiling of her bedroom and tried, not for the first time, to grasp what had happened the day before. There had been so much, and it still felt weirdly surreal. Meeting Hiccup at the stables, those precious minutes they shared in that quiet room, and how easily he seemed to fit in with Daniel and Eret... It all seemed like a dream.

As if of its own accord, her hand wandered to her chest again. She chuckled shakily at the strange sensation, at this warm connection that seemed to glow brighter the more she thought about him. Absentmindedly, she wondered when she would see him again. Hopefully at some point today. And, equally hopefully, they would get the chance to talk in private. She had so many questions, ranging from the serious to the inane. She wanted to know everything, from why he’d been on the road for two years and what he’d been looking for while he’d been out there, to his favourite colour and where he was ticklish.

Of course, the likelihood of getting to actually ask such questions was minimal. Yesterday had been an aberration with the amount of time that she’d managed to duck her minders. Silly and irreverent they might be, but the twins took that part of their jobs seriously, especially since last spring. It was rare that she managed to carve out five minutes out from under their watch... which, of course, made her wonder if she’d had a little help yesterday.

She made a face at the ceiling. “All-Father, I don’t want to sound greedy...” she began, but trailed off. What, was she going to ask for more help? Odin and Frigga had already eased her path to a man whose soul now beat in time with her own heart. Clearly, the rest was up to her. But how she would manage to pull that off was a bit beyond her, she had to admit.

But even that realisation wasn’t able to darken her mood. Last night’s joy was still bubbling through her, and when Rachel finally came to help her dress for the family breakfast, Astrid greeted her cheerfully.

“Good morning, Ruff,” she said with a happy smile. “Isn't it a lovely day? The sky is blue, the sun is shining, and—” She’d been about to wave toward the high windows that led out over the green hills around Lake Vola behind the castle when she caught Rachel’s amused expression.
“I guess the feast wasn’t as bad as you’d expected?” her maidservant stated dryly, lips quirked up into a smirk and arms crossed in front of her. “Did anything special happen that put you in such a good mood? Or something that's worth mentioning in general? Some interesting bits of gossip to spread? I so loved your description of Grand Duke Spitelout's face when he realised those were his pigeons last summer. What was it again? ‘He looked like a cross between an overfed pig and a burst cake’?”

Astrid’s heart sank a little at Ruff’s words. She was grateful for the fact that Ruff had stepped behind her to detangle and unknot the simple plait Astrid had put her hair in before going to bed. Would there be any gossip about her and Hiccup? There had been no reactions last night, but… Had anyone seen either of them disappearing into the other room...? Or even just seen him emerge from it after she and Eret had left it? Or had anyone noticed how… how meaningful their small interactions had been?

Trying to sound casual, she said, “No, there was nothing worth mentioning. Unless you include Countess Whitevale’s attempts at matchmaking as interesting. Did you know that Alicia apparently is ‘fond of animals’? I always was under the impression that she's scared of anything bigger than a fly.”

“You don't say,” Ruff said, chuckling lightly, and Astrid sighed inwardly in relief. Diversion successful. “But no, that doesn't count. It would only be worth mentioning if she managed a night without advertising those poor girls like livestock. There really was nothing else? How boring.”

Biting her lip, Astrid considered how much more she could say while Ruff was busy lacing up the back of her dress. There was so much that had happened, but she couldn't say anything. Except…

“Well, Eret's new squire made for a good start in his new job,” she said lightly. Ruff would have heard about Hiccup anyway, and her not talking about their major public interaction would only raise her suspicions. "He directly interfered with Daniel’s stupid law – without knowing about it, I should add."

Behind her, Ruff paused. A heartbeat later, she continued, sounding slightly anxious. "Uhh... elaborate on that? What happened? I mean, you’re obviously okay... but, well... Damn, don't tell me he lost a hand right away. That would be awfully inconvenient for Eret, wouldn't it?"

Astrid grimaced, and shook her head, glad that Ruff would think she was only worried on Eret's behalf. "No, none of that. And it wasn't that bad, really. It was only an accident, Daniel warned him off, and that was it. Besides, the boy actually seems to be all right. Daniel invited him to sit with us, and, apparently, he knows more about architecture than you, me, Eret, and your brother together."

“Well, then he should be safe,” Ruff snickered. Resuming her work, she said, “Your brother wouldn’t risk losing such a conversation partner.”

Astrid giggled a bit at that, if shakily. “You’re probably right. And I mentioned it because it was more or less the only actual gossip-worthy bit that happened. No, wait. Eret crashed the formal gathering a little when he asked me for a dance and at some point some other couples joined us. But aside from that it really wasn't that much of an interesting event, all things considered."

The understatement of the year, but, hopefully, Ruff would never know.

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Once Astrid was appropriately dressed in a light blue silken dress, Tuff escorted her through the
busy corridors toward the breakfast room.

The very room in which she and Hiccup had kissed last night.

“Is everything all right?” Tuff asked, sounding confused. She’d stopped a few steps in front of the door, wide eyes staring as the rest of her body refused to move on. It was the official entrance to this room – the broad double door that led to the front part of the room and not the hidden servants’ entrance that was closer to the kitchens, the one she and Hiccup had come through last night – but the prospect of entering this room and having to keep her composure was daunting.

And yet, she had no choice. Swallowing, she raised one hand to her chest, and the already familiar warm glow made her feel more confident. She could do this. For his sake, she could act as if nothing had happened. As if she was still the same person as yesterday. Taking another second to calm herself, she pushed the well-practised mask of a composed smile back onto her face. “Of course,” she replied, batting away his concerns, and stepped through the door as soon as Tuff opened it for her. Her gaze flickered immediately to the back of the room, to where they’d kissed and their souls and lives had become one, and to the cupboard behind which Hiccup had hidden. She still could hardly believe that Eret hadn’t noticed him standing there. But then, it had been pretty dark, and Eret had obviously not expected to find anyone but her.

With much effort, she forced her eyes away from that spot and her thoughts away from those memories. Instead, she tried to focus on the scene in front of her. Her father, Daniel, and all three Erets were already sitting around the table – laden with a basket full of light bread rolls, small pots of butter, honey and fruit jam, and plates with cheese and cold meat – and Astrid tried hard to keep her mask in place as they all looked up at her entering the room. It felt weird to so with these men, but letting her emotions show was not an option.

“Good morning, Milords,” she greeted the men with a curtsey, and sat down on the chair next to Daniel. He and Eret greeted her with warm if tired smiles which made her guess their night had been quite a bit shorter than hers. Her father nodded, equally tired, while the Grand Duke’s expression broke into a friendly grin.

“Good morning, Astrid. As always, your sight is a blessing for these tired eyes.”

She accepted the compliment with a polite nod and was about to reply, when Eret the Elder beat her to it.

“Yes, yes, the girl’s a pretty sight in that expensive dress,” the old man grumbled. “I only wish a sight like hers would rejuvenate my back instead of my loins. Honestly, this bed in the room you gave me was hard as a rock. Poison for my bones and joints, I’m telling you. Poison! The offer was well-meant, Osmond, but you’ll have to accept that I’ll relocate to my townhouse until I return home. From what I remember, the beds there are more comfortable.”

The King only replied with a grunt, indicating that he’d heard and accepted the words, and Astrid had to hide a grimace. The castle was brimming with guests who’d come for Eret’s accolade and for the upcoming Midwinter festivities. From what little she remembered regarding the planning, the fact that Eret the Elder had been offered a room in the castle was only thanks to his grandson giving up the room that would have gone to him as the guest of honour. Eret had chosen to spend the night on a couch in Daniel’s quarters, as the two friends would have talked for hours anyway. Sometimes, the tone in which the old goat spoke to his King surprised Astrid – his insulting tone about the accommodations in the castle, not the comments about her. Those didn’t surprise her anymore. But then the old man had been her own grandfather’s friend and advisor, and an honorary uncle to her father. A relationship like that apparently didn’t change just because the boy he’d seen grow up became King. And in most cases nobody bothered to call him on his oftentimes
inappropriate tone anymore anyway.

Caught up in her thoughts and not really listening to the old man’s complaints anymore, she reached for a roll and a pot of honey. Every now and then, her gaze shifted to the other end of the room again, and the memory of Hiccup holding her in his arms made a warm smile spread across her face. Oh, what would she give if she could go back to those minutes, to feel his embrace right now, his lips on hers, and his warmth. Being here in this room again but under these completely different circumstances only heightened the sense of surrealness of last night’s events. LIGHTLY touching that spot on her chest, she knew that it all had happened, but at the same time, it still felt like nothing but a dream. If only she could be sure to soon see him again and to be able to talk to him...

Suddenly, a light dazzled her. Astrid blinked, and realised that it was the reflection of the sun on Eret’s knife as he deliberately tried to catch her attention. She looked up to see him questioningly raising an eyebrow at her. Remembering how easily he was able to read her, she gave him a nondescript smile, and then put in some effort to school her expression. She couldn’t let any of her emotions or thoughts show.

Still distracted, she was about to take a first bite of her breakfast when her father’s voice drew her attention. She’d deliberately ignored their conversation, mostly due to the old goat, but now that he raised his voice to address Eret, she couldn’t fail to notice his words. And the topic would have drawn her attention anyway.

“A word about your squire, Eret,” the King said in a serious voice, and Astrid momentarily froze mid-movement. Her hand half-raised to her mouth, she felt her heart skipping a painful beat as she tried to think of any reason why her father would want to talk about Hiccup of all people. Did he know after all? Had someone noticed and told him? She felt as if she would know if something had happened to him, but...

“I know we talked about him yesterday already,” her father said, and Astrid noticed how all men around her perked up their heads at this topic. “And I haven’t changed my mind, don’t worry. On the contrary, now that I’ve seen him… Well, I’m glad you took the boy in. And I’m sure he’ll be good for you, too. Especially when it comes to formal behaviour, from what I’ve heard.”

Astrid returned her eyes to her plate, and tried not to show how eagerly she absorbed every word her father had said. Even the King knew who Hiccup was? Was he someone one ought to know then?

“Thank you, your Majesty. Your approval means a lot, to both him and me,” Eret replied relieved, drowning out his father’s and Daniel’s low chuckling with his sure voice. Astrid pushed her internal contemplations aside to further listen to what they might say.

The King nodded, but before he could say any more, Eret the Elder interjected. “And what about my approval?” he sneered in his usual unpleasant tone. “Nobody asked me. But just so you know, I do not approve of your choice, lad. That twig can’t be any good at fighting, he’ll only be a hindrance to you. And where did he come from anyway? Surely you could have found a better squire among our vassals, maybe Dogsbreath of Greyhound. His grandfather fought well for us; held the bridge for an hour, giving us time to regroup, and lived to tell the tale! And his mother’s line is just as distinguished. But your boy there?” He shook his head. “No. He surely comes from a bad breed. Just look at him! That’s a weak bloodstock, as scrawny and thin as he is.”

Astrid was used to the insulting words of Eret the Elder, but suddenly it had become a lot more difficult to stay calm. She was hard-pressed to keep herself from interjecting that Hiccup was anything but weak. A part of her wanted nothing more than to throw into the old goat’s face how
she’d felt his strength last night, his wiry muscles that had held her so tight and sure. But she fought down the urge. She took a small bite off her roll to give her face something to do while she worked to appear unperturbed – and only slowly noticed the change in atmosphere around her.

All the other men had become strangely quiet, a practically tangible awkward silence covering them that didn’t make any sense to Astrid.

“So, I’m right?” Eret the Elder kept ranting. “He’s nothing but a peasant after all? Or the grandchild of one of those yellow-livered captains that we gave a county to, despite hiding in the back ranks? Or is it even worse? Is he your bastard, Son? Did he crawl out of a Temple and now thinks he can benefit from his sire’s name? Bah, that would fit, I thought he looked familiar somehow. You should—”

“He’s Valka’s son,” the Grand Duke interrupted his father with a dangerously calm voice that betrayed the rage beneath. Astrid stowed that name away in her mind for later use, unable to react in any way. It wasn’t just her own father. Everyone in this room seemed to know what Valka’s son meant, everyone but her. But not everyone seemed to be happy about this revelation.

“What?” the old goat shrieked, and was on his feet before Astrid knew what had happened. Behind him, the chair toppled to the ground with the sound of delicate wood cracking. His face was a mask of anger, turning dangerously red, with his eyes blazing and spit flying as he went on. “That scrawny little weakling? That son of a failure? Bah!” He turned toward his son, one finger raised accusingly. “This is all your fault. You said both of your sister’s suitors were equally good choices. You convinced me that letting her choose between them would avoid any political consequences. But I never should have listened to you. BAH! I should have known the girl would choose wrong, just as silly as every other woman. And you!” he turned toward his grandson. “I thought you had better sense then that! This is about your future. You should have considered building alliances when picking a squire. But no, you’re apparently just as stupid as everyone else. Bah. BAH! I wish I was still the head of my own House. I would make sure you marry this girl here before you could make any other stupid decisions on your own.” He snatched up his cane and went to the door. “Have the kitchens send something to my chambers. I’ll eat privately. I can’t stomach the arrant stupidity in here any longer!”

Long since used to old Eret’s tendency to rant and spit without a way to stop him, everyone else had stayed quiet until the door slammed behind him. Once he’d left, an oppressive silence fell over the room that left nearly everyone staring at their plates in discomfort.

Astrid, however, used the quiet moments to filter all the information she’d just picked out of the elderly man’s words. Hiccup’s mother was a woman named Valka. And she was the Grand Duke’s sister. Of course, Eret had introduced Hiccup as his cousin, but… Slowly, she shook her head as she processed it all. She hadn’t thought that they were that closely related. Her eyes widened as another realisation hit her. If Hiccup’s mother was the daughter of Eret the Elder… Then the old man was Hiccup’s grandfather, too. How was it possible that he was so closely related to one of the most powerful Houses in the whole of the realm and yet held no power himself? Being deliberately kept in the dark about any political matters could be so inconvenient.

The silence was broken by Eret II uncomfortably clearing his throat. “Well. That was... horrible,” the Grand Duke stated, and rubbed his temples. “And that’s not even taking into account that we’d agreed on keeping the boy’s identity a secret from the old man. Gods, I only hope Father won’t pester the boy with one of his tirades, he’s been through enough.” There was mumbling agreement from the other men while Astrid still stared at her plate, unmoving, as her mind seemed to race in circles.
Who was Hiccup? He obviously was not just a simple stable boy, but that much she’d learned last night already. And he’d said that he held nothing but an empty title, but… which title? If he was the grandson of Eret the Elder, the direct nephew of the Grand Duke of Eastervale… No, nothing made sense. He couldn’t be this powerless, not with relatives like this.

Without thinking about it, her gaze roamed over the paintings and portraits hanging on the walls around her to land on that of her mother. She didn’t often think of her – one couldn’t really miss what one had never known – but right now, she wished she was still alive. She wished she had someone to talk to, someone who could answer her questions not only about local up-to-date gossip, but about more far-reaching connections, too. Surely, her mother, the independent Lady Brenna, would have been willing and able to answer her questions, unlike her many governesses. They were more concerned in carving her into the form of the perfect princess, proper, decorous and empty-headed, than teaching her about the state of the kingdom.

“So, what is on the agenda for the day for everyone?” came the Grand Duke’s barely concealed attempt at brightening the mood a few minutes later.

Out of the corner of her eye, Astrid saw how her brother shrugged. “Well, I’d like to see the horses you brought,” he said. “There’s nothing else to do anyway, and the sooner I might get accustomed to a new stallion, the earlier I can return to my men in Westhill. I hope to set off shortly after the Midwinter festivities.”

The Grand Duke nodded. “That should be manageable. You know your way around our horses, after all. Getting used to a new one shouldn’t take all that long.”

“Right. Let’s head over there directly,” Eret suggested, standing up already. “I dearly need some exercises and fresh air.”

“Weren’t you just on the road for five days?” asked Daniel, amusement clear in his voice. “Seriously, can’t you sit still for even half a day? Read a book, or so?”

“Heh. No, I’ll have enough time to read once I’m old. Hopefully, that will keep me from giving unsolicited and insulting advice to my descendants that they’re not heartless enough.” Eret shook his head in annoyance, and headed for the door. “I know that Grandfather was the old King’s political adviser, but I’m starting to wonder if he cut out his heart, instead of his eye, for a drink from Mimir’s Well.” Eret II scoffed in grudging agreement, and Eret III opened the door.

“Aren’t you coming, too, Swanja?” he called back as Astrid made no attempts to get up and follow him and her brother. She threw a glance back at her still barely touched breakfast, but decided that she wasn’t hungry enough to stay behind. The idea of going to the stables, to the familiar and soothing company of horses, was too tempting.

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“Hoy. Is she ready yet?”

Daniel’s voice echoed from the front room over to where Astrid stood in front of the floor-length mirror in her dressing room. His words served to heighten her own restlessness, and she let out a suppressed sigh. Rachel grumbled something about royal impatience under her breath, and kept on fixing the many cords on her back. This time, Astrid didn't need to sneak away and toward the stables in secret, so she’d grudgingly agreed to change into a more suitable dress. Even though it meant she had to wait even longer. She couldn't wait to finally go to the stables, to feel the comfortable familiarity and simplicity that always overcame her there. It would be a welcome change to this morning’s tension.
“Not yet,” Tuff replied in his usual slightly bored tone. “But Ruff already cursed the amount of laces on her dress, so it can't be long now.”

“I'd like to see you bind all these Lokied knots and loops every time,” Ruff called back, her exasperation only partially humorous. “There, it's done.”

Happy that they would finally be going now, Astrid left her dressing room to join her brother. Daniel stood near the door, wearing rather simple trousers and an unadorned though still splendidly tailored shirt and jacket over a pair of riding boots. One would think that might have been enough of an indication already.

“Oh, no, not again,” Tuff whined when he saw her and recognised her dress as one of her usual riding outfits; A deep blue dress made of sturdy linen, barely adorned with anything but a few simple stitchings, and with long sleeves that would protect her from the autumn chill. It was completed by a set of light calfskin-gloves and the unmistakable sounds of her own riding boots on the stone floor. “Don't tell me I have to walk all the way out to those stables again. Seriously, wasn't the hike through the entire castle yesterday enough already?”

Daniel gave Tuff an amused look at where her manservant lounged sidewise on one of the cushioned chairs around a delicate tea table in the corner of the room. “Best not overwork the poor man,” he said with a barely hidden smirk. “I don't think your services will be needed today, Timothy. Eret and I will be with her, so you can have the day off. Although, I do hope that you don't use your time to play yet another prank on one or the other of our honoured guests. Like, say… Sir Eret the Elder, for example. The old goat is fuming already as he is.”

Astrid couldn't hide her smirk at this barely hidden challenge, or the look the twins shared. “What, in Loki's name are you thinking of us, Highness?” Tuff inquired in mock indignation, just as his sister threw in, “As if we would ever do such a thing.”

“Exactly…” Daniel murmured.

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When Daniel and Astrid reached the castle’s entrance, Eret was already waiting for them. He, too, was dressed in practical and comfortable riding gear, and carried a heavy-looking basket over one arm.

“Ah, excellent,” Daniel grinned, and pointed at the basket. “You were able to talk Heather into packing us a picnic?”

Eret smirked. “Yeah. It wasn’t that hard, as it’s literally her job to keep you two fed. And, conveniently, your guests as well. Besides, they have a lot of leftovers down there from last night. Would be a shame to let all these pastries go to waste.”

“Indeed,” Daniel agreed, and lifted the lid to pull out some food directly. He handed each Astrid and Eret a few pieces.

Astrid, who’d practically skipped breakfast, ate the first bite eagerly, but couldn’t resist teasing the men a little.

“Didn't you just eat breakfast? How can you be hungry again already? Just wait, before long you’ll be as vast at Fyrir Alvin.”

Daniel and Eret paused to share a strange look. “Well,” Eret began hesitantly. “Since I know us, this is not just an in-between snack, but also lunch. And, to my defence, it’s not only for the three
“Hiccup?” Astrid couldn’t help the small pause in her steps that nearly caused her to stumble. She glared at a small rock as if it was to blame while countless thoughts whirled around her head. *Hiccup! They would meet Hiccup? Was he at the stables? Would she really see him again in only a few minutes? Her heart started to beat faster at that thought, and she was glad when Daniel inquired after him, too, and drew the attention away from her.

“You left him at the stables?” her brother asked, sounding indignant and growing morose as he went on. “Why? You yourself said he’s no ordinary servant, much less some stable boy. He surely has the right of better accommodations, at least for being your squire, if nothing else. We have quarters for the other squires, he could live there for the time being. Or you could even claim that you *need his assistance*, and accommodate him somewhere closer to you. Or what about your family’s townhouse? I understand that you didn’t want to return there last night, but, surely, he could have–”

Eret interrupted him by raising a hand. “Believe me, this is the best solution,” he said with a gloomy expression. “We talked about it beforehand, Father, Hiccup, and I, and we agreed that Hiccup would stay with the horses. On the one hand, we would have wanted someone to do that anyway, and he agreed to it, no matter whether he would become my squire or Father’s new stable master. At least as long as we stay here at the castle. And on the other hand… Well, I wouldn’t want to house him with the other squires. Grandfather is right on one point after all. He’s no fighter, not buff or strong like some of the others. And you know how young men can be if they think they found the weakest link in their chain. No, that wouldn’t be a good idea. And the same goes for our townhouse, if for different reasons. I wouldn’t want Hiccup anywhere near the old goat.” Daniel winced, and gave a grudging nod of agreement, as Astrid felt her own anger rise at the mere thought of Eret I screaming at Hiccup. Seeing Daniel’s nod, Eret continued, “As for me needing his assistance… Well, I’ve managed to dress myself for over eighteen years now, and I would prefer to keep doing so, thank you very much. Besides, where exactly would you suggest he could have slept last night? There is only one couch in your rooms, and I don’t fancy sharing that tiny bit of space with someone else. I like my cousin, but not *that* much. Which reminds me... *Please* tell me the couch was... erm... *safe*.”

Daniel gave an exasperated snort. “*Safe* as in *clean*? Yeah, don’t worry. Believe it or not, but I’m not that busy that I can’t make the way to the temple on my own. I don’t need for one of the Ástir to come to my rooms instead.”

“Are you telling me that strategically placed mirror on the opposite wall actually is simply for checking clothes?” Eret laughed, and shook his head. “I could have sworn it served a better purpose than simply showing dressed people.” Daniel gave Eret a flat look, but Eret ignored him and cheerfully continued. “Anyway, I’m not complaining. It’s still a nicer room than what I normally would be able to expect as the juniormost knight in the kingdom, regardless of who my father is.”

“That much is true,” Daniel said, musing. “Right now, the other knights in my retinue are packed six to a room and whining about it.”

“Like I said, much nicer,” Eret commented. “Although, while you’ve got great taste in furniture–”

Daniel interrupted, his tone syrupy sweet. “Thank you! Even though I’ve noticed that your tastes, if I remember correctly, run towards something I’d expect to see in one of your family’s stud farms – specifically, in the barns.”
“Neeeeeigh, I must protest!” Eret whinnied with a cheerful smirk. “But back to the point. A man of taste and refinement such as yourself could use more paintings of Ástir at work on the walls. Maybe a nice tasteful mural of the Eighty-One Acts of Bliss?”

Astrid giggled as Daniel choked.

Eret grinned and said, “I could have one commissioned for you! Imagine coming home from campaign and finding it on your walls.”

Daniel glared at Eret. “You wouldn’t dare.”

Astrid snorted and Daniel looked at her. “What?”

“You do remember who you’re talking to, right? Your almost-brother Eret, the man who has no shame when it comes to a bet or dare?”

Eret chuckled evilly and Daniel looked exaggeratedly worried; she wondered which incident he was remembering. There were, after all, so many to choose from...

As Eret continued to cackle, Daniel gave him a side-eyed look. “I can see what Dagur means by like how guests are like fresh fish.”

Eret waggled his eyebrows with a giant grin. “What, they start to stink after three days?”

“That, and you’d occasionally like to gut them and see them fried in oil,” Daniel said mock-dangerously. “Sleep lightly tonight, friend.”

“On that couch? Like I’ve got a choice with those lumpy cushions,” Eret replied with a smirk.

“You’re talking as if you actually managed to sleep last night,” Astrid threw in with a dry smile. “I’m pretty sure that you two were up until daybreak talking again. Or wait, no. Didn’t you order that special barrel to be delivered to your rooms when I left?”

“Ah, yes. Dagur’s Special Brew.” Daniel’s praise was almost comically exaggerated. “Honestly, I could kiss Dagur for coming up with this recipe. From what I remember, we were pretty smashed. Or rather judging by the… erm… lack of memory. But today there’s nothing left. No headache, and I’m not even tired.”

“Kissing Dagur?” Eret asked, smirking, and with a raised eyebrow.

Hearing the teasing tone in her friend’s voice, Astrid decided to play along, and threw in, “Oh, I’d like to see that. That surely would be hilarious to watch.”

Daniel groaned exaggeratedly, and threw his hands up in mock exasperation. “That was figuratively speaking. Honestly, can’t you two detect a joke when it jumps at you? Or are you so busy making them that you can’t tell the difference!?”

Eret and Astrid burst out laughing, and, a moment later, Daniel joined in. If felt good to do so, even if Astrid was acutely aware of the accumulating number of secrets between them. It felt weird, wrong even, but she couldn’t help it right now. If Eret thought it better to keep his secret then that was his decision. She had no business interfering there.

And as for her own secret… Under different circumstances, she probably would have told them about her feelings. Freya, she definitely would have done so last year. But with this stupid law in place and Daniel being so unyielding about it, she didn’t dare to give away anything. Not when it
was Hiccup’s life that was at stake.

And talking about him now didn’t feel right anyway. She would have loved to hear more about him, but somehow was also glad for the change of topic. Hearing all these weird comments about him earlier had felt wrong, like an intrusion, especially without understanding what they meant and without him being there to explain them. She wanted to learn more about him, but she wanted to do so by him telling her. And if she was to meet him again in a few minutes anyway… She could wait that long! She would wait, would keep her feelings for him hidden, and outwardly be the same woman she’d been yesterday. Hiccup appearing in her life had turned her whole world upside down, but she couldn’t let anyone see that.

And as long as she could spend her time like this, laughing and joking with her brothers, that was easy. Only later, when Hiccup was around, she would need to be more careful. Eret and Daniel knew her so well, she would need to be on her guard then. She was only glad, that they’d stopped talking about him now.

Or maybe not…

“But back to serious matters,” Daniel began when their laughter had calmed down again. “About Hiccup… Did he… tell you anything? About what happened on Berk, I mean?”

Astrid tensed, but managed to not react at all while Daniel looked expectantly at Eret, waiting for his answer.

Eret’s face turned into a dark grimace, and he shook his head. “No, he didn’t. I asked him once, but… The memories seem to be quite painful, understandably, and… well, I didn’t ask again. All I know is the semi-official part which you surely know, too. That they’re dead and the Tribes blamed him for it. Which would be ridiculous if it weren’t so grim. I mean…,” he trailed off and ran a hand through his hair. “Anyway, there’s not much we can do without causing an uproar. It’s none of our business, after all. Even your father agrees there, if I understand correctly.”

Daniel nodded. “Yes. Interfering with the Tribes’ inner politics didn’t seem like a good idea, even if they are part of Volantis.”

“You can’t reign over an archipelago like you would a river valley – or open grasslands. Father talked it through with their dukes and agreed on giving them time to sort it out on their own. But now, I wish we could do more. We didn’t even know he was still alive.”

“Yeah, well, neither did I. Anyway, there’s not much we can do right now. Because you’re right, we can’t interfere. All we can do is support him until he, maybe, can return one day. And that includes keeping his identity a secret for now, hence the whole squire business.”

Daniel nodded again, though with a grim expression now. “Agreed.”

They fell silent for a while, and Astrid turned her gaze to the ground in front of her. The path that led to the outer stables became narrow and bumpy here, which provided an excellent excuse for her not to meet Eret’s or Daniel’s eyes and possibly betray her troubled thoughts. She was still anxious to see Hiccup again, to compare the little information she’d learned with reality and to ask him all her questions. And yet… Suddenly, she was strangely reluctant to approach him about his
past.

Whatever had happened that had brought him into this position, it must have been bad. If he hadn’t even told Eret, if what had happened was too painful for him to talk about… Well, she hoped to learn about it all, but she wouldn’t push him. There were enough other things to learn about him than simply how he’d ended up where he was now.

Despite the grim revelations she’d just overheard, a nervous smile spread across her face. The stables were almost in sight by now which meant she would see him again in only a couple of minutes. How would that be like? During the party last night, she hadn’t really been able to process it all, had been too busy with hiding her feelings to examine them. Seeing him and being in close proximity to him had been weird, but manageable. It had been just another thing that added to the craziness that that night had been. But now?

Now, it had all settled. He was her *soulmate*. Despite the fact that she’d already thought about marrying him one day yesterday, today that thought seemed to have even more weight. Her soul, her future, her entire life was tied to him, in whatever way, and it felt… meaningful… *important*.

“Yeah, I know that look!” came suddenly Eret’s voice. Just now, he’d been talking to Daniel, but she hadn’t paid them any attention. Not until he now spoke louder, deliberately, almost calling out to her.

Startled, Astrid looked up and into his wide grin. Only now did she notice that she’d stopped walking and that both he and Daniel were watching her from a few steps ahead, where they had paused and turned to look at her.

“Yeah, she seems to be in an entirely different place inside her head,” Daniel mused with an amused smirk. “I do wonder where though. It seems to be a nice place, judging by that dopey smile.” He seemed intent on turning the table on her now, after they’d teased him before.

“Oh, I do have an idea,” Eret laughed. “And I’d say the question is not *where* but *who*. Am I right, Swanja? Are you thinking about a special someone?”

Shocked, Astrid stared at them. Had she revealed too much? She’d been so careful… “I-I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she sputtered, and, trying to reign in her features, hurried past them.

“Ha! I knew it,” Eret crowed. “Come on, Swanja. What’s his name, eh?”

“What, are you suggesting our little sister might be thinking of someone *male*?” Daniel chimed in, his voice weirdly teasing and disbelieving alike. “That’s hard to believe.”

Daniel’s tone struck her as odd. Surely, if he thought she’d been thinking of a man, he would react differently? She went on, fully intending to ignore their teasing, until Eret’s words caught her off guard.

“No, I’m sure I’m right. Am I not, Swanja? Admit it, there is someone *special* waiting for you. Why else would you’ve gotten that dreamy smile and ignore us so determinately?”

Astrid’s steps faltered. He knew? But… if he knew, had he told Daniel, too? And what would happen to Hiccup? From everything she’d heard so far, it seemed like Eret and Daniel wanted to *protect* Hiccup, but that could change in the blink of an eye. If Daniel learned about...

Or maybe they didn’t know of whom she’d been thinking, after all. Yeah, that had to be it. Maybe they were just beating the bush, suspecting that she was thinking of *someone* without knowing who
it was. She looked up at the sturdy wooden building that had come into sight by now. She only needed to cross this meadow and walk past the paddock, and then she could see him again. But did she dare to do that? Would she be able to act naturally enough when Eret and Daniel already suspected–

“I bet I can guess who it is,” Eret went on, grinning mischievously. “Let’s see… Does he have a thick mane of auburn hair and you’re just dying to bury your fingers in it?”

Astrid stopped dead in her tracks. So he had noticed? Slowly, she turned to look at him. How could she make him stop talking, make him not reveal what he knew in front of Daniel? Would he even do that? Would he lie to his best friend for her sake?

“Oh, don’t look so surprised,” Eret went on, oblivious to her growing panic. “It’s no secret, after all.”

“Care to tell me what you’re talking about?” came Daniel’s puzzled but still amused voice from behind him. Astrid threw Eret a pleading look, begging him not to say any more, but he didn’t seem to understand. Instead, he turned toward her brother with a mischievous grin on his face.

“Oh, don’t look so surprised, Daniel,” Eret replied cheerfully. He strolled past her, arms crossed behind his head. “I thought you knew your sister. Who would it be that puts her in such a good mood? There aren’t all that many options, I’d say.”

Astrid had turned to follow Eret with her eyes. She was still trying to make him stop talking, slightly shaking her head, but he barely paid her any attention. Instead, Daniel suddenly burst out laughing behind her. “Loki, you got me there,” he gasped in-between. “And here I thought you were actually suggesting… No, you’re talking about that gelding, right? What was his name? Markan?”

“Markor,” corrected Eret, nodding. “Yeah, sure. Swanja and the horses, that’s a love story on its own, after all.” He chimed in on Daniel’s laughter.

Relief washed through Astrid, but before it could show on her face, she managed to put on an incredulous expression. It equally suited her feelings, but didn’t give away anything. “Oh, that’s mature,” she scoffed, and left them standing. With resolute steps she crossed the remaining distance between her and the stables, if only to get away from the laughing men. That had been awfully close. For a moment, she’d thought they knew…

But, lucky for her, they, too, still saw her as a girl and not as the woman she was about to become. And, maybe, she could use their expectations for her own advantage.

...o O o ...

“Hey, no need to get greedy,” Hiccup chided Cassie as the mare made a move to snatch one of the two apples out of his hand. “You already had yours, these are my breakfast.” Affectionately, he patted her nose, and then went to sit on one of the many straw bales that littered the stables. He was done with his usual morning routine – providing the horses with fresh hay and water and making sure none of the spirited animals had hurt themselves. Trample had a shallow scratch on his rear, but Hiccup had directly applied a healing salve which should be enough. Now, he finally had time to care for himself.

He ate the first apple quickly and then began to nibble at the second, absentmindedly rubbing his scarred leg. It didn’t hurt, not really. But rubbing it to get the stiff muscles to relax whenever he got the time had become somewhat of a reflex over the last two years. A warm smile spread across his
face as he contemplated what kind of a strange morning this was. His leg didn’t hurt, hadn’t played him up at all during his work, and he’d actually slept through the entire night. Not once had he woken up, screaming or panting because of nightmares. For once, there had been no images of a vicious beast attacking him or of the burned remains of his life. No memories of surging pain, freezing cold, or bitter accusations had haunted him. No, instead he’d slept peacefully, for the first time in over two years, with the only image in his mind being her warm smile.

Indulging in the moment, he closed his eyes and called forth the memories of the previous day. Of her, of her true and unaffected laughter, of her radiant eyes. Of the way she’d melted into his arms, fitting perfectly as if they were made for her. A warm sense of ease spread through him at these thoughts, but he also couldn’t help the spark of uncertainty that accompanied those feelings and memories.

In an attempt to calm his nerves, even marginally, Hiccup stood up again and walked over and into Cassie’s stall. He gave her the remains of his second apple, and scratched her neck in greeting. She responded in kind, gave a happy snort and rubbed her head against his chest, which made him chuckle. “Yes, you’re a good girl, aren’t you?” he murmured quietly. He’d learned early in his life that humans weren’t the only ones one could talk to when one had troublesome thoughts. Animals were equally good listeners, with the advantage of them not spreading the gossip as soon as he turned his back on them. And, unlike when he’d been a boy and that had just been a nice addition, now it was of utmost importance that no human ever learned about what he needed to get off his chest today.

“Yes, a good girl… You can keep a secret, can’t you?” he continued in a low voice, head resting against her strong neck. “Because I don’t know what to do. I miss her, can you believe that? Not even a day ago, I didn’t even know she existed, and now… Now I feel like every minute I can’t look at her or listen to her voice is wasted.” Cassie gave a snort and Hiccup chuckled quietly. “Yes, it’s silly, isn’t it? But I can’t help it. I want to see her again. I even thought about going up to the castle, but... “ he trailed off, shrugging, and slowly shook his head.

There was no point in going up to the castle to look for her, he knew that. He couldn’t very well walk up to the guards and request to be led to the Princess’s chambers. And they certainly wouldn’t let him walk around for hours to look for her on his own, either. Sure, he could always use Eret as an excuse, that he’d gone up there to see whether his master had any tasks for him to do. And there always was this hope that she might know that he was looking for her, that she would come to intercept him, or that they might even meet somewhere in the corridors by chance. But that wasn’t very likely to happen. And even if that were to happen, there would still be servants and guards all around. Too much company to talk to her like he needed to talk to her.

All this was so… bewildering. Yes, he knew who she was, knew all the stories about the Princess, the official ones, just as well as he knew those few tales Eret had told him privately. And he knew her soul, could still feel it glowing in his heart. But all that wasn’t knowing her.

“Am I going insane?” he asked quietly, but the only answer he got was a nondescript snort. Still leaning against Cassie’s neck, he smiled weakly. “You’re right, maybe I’m already insane. But I just can’t get her out of my head. Her eyes and her smile and her hair. Freya, this hair… What would I give to simply be next to her and play with her hair right now? That would be enough. That, and talking to her without fearing who might overhear us. Like yesterday, when she was here. Gods, if only I knew when I can see her again. And...”

Hiccup trailed off as Cassie nickered, sounding almost amused. With a sigh, he scratched her neck once more and then left her stall again. Spelling out his problems hadn’t helped, not really. He felt a little lighter for having done so, but he still didn’t know what to do now. All he knew was that
she was his future. It sounded absurd even if he just thought the words. But he didn't mean them like that, not exclusively at least. It wasn't just that nothing but her seemed to matter anymore. It was more that… that their lives were connected from now on. Whatever he did, every decision he made from now on would include her. She was inside him, was a part of his every thought, and even if he could change it, he wouldn't want it any other way.

And his path lay clear ahead of him. He would go to the West, would fight and distinguish himself as best he could. After last night’s conversation, he was positive that he would get along well enough with the Prince. He had little doubts that the plan he’d made last night would lead him to the desired outcome. Especially as the Gods were on his side, too. They had to be, or they wouldn’t have given him such a broad hint as to which path he had to choose.

No, that part wasn’t his problem. He was confident that his plan would work. All he was uncertain about were the next few months. How often would they be able to see each other? Would they be able to talk at all? Would he ever get the chance to hold and kiss her again? The thought of even spending just this one day without doing so seemed like too much already. Last night, he’d bravely thought that he wouldn't mind possibly waiting for over two years to marry her. But if that also meant two years without… knowing her, he’d go insane.

Grimacing, he rubbed the back of his head as another, not all that pleasant emotion rose in his heart. Suddenly, he was angry at his father. Hiccup had never begrudged his father’s choices in how to live and how to lead their House. Their lives had been simple but peaceful – or as peaceful as they could be with flying and fire-breathing monsters raiding their food stock regularly – and it had always been enough for him. But thinking about how things could have been, how, if his father had decided differently, he could have known Astrid for all her life…

The thought kept nagging at him, and he was still trying to pull himself together when he heard the sounds. Footsteps approaching quickly, and the raucous laughter of men.

Chapter End Notes

As I said, ridiculously long... But, oh well...No direct Hiccstrid in here, but I hope there were enough other bits to entertain you. ;)

Two more chapters until the short break. :)
Chapter Notes

THE TRAILER! WOOOOO! I CAN'T! xD I'm so excited! Just good this chapter was finished yesterday already, not sure I could have done anything after watching the trailer. I'm still not over it, so cool! And the beard! I love the beard! xD

Okay, back to normal... I'll try...*deep breathe*

This chapter became ridiculously long... again! It was only meant as a short opening scene for the last chapter of part 1, but... oh well... It became this long on its own, without the other part. As I said, ridiculous. I simply can't help myself... Not sorry! :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hiccup recognised the voices easily. He’d spend enough time with Eret to know his laughter, and Prince Daniel’s was easy to identify as well. But if those two were here, did that mean…?

Frozen like a deer hearing a twig break, his heart racing, he stood in the middle of the corridor between the two rows of stalls and stared at the closed entrance door.

All Gods in Valhalla, please…

The smaller door within the gate opened, and, as he’d hoped, it was Astrid who entered first. The moment he saw her, he felt as if some invisible weight got lifted off his shoulders. She was here. She was here, and simply seeing her was enough to soothe him and make his heart leap in joy at the same time.

When her eyes fell on him though, she visibly tensed. He thought he saw something of the joy he felt in her eyes too, but it quickly got overshadowed by something darker, worries and a cool determination.

She’d paused in the doorway when she’d spotted him. But when the voices behind her became louder, she hastily stepped inside to make space for Eret and her brother. Her face gave nothing away as she gave him a polite nod, and Hiccup fought hard to equally school his expression, even though it felt neigh on impossible to do so. What had happened to make her act reserved like this again? Surely, she could at least have given him a small smile?

But she hadn’t. She just quickly walked past him. He could hear how she cooed and murmured at the horses, and then opened the door to one of the stalls, probably Markor’s. He didn’t dare to turn and make sure.

Both Daniel and Eret gazed after her, wide grins on their faces, before they turned their attention to Hiccup. “Good morning, Hiccup,” the Prince greeted him, amusement turning into a concerned smile. “I hope your… accommodations are… well… tolerable?”

Glad over this distraction, Hiccup focused all his attention on the Prince – away from his sister and her odd behaviour. “Yes, Milord, they are,” he said truthfully. “It’s dry and sheltered from the wind, and warm enough too, with all the horses here. Straw is remarkably comfortable and I’m
alone here. That’s definitely a bonus, too.” He paused and averted his eyes, but then added without really intending to do so, “I’ve had much worse.” Glancing up, he looked into two concerned faces and scolded himself for letting those words slip. He hadn’t meant to sound so pathetic.

“That’s… good to hear,” the Prince finally broke the awkward silence.

Eret, however, simply snorted. “I told you, he’s fine here. It’s not like he hasn’t slept in some stables before. And it’s so much warmer down here, it’s ridiculous what you call winter.” He walked past Daniel and clapped Hiccup on the shoulder in greeting. Then he lifted a basket he was holding in his other hand. “I know you said you’re fine with living on apples, but I still brought you something more substantial. Father would never forgive me if I let you turn into that skinny fishbone of a man again.”

“Thank you, Sir,” he replied as Eret walked over to the side to place the basket onto one of the straw bales.

“Oh, stop that,” he sighed, rolling his eyes at Hiccup. “You’re not some lowly servant, okay? You don’t have to bow and scrape all the time, especially if there’s nobody around to act for. Not when it’s just us.”

“If you say so,” Hiccup mumbled. He stared at the ground, not meeting anyone’s eyes. He wanted to be a part of this group, more than anything else. But the simple truth was that he wasn’t. Not yet… There was a moment of awkward silence, a tension in the air that hadn’t been there the night before. Last night, the proverbial ice had been broken, but today, they seemed to have started anew.

“Right,” Daniel said after a few uncomfortable moments, changing the topic as he turned to Eret. “Which ones are the horses you said might be suitable? Not the mare or Astrid’s gelding, obviously, but I see you have five stallions here.”

He let his eyes wander along the row of stalls, and Hiccup made way to let the two men walk past him. These horses were Eret’s pride and joy, and it therefore was his privilege to show them to the Prince. There was no need for him to step in and take this work from his master. And then, there also was another advantage to them being occupied otherwise...

The moment Eret and Daniel turned away from him, he couldn’t keep his eyes from flickering to where Astrid stood in Markor’s stall. She was humming quietly under her breath, petting and scratching the big horse affectionately. Just like yesterday, the sight was mesmerising. He gazed in wonder, hoping to catch her attention. But she wasn’t looking, seemed completely lost in some blissful bubble of her own, and didn’t pay any attention to anyone but her horse. Certainly not to him. Swallowing, Hiccup forced himself not to stare at her, and focused back on the two men and the horses again as Eret began to introduce them.

“This one is Hunter,” Eret nodded toward the black beast in the first stall. “He belongs to Father. And that one next to him is my Crusher. You saw them both yesterday, remember?” The Prince nodded, and went past those two and the empty stall next to them. “And this is Chomp. He would be suitable, but I actually would recommend either Squish or Trample. Not that Chomp isn’t a great horse, but he’s a little thick-headed sometimes.”

“Chomp, Squish, and Trample?” Daniel inquired, snorting quietly. “Who came up with these names?” With calm steps he walked along the stalls, inspecting the horses within.

“Well, they kind of named themselves with their antics,” Eret replied dryly, rubbing his left arm
where Chomp had bitten him once when he’d been little more than a colt, as Hiccup had been told. Eret was lucky to not have lost the arm, and the scar was pretty fierce. “But, of course, those aren’t their real names. Chomp, this sorrel here, is actually formally named Firewind Hookfang in the breeding register. But as I said, I wouldn’t recommend him. Not when you have a choice.” He walked next to Daniel past the stalls.

“Then we have this buckskin, Squish. Or Blazing Thunderstrike, as it says on the paper. And then there’s this black rascal, Trample. Or Twilight Shadowwalker. Fitting for his hide, don’t you think?” He gave his friend a sidelong grin. “Anyway, these two are the ones I would recommend to you. They, too, have a bit of a temperament, but you wouldn’t want a war stallion without that anyway.”

Daniel had listened with a raised eyebrow, but now shook his head, laughing quietly. “These names are hardly better... Let me guess, your sisters choose them again? Honestly, don’t they have other things to do than come up with those ridiculous names?” Eret smirked at that, but didn’t say anything as Daniel took a minute to give both stallions measuring looks. But it wasn’t much of a choice. Even over the small distance, Hiccup could see how there seemed to be an immediate connection between Daniel and Trample. With the usual noises to calm the beast, the Prince made a cautious step toward the black horse, and Trample let him pet his head without any trouble.

“Well, I guess that’s settled then,” Eret stated in an amused voice. “Let’s get him ready, and you can make a first test ride on the riding ring outside.” He made attempts to walk toward the tack room that lay behind a door at the side of the main stable room, but Hiccup beat him to it. Eret reacted with a heavy sigh, and, rolling his eyes, he said, “Hiccup, you don’t have to do this. You–”

“Yes, I do,” Hiccup interjected quietly. “I am your squire. And readying a horse for you is certainly part of my duties.”

Eret gave him a flat look, snorted, and shook his head. ”All right. If that’s how you see it. But don’t expect me to treat you any different.”

Hiccup gave his cousin a small smile before ducking into the tack room to look for where they’d placed Tramble’s bridle and saddle the day before.

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Astrid enjoyed the peaceful moments she was able to spend in Markor’s stall, she really did. Caring for him yesterday had been wonderful, partially because she’d been allowed to do so for once. But simply enjoying the horse’s company right now was great, too. She was leaning against the broad neck, her bare fingers scratching his hide as she’d pulled off her gloves the instant she’d entered the stall. Quietly humming to herself, she enjoyed being able to let her mind wander without anyone interrupting her… Yes, all in all, it was very enjoyable.

Or it would have been.

Usually, she was quite able to pay no mind to everything around her when she was around horses. But, of course, today nothing was ‘as usual’. All the time, she had to fight the urge to let her eyes flicker over to Hiccup where he stood a few steps away from Eret and her brother, attentive as he was supposed to be.

In a way, it was even worse than it had been last night. Last night, everything had been so confusing. And even after their shared minutes and their kisses, after their souls had melted together and everything had started to make sense, she hadn’t fully grasped it all. But now, she understood that her life was connected to his. And no matter how much she wanted to throw
herself into his embrace, she couldn’t do anything to risk his life.

Sure, Ruff had probably been right. Daniel wouldn’t want to punish him. Not after how well they’d gotten along last night and the bits he and Eret had talked about earlier. But still, she had no doubts that, if her brother would ever learn about what had happened, he wouldn’t hesitate to have Hiccup killed. Daniel wasn’t brutal or sadistic... but she had noticed that the years on the battlefield were already starting to harden him. He’d developed a taste for expedient justice, and his law against touching her was only one example. Admittedly, he only executed said justice when guilt was obvious... but if he caught them together like they’d been yesterday... that would be pretty obvious.

She chewed at her lip at the thought. She wanted nothing more than to be with Hiccup, to feel his warmth, his touch, and get to know him. But she would need to be exceedingly careful. Daniel might be oblivious to romantic matters of any sort, but Eret surely was not. His teasing earlier might have been just a joke, but he’d been awfully close. And when it came down to choosing between her and Daniel, his loyalty surely lay with his future King.

Trying to keep her thoughts from wandering to dangerous territory, she listened as the men talked about the war stallions House Jag’r had brought. Unsurprisingly, Daniel decided on the black stallion as he had a preference for those, and equally unsurprisingly, Eret suggested to directly go for a test ride on the riding ring outside. She had expected as much, had counted on that, in fact. If only the rest of the day also went as she hoped. She would still need to keep up her act and come up with a believable excuse, but–

“Hey, You all right in there?” Eret’s cheerful voice came suddenly through the stall door.

She looked up to see him poking his head through the opening at the front of the stall. “Yes, I’m fine,” she replied, smiling, and ran her hand down Markor’s neck. “He really is amazing, and I can’t thank you enough.” And not only for the horse you brought, she added mentally.

“I’m really glad you like him,” he said, winking good-humouredly. “But I’m sorry that I had no chance to get his saddle so far. I promise to somehow get it here as soon as possible.”

“Oh, that’s fine. I don’t mind,” she stated happily as his words sparked an idea. “But what about you? Aren’t you and Daniel supposed to get his stallion ready?”

Eret snorted. “Yeah, well, the perks of having an overly eager squire... Makes me feel useless.” He paused, and a mischievous grin spread across his face. “But what about I show you the ‘pretty’ saddle we brought while we wait? Apparently, I have nothing else to do anyway, and it really is worth a look. You’ll love it.”

Astrid doubted that, but agreed nonetheless. She left Markor’s stall and followed Eret toward the attached tack room, but paused again when Daniel beckoned him over.

“Heh, Eret? A moment to take a look at this?” He didn’t call out loudly – mindful of the horses – but sounded serious nonetheless, concerned even.

Eret looked up with a frown, nodded, and turned back to Astrid. “I’ll see what he wants. You just go ahead and I’ll be there in a minute,” he said lightly, and left her standing.

She followed him with her eyes as he went toward the stall where Daniel stood near his new stallion. For a moment, she watched them as they inspected something on the horse’s leg, but then she shrugged to herself and entered the small and dusty room...

*To run directly into Hiccup.*
She gasped in surprise, a noise he mirrored. He dropped what he was holding, and she barely registered the clattering thud of metal and leather hitting the ground as she abruptly found herself in his arms.

Astrid froze as she felt his hands on her waist, her own hands bracing against his chest to steady herself. Dumbfounded, she gazed up into his beautiful face, his eyes wide and lips parted in surprise. Oh, how she’d yearned for his embrace! Their sudden closeness made her heart race, her breathing quickening. She could feel his breath brushing over her skin, his warmth soaking into her where she could feel him through their clothes.

For a few precious heartbeats, they held each other. She felt her heart with the piece of his soul glowing with joy, their connection thrumming at the unexpected closeness. It was wonderful, amazing, everything she’d wished for – and extremely dangerous!

His eyes glazed over, becoming more intense as he slightly bent his head, and for the fraction of a second she thought – hoped, and feared – he might kiss her.

The clicking of heavy boots on stone was the only warning.

Astrid pushed Hiccup away from her in an instant. She made a hasty step backwards and saw how he stumbled, a confused look on his face. But there was no time to explain anything. When Eret opened the door a second later, she stood frozen in place, unimaginably grateful for the lack of proper illumination that hopefully hid her blush and her frightened expression. Hiccup had hastily dropped to his knees, maybe to hide his face.

“And here I am again. Sorry you had to wait,” Eret said cheerfully, then frowned at Hiccup crouching on the ground.

“Is everything all right with Daniel’s stallion?” Astrid asked, after rummaging through her memories to come up with something reasonable to say.

“Yeah, nothing to worry. Daniel just noticed a scratch on Trample’s upper leg, but it’s nothing serious. You already took care of that, as I saw?”

The last words were obviously meant for Hiccup, who had just straightened up again. He was a little breathless, but otherwise seemed unperturbed, the dropped bridle back in his hand. “Yes, I applied the healing salve directly when I noticed it earlier,” came Hiccup’s sober affirmation.

“Good man. Not that I regret your decision, but you would have made a great stable master. Ah well, that’s how it is. Anyway, you can get started with rubbing Trample down right away, I’ll bring the saddle once we’re done here.”

“As you wish, Sir,” Hiccup replied, the teasing tone in his voice not hidden to Astrid.

Eret, however, sounded more exasperated. “Hiccup, I swear. If you don’t…” He trailed off, groaning, as Hiccup chuckled and then quickly walked toward the exit.

As he passed her, he politely bowed his head in her direction and murmured a short “Milady,” in greeting. This formal form of address sounded so wrong coming from him. But, of course, it was the only sensible one. Astrid secretly saluted Hiccup for how quickly he’d caught himself, for how easily he’d acted as if nothing had happened. Because all she was able to do in response to him was nod mutely. Hiccup left the small room, and Astrid let out the breath she hadn’t even noticed she’d been holding. Freya, she needed to do better than this. Sighing, she turned back to Eret – who gave her a scrutinizing look.
“Is everything all right?” he asked seriously. Frigga, why had he to be so good at reading her?

“Sure, why not?” she nonetheless tried to ward off his concern. But he wasn’t buying it.

“You seem… tense somehow. Especially around Hiccup. And… well, I understand, you know? Last night, Daniel told me all that happened. Why he thought this… this law to be necessary and all, and I see his point. But Hiccup isn’t like that. I promise. He’s a decent guy, and would never… You don’t need to be afraid of him. And… well, I’m sorry to pull you two in on this, but he really could use some friends right now. He’s been through a lot.”

Astrid stared at him, not sure whether to laugh or to cry. He was asking her to befriend Hiccup? Because he was a decent guy, and surely would never touch her? Gods, the irony was incredible. What could she possibly say to this?

“Okay.”

“Okay? That’s all?” Eret, who seemed to have expected a stronger reaction, blinked in confusion.

“Well, what else should I say?” she replied lightly. “I’m not afraid of Hiccup, if that’s what concerns you. It’s just… weird, I think. Maybe because I don’t know him at all, not like I know you or the others. But I’ll try to put in some effort to change that, all right?” It was nothing but the truth.

Eret hesitated, but then nodded and gave her a broad smile. “Thanks, Swanja. That means a lot to me,” he said sincerely. Then he beckoned her to follow him. “Anyway, that’s not why we came here. Come, what I wanted to show you is over there.” He went ahead to the far corner of the room where a narrow beam of sunlight fell through a small window and provided better illumination. With mischievously gleaming eyes, he gestured toward what could be called a saddle, except…

“What in Loki’s name!?” she sputtered, disbelievingly. What hung on the saddle rack in front of her was… hilarious!

Covered in dark blue satin, the saddle was indeed a gorgeous piece of horse-riding tack. Or it would have been if that had been all. The scenery of swans swimming on a lake – embroidered with silver and gold threads – surely was beautiful and detailed, but seemed a bit… excessive on a saddle skirt, to say the least. And the additional embellishments of brocade and stitched-on glass beads around the dual pommels was assuredly, absolutely too much. The tassels hanging from the cantle were tasteful, at least, and were done in a way that managed to suggest a swan’s tail-feathers. And the leather of the fender, stirrup and straps had been neatly tooled with more waterfowl. It was a gorgeous piece of art...

That would be ruined the instant Markor went anywhere there was a hint of dirt or mud. And while the stitching holding the seat to the saddle skirt was – yep, she checked – silver bullion wire, a ridiculous extravagance, it was at least flush with the leather. Even the seat had been embossed with a swan in flight, which just made her shake her head. And they’d clearly gone a little too enthusiastic on the decoration for the pommels; while the parts that would be touching her thighs directly were smooth leather, the rest of the pommels were embellished to the point of absurdity.

How long Astrid stared at the ludicrous, ridiculous piece of riding equipment, she didn’t know. It looked so entirely out of place in the dusty, practical tack-room, as if it had been misplaced by some absent-minded dvergr. Her expression must have been gloriously bewildered, as Eret clearly reached a point where he couldn’t control himself anymore and burst out laughing. “Yes, that’s the face I expected,” he guffawed. “Seriously Swanja, I wish you could see your expression right now.”
“How in all Gods’ names did this happen?” she asked incredulously. “I mean… Your father said your sisters did this, but… but don’t they know what a saddle is for? How is this… this thing supposed to survive even one ride?”

Eret shook his head, still grinning. “It’s not.”

“Just look at this!” she went on in disbelief, not reacting to his comment in any way. “Even ignoring the fact that whatever dress I wear is going to completely cover this saddle; as soon as I go anything above a trot, the skirt will wrap around the pommels and get ripped to shreds by the beading and embroidery!”

“So don’t go above a trot, then,” Eret said with a smirk.

This time, she gave him a sour look. “I’ll simply wear my practical and thick riding leathers beneath some discarded linen dress, thank you. That way, at least my legs will survive this saddle and none of my usual outfits gets destroyed.”

“Oh, please do! Just imagine the scandal,” Eret said with teasing glee and held up a hand as he leaned over, as if visualizing something off in the distance. “The refined Princess Astrid, riding her gift horse and fine gift-saddle from House Jag’r… while wearing a pair of worn and dirty leather riding trousers beneath rags.”

She groaned.

“Sorry to burst your bubble,” he didn’t sound very sorry, “but you’re probably going to have to use it at least once for some formal ride somewhere. Wearing a skirt. At a trot that’s so slow that you’re going to want to scream, knowing that you could be flying instead.”

Astrid groaned at the image he painted with his words. She’d been a part of such formal processions before, and they were deadly boring. But she would at least take Eret down with her...“If that’s actually going to happen one day, then I’ll make sure you’re a part of it, too. Riding somewhere behind me, just as slowly.”

“No, don’t do that! Have me locked in with my grandfather for a weekend instead!” Eret protested in mock desperation.

“What, and let you off easy?” she fired back. “Nope. Sentence is spoken. It’s that or possibly being pecked to death by swans. I can take you over to the pond and throw you in right now. Your choice.”

“Well, I suppose that might be the more pleasant choice. But then you’d have to explain things to my father, Hiccup, and Dagur,” Eret said with a grin.

Astrid snorted, making Eret chuckle. “All right, you get to live, this time,” she said, deadly serious… before she burst out laughing as well.

Laughing like this was liberating, even with the sting of her secret between them. It felt natural, normal. She knew that, once she left this small room, she would need to keep her every action in check again to not reveal how Hiccup’s mere presence affected her, to not endanger him. But when she pressed her hand to her chest, presumably to catch her breath, she knew that it was worth it. He was worth it.

Once they’d calmed down again, she continued to examine the details of the saddle’s stitchings. It truly was completely mental. There had to be a small fortune of silver thread stitched into the thing...
“You’re a sadist, and I know that you encouraged this, didn’t you?” she said after a while, shaking her head at the sheer lunacy of this thing.

“Who, me?” Eret said innocently, and then chuckled. “Don’t worry too much, we all knew you probably won’t ever actually use it. It’s more of an alibi, for you and for my sisters alike. Believe me, these days they are eagerly grasping for every excuse to claim being busy to avert any unwanted attention.”

Astrid raised an eyebrow at his words, looking up from inspecting the equally ridiculously embellished bridle. “Unwanted attention?”

“Yeah, well…” Eret scratched his neck sheepishly. “There’s been a surge in young noblemen who all came up with the same idea: marry a daughter from one of the higher Houses for the alliance and maybe a bit more power. I mean, they’re probably right. And I easily admit that this is a far more pleasant way to seek power than simply killing your rivals, especially as most seem to put honest effort into courting the girls to win their hearts and hands. But it’s become a lot more intense lately, and my sisters are grasping for every opportunity to flee their suitors.”

Astrid contemplated his words with a slight frown. “But… last time I checked your sisters were younger than I am. Isn’t it a bit… early for them to think about marriage?” She was aware of the irony for her to say these words after she’d been thinking a lot about marriage since yesterday, but still.

But Eret simply shrugged. “It’s not like Father would marry them off right away. But contracts can already be made and sealed, even if the wedding only takes place in a couple of years. Besides… waiting to get married until the bride is twenty is not a law. It’s just a custom, one you’re far more fond of down here in the south then we’re anyway. And if it serves to settle some dispute between Father’s vessels, then I’m sure he wouldn’t hesitate to concur – as long as whichever of my sisters isn’t totally against it.”

Astrid nodded in understanding. It wasn’t that much of an uncommon practice after all.

“Anyway,” went Eret on. “It’s not like it’s that likely to actually happen anytime soon. I think Father mentioned something about how he wanted to talk with your father about other ways to calm those disputes or something. And it’s not that bad so far, for us, at least. There are just a dozen or so young men around the stud farm practically every day, hoping to talk to one of the girls. Or to impress them or Father or sometimes even me with their skills in caring for the horses, trying to convince us of their suitability. Frankly, it’s quite entertaining, from my point of view, at least. The stables are cleaner than they’ve been in years.”

“You’re horrible,” Astrid chuckled as they turned to leave the room.

“Of course, I am,” he agreed cheerfully, took a black saddle from one of the racks, and added with a wink. “And here I thought you of all people knew that already.”

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With a strained grunt, Hiccup lifted the heavy saddle up and onto Trample’s broad back. It was difficult, but he had to get used to this. House Jag’r’s horses were so much bigger compared to those he was used to. Or… had been used to… His jaw tightened at the dull ache that accompanied this thought.

Once again, his eyes flickered to Astrid for a scant second to chase away the hurtful memories. When she’d left the tack room a few minutes before, she’d been in an exceedingly good mood,
laughing about some comment Eret must have made. Then she’d returned to Markor’s stall, and was now humming quietly to herself. All he could see of her were occasional glimpses of her golden hair.

And she hadn’t even looked at him again.

But that was probably just because she was cautious. Yes, that had to be it. Despite the animated discussion he and Daniel had had last night and the friendly smile from this morning, Hiccup vividly remembered the warning he’d been given. Surely, it was just because she was trying to be careful. No need to panic...

“Okay, he’s ready,” Hiccup announced once the saddle was tightly attached to Trample. Eret and Daniel, who’d stood to the side, talking quietly, looked up and came over. “I’ve left the halter on as I guess you want to lunge first. But I can quickly bridle him, as soon as–”

“That’s alright, we can do that ourselves,” Eret said decidedly, and took the bridle out of Hiccup’s hand to lay it aside for later use. “But yes, we’ll do some lungeing first. Are you coming, Daniel? Lots to do today.”

Daniel hesitated and threw a questioning look over at his sister. “Aren’t you coming, Astrid?” he asked, head cocked to the side as she made no move to leave Markor’s stall and follow them. Hiccup perked up his head to look at her, just like Eret did.

“No, I’ll stay here,” she replied absentmindedly, head leaned against the horse’s neck and apparently entirely caught up in her thoughts.

His heartbeat quickened at the prospect of them staying behind – alone – but he also caught the worried expression on the Prince’s face. He seemed as if he wanted to object when Eret placed a hand on his friend’s arm.

“Hey, it’s all right,” he said quietly, his voice easily carrying toward where Hiccup stood. “I get that you’re worried for her after what you told me last night. But look at her. Does she look scared or anything? She’s fine. There’s no need to soothe any fears when there are none.”

“Maybe,” the Prince replied, murmuring. “It’s just…” Hiccup practically felt how piercing blue eyes rested on him for a moment, and he tried hard to act as if he was just lounging around and not listening in.

“Listen,” Eret interjected, even quieter than before. “There’s no need to worry about him. He’s not like that creep Thuggory or that other man. I promise – no, I vouch for him. She’s safe with him. Besides,” he added more cheerfully. “You do remember the scared swan, right? She can take care of herself.”

The Prince sighed, and from the corner of his eye, Hiccup saw how he nodded. “You’re right, I guess. Okay. Let’s get started.”

They left the stables and Hiccup gazed after them, thoughtfully. Eret’s words had hit him on many levels, and he wasn’t sure about which to think first. Why should Astrid be scared of him? He hadn’t given her any reason for that… had he? No, surely not. But what had he meant by creep? It didn’t make much sense to him. And what had that been about a scared swan? It had sounded… meaningful somehow, like there was a story behind that phrase. It at least seemed to have been important enough to convince the Prince in the end. He wondered what that had meant.

But aside from those confusing comments, there had been something else that bothered him even
more. Eret had vouched for him… He’d promised that Astrid would be safe with Hiccup. Gulping, he fought to calm down the troubled emotions that started to boil up inside him.

Of course, Astrid was safe with him! The mere thought something could ever happen to her made his heart cramp painfully, and in that moment, he knew that he would do anything to ensure her safety. But that probably hadn’t been what Eret had meant.

Creep.

No, the Prince wasn’t worried about something dangerous that could happen to her, some outer threat she needed protection from. And why would he be? There was not much that could actually happen to her here at the capitol. There were no Malarian raiders who could penetrate this far into the kingdom, and the only other real threat, the dragons, barely ever came this far south. No, what the Prince was worried about were some creeps, men who simply lusted after her body. And now, they’d left her alone with him, despite that fear. Because Eret had vouched for him.

Hiccup took a deep shuddering breath and closed his eyes. He’s right!, he thought to himself. He wasn’t like that, wasn’t forbiddenly lusting after some random girls like some men did. This was something different. Eret was right to leave her with him. The Prince probably would disagree if he knew about Hiccup’s feelings for her, but it was true nonetheless. She was safe with him. He would never…

As the stable door finally closed, he looked up at where she still stood inside the stall. She seemed lost in thoughts, so he felt free to gaze at her. Eret was right. When it came down to the points Daniel probably was concerned about, then she was safe with him. He would never do anything she wouldn’t want him to do. He wouldn’t venture where he was explicitly forbidden. He would never take what wasn’t rightfully his. But all Gods above, if the Prince knew about how they’d kissed last night, and how he wanted to kiss and hold her again right now, he would probably kill him on the spot.

And yet, he couldn’t bring himself to stay away from her. Not when they were finally alone.

He took a deep breath, grimacing as his leg tingled from standing still. Suddenly, he was nervous. He wasn’t sure how to approach her. Should he simply go to her, enter the stall and take her into his arms as he longed to? Simply being near her again? Somehow it felt weird to do so when she was so completely engrossed in enjoying her time with Markor.

He made a few hesitant steps in her direction, wondering why she wasn’t even looking at him. Hadn’t she noticed how Eret and her brother had left? That they were alone? Surely, she must have…

As he took another hesitant step in her direction, the stable door opened again, and Eret came in, his demeanor satisfied, and walked over to the hay bale with the basket. He snagged a pastry, took a bite, and then seemed to notice that Hiccup was sheepishly standing in the middle of the corridor.

“Why are you just standing there?” he asked, throwing Hiccup a confused look. “If you have nothing else to do, you can take a break and eat something.” He motioned to the basket. “This is for all of us, after all.”

“Erm… okay,” Hiccup said. He walked over to where Eret was standing and leaned against the straw bale as if to settle there, the basket in arm’s reach.

“How’s it going?”
Surprised at the suddenness of hearing Astrid, Hiccup turned to look; she’d poked her head out of the stall’s small opening, looking cheerful, her gaze entirely fixed on Eret, but Hiccup thought he could also see a certain tenseness in her.

“Perfectly, as expected,” Eret replied. “Daniel is leading him around so they get used to each other. But he won’t have any problems with this one.”

“That’s good to hear. I just hope he can keep him for a while this time.”

“Me too,” Eret sighed. “But the Malarians aren’t stupid. They know that, without the horses, our men are far less effective. It would be stupid of them not to target their attacks at them.”

“I know,” came Astrid’s despondent reply. “I just… I just wish all this pointless killing would stop at some point.”

“You’re not alone there,” snorted Eret, then waved and left the stables after grabbing a few more pastries on his way out.

Hiccup waited until the door was closed again, then stood up to walk over to her. Obviously, she wasn’t that lost in her thoughts, judging by her short conversation with Eret just now. Sure, she’d gone back to humming and scratching by now, but still...

He had almost reached the stall when she suddenly looked up after all. It was nothing but a quick glance, her stern blue eyes finding his without a moment’s doubt. She just looked, her expression unreadable, and then turned away again, her entire attention back on Markor.

Hiccup frowned but paused in his steps, confused. Why was she still acting like this when they were alone? Or did she genuinely want to spend time with her horse? That was something he couldn’t really begrudge her, considering how much she loved horses, according to Eret.

Indecisively, he paused in his steps, then turned and returned to the food basket. If that was what she wanted then he wouldn’t impose on her. Surely, they would get another chance… eventually...

Unsure what to do now, he reached into the basket and pulled out one of the pastries. He hadn’t paid attention to what he pulled out of the basket, instead just picking out something absently and taking a bite. But when the sweet taste of honey and nuts filled his mouth, his eyes closed on their own accord, savouring the divine taste. His thoughts drifted back to the night before, when he’d picked one of these by coincidence – the same one Astrid had reached for. It had felt like yet another string added to their connection, a tiny piece of knowledge about her, in that they had similar tastes in food.

Right… They were connected now. That was irrevocable. But that didn’t mean they would have to give up everything else. If she didn’t want to talk right now, if she wanted to enjoy her gift instead, well, that was okay. They still each had their own lives. Even though it felt to Hiccup as if his entire life was about her now.

Not wanting to sit around and feeling superfluous, Hiccup stood up and got the broom that was leaning against a wall. There were things he could do, something other than just oogle her all day if she was busy otherwise.

“Heh. I thought you wanted to eat,” came Eret’s teasing remark as he came inside again a few minutes later.

“Yes, and that’s what I did,” Hiccup replied, quickly searching his mind for more to say. “But sitting still isn’t all that comfortable on the long run. So I… I thought I could sweep the floor. You
know, after grooming Trample...”

Eret gave him a strange look, but then simply shrugged. “Never try to make sense of a Tribesman,” he mumbled. Apparently, this was a common saying, but one Hiccup had never heard before two years ago. Eret walked past him to get the bridle from where it hung next to Tramples stall.

“Are you already done with lunging?”

Both Eret and Hiccup looked up at Astrid’s surprised remark. Again, she’d poked her head through the small opening and nodded at the bridle in Eret’s hand. Apparently, she was paying more attention to her surroundings then Hiccup had thought. She just didn’t seem to be interested in him.

“Yes, it works really well. A few rounds around the ring and that should be it,” Eret replied, and left the stables again.

Hiccup looked at the door through which his cousin had just left and then to where Astrid had retreated back into the stall, further avoiding even the tiniest contact. Not even a quick glance...

Had something happened to change her mind? He didn’t really believe that, didn’t want to believe that, but… seeing how she kept ignoring him didn’t exactly help to make him feel confident. Had she learned something or heard something and now didn’t want anything to do with him anymore? She probably couldn’t end this connection between them, but she surely could ignore it. Was that what she was doing? Ignoring him and move on?

A part of him wasn’t even surprised. Ever since he remembered, people had looked at him with disdain and contempt. For not being strong, for not being a fighter. For not being who they thought he would be. Was it really that surprising that Astrid, the beautiful Princess who could probably choose from a dozen or more handsome and rich Dukes didn’t want to be associated with a failure like himself?

He remembered how they’d collided in the tack room earlier. How she’d looked at him, not really happy, and how she’d pushed him away, hard enough for him to stumble to the ground. He’d thought she’d done it just because of the approaching footsteps, but now he wondered.

He looked down at his hand around the broom and snorted harshly. Of course, she didn’t want him. In the end, he was nothing. Nothing but a lowly servant, good for nothing but shovelling horse shit.

But that seemed to be the theme of his life. He hadn’t minded taking care of his father’s animals in his youth; he’d been far better at it than at fighting anyway. And he hadn’t minded doing so for his uncle during the past months, as it was his only means by which to pay him back for his kindness. He wouldn’t have minded doing it for the rest of his life if he’d chosen to become a stablemaster. He didn’t mind doing it while they were at the castle as it provided a perfect excuse for him not to be around noblemen who potentially might recognise him after all. And he didn’t mind doing it in the future as Eret’s squire either.

This was his life now, the life he had chosen. Granted, he’d chosen it to be with her. But even if she didn’t want him now anymore, then this was still his life. He would get used to it. Would have to...

His thoughts kept running in circles as he mechanically swept the floor. In Markor’s stall, she was humming a low tune to herself, sounding happy and content, and entirely ignorant of his misery. It was mind-jarring. Every now and then over the next hour or so, Eret or sometimes Daniel came inside, getting food or something to drink, or getting rid of their jackets as the sun rose higher. They gave friendly comments and Astrid happily chatted with them, but Hiccup wasn’t paying
much attention.

Was that really it? One night of happiness, of dreaming about a life with her? A few hours of finally looking forward to the future? He gulped, and turned once more to look at her. In his mind’s eye, she seemed to radiate, to glow. She was joy and warmth and everything he wanted. And he wouldn’t simply give up like that!

He decided to approach her after all, taking the risk of her rejecting him against the uncertainty. He just had to try. Whatever it was that had changed her mind... maybe someone had told her something. Something that wasn’t true and he could set right. Or at least something he could explain. Reaching up to that burning spot on his chest to gather his courage, he went to Markor’s stall and was about to open the gate – when the front door opened again.

With brightly gleaming eyes, the Prince stepped inside. He directly went to the basket with the food and served himself, before he came over.

“These Jag’r-horses really are quite something,” he stated cheerily and threw a bit of cheese into his mouth. “The difference to the normal horses I had to ride during the last few weeks is almost ridiculous.” He shook his head in wonder.

Astrid looked up at him without a pause and threw him an amused smirk. “You’re aware of the fact that you say that every time? Shouldn’t you be used to that by now?”

Hiccup stood to the side, watching the exchange with trepidation and a rapidly beating heart. Had this been another sign? That he was to stay away? He felt numb. Maybe the rush of their weird connection had clouded her mind last night, and the light of day had made her see clear again. Maybe she simply didn’t want anything to do with him after all. If she decided to ignore their bond… Hiccup wasn’t sure how he was going to be able to cope then.

Astrid’s quiet but true laughter caught his attention again, and he put in some effort to concentrate on the here and now again. “You want to go on a ride? Through the countryside? Why am I not surprised?” she asked, amused.

Eret returned, too, leading Trample back inside. “It was inevitable, wasn’t it?” he dryly replied to her question, and tied the stallion to a ring mounted in his stall’s front. “But then, that’s why we’re all wearing riding gear, right? I’ll prepare Crusher, and Hiccup can help you with Markor once Cassie is ready. These two are far calmer, after all, that should go quickly. And–”

“I’m not going with you,” Astrid snorted, interrupting him. Three heads turned in her direction, all with equally surprised expressions on their faces. She didn’t want to go for a ride after she’d spent all morning cuddling her new horse? That didn’t really make sense. Surely, there was an explanation, but Hiccup wasn’t able to think right now. As if through a haze, he watched the back and forth around him, his numb mind trying to process.


“I would,” she admitted, a little miffed. “But as I recall, the proper saddle is still in the servants’ quarters. I surely won’t go for a ride on that hilarious torture device of a saddle.” She gestured toward the tack room, grimacing.

‘Ah, that makes sense,’ Hiccup thought numbly.

Eret and Daniel shared a concerned look. “I… didn’t think of that,” Eret admitted sheepishly.
Daniel grimaced, but then shrugged. “Ah, well... We can go on a ride on another day then. It’s not like we have much else to do during the next weeks until the Midwinter festivities.”

“No, don’t delay that ride,” Astrid said cheerily, turning back to pet Markor’s neck. “I can see how much you two are looking forward to it, and I don’t mind staying behind.”

“Seriously?” Eret gave her a sceptical look. “We’ll be gone for a couple of hours, I think. That could become quite boring.”

At that, she giggled. “I doubt that. You know me, I never notice much when I’m around horses. Surely not the passing of time.”

Despite himself, the increasingly pained thought in the back of Hiccup’s head commented, ‘Yeah, I noticed… not time… and not me.’

“True enough,” Eret shrugged.

“But you’d be all on your own,” Daniel threw in, worried. “I don’t think…”

“Oh, for Odin’s sake, I’ll be fine, Daniel,” she exclaimed. “Nobody ever comes here anyway.”

Daniel didn’t seem convinced.

“Hiccup could keep her company, if that makes you feel better,” Eret suggested, clearly eager to go for this fun ride they’d planned.

Daniel looked up at Hiccup, scrutinising him. But then his features cleared and he nodded. “Would that be all right for you, Astrid?” he asked.

She shrugged. “Sure, why not? If that makes you feel better.”

“You don’t mind babysitting my sister, right?” he asked, turning toward Hiccup with an amused twinkle in his eyes now. “She can be stubborn, but usually is good company.”

Hiccup swallowed, his gaze shifting from Daniel, who looked at him expectantly, to Astrid, who had all her attention on Markor again, and back again. “Of course, Milord. I don’t mind,” he said, as he thought ‘It can’t get any worse anyway.’

“Okay, then that’s settled,” Eret said, relieved.

Daniel stayed with Trample as Hiccup helped Eret preparing Crusher. They worked quickly; the past months had made them quite efficient, and shortly, Eret and the Prince led their horses back outside.

“Until later then. Don’t eat all the food, okay?” Eret called in parting.

“Have fun,” Astrid called back, and waved absentmindedly after them.

Hiccup followed them outside to hold the two black stallions in place until their riders sat in their saddles. Then he gazed after them as they rode past the paddock and finally disappeared behind a hill. He didn’t really want to go back inside, and dreaded the idea of spending hours with Astrid ignoring him like she’d done all day. But he had not much choice in that matter. He had agreed to keep her company, after all…

Those would be some long hours indeed.
But when he entered the stables and closed the door behind him, he suddenly found himself with an unexpected armful of Princess. Out of reflex, his arms closed around her, holding her, before his mind even had the slightest chance to understand what had happened.

“I thought they’d never leave,” she mumbled against his chest, her hands on his back clutching him tightly.

“W-What?” he stammered, disoriented by the sudden change in her behaviour. His arms around her were trembling.

“I knew they would want to go for a ride,” she explained, chuckling weakly. “They always do. I just had to convince them that they could leave me – leave us here without worrying.”

And then he understood. She’d acted so indifferent on purpose, so neither Daniel or Eret would think anything about leaving them alone? Because she’d known that would give them the chance to actually be alone? Gods…

Relief washed through him like a tangible warm wave, brushing away his tension and anxiety in a heartbeat. His arms around her tightened and he clutched her to his chest, chuckling shakily at his own stupidity. With her in his arms now and the already so familiar mayweed scent in his nose, he saw how pointless his worries had been. Of course she wouldn’t ignore their bond. Of course not…

“Eret was right,” he said, voice trembling slightly as he recalled something his cousin had said regularly. “Your mood swings really are dangerous.”

In his arms, she laughed lightly, the sweet sound making his heart swell. “Only if you don’t see them coming,” she replied, grinning up at him.

Despite her obviously good mood, her words dampened his own noticeably. “Guess I don’t know you well enough, then,” he replied throatily, grimacing as that fact hit him once again.

At his despondent tone, Astrid retreated to look up at him. She raised one hand and let her fingers glide over his face, as if to smooth out the lines that had formed there. Exhaling slowly, he leaned into her touch, warm and soft like sunshine.

“Well, we have a couple of hours to change that,” she said lightly, eyes soft as he looked at her. “What would you want to know?”

Chapter End Notes

Okay... you knew the angst would come, right? I mean... it's me! Just a tiny droplet though... more to come in later chapters ;)

And I'm sorry to say this... but, no, Eret doesn't know about Hiccstrid. He was genuinely making fun of her while at the same time playing with Daniel's worries to ease them.

So, one chapter to go until the hiatus. Two warnings though:
1. Sticky-sweet, teeth-rotting fluff to come... xD
2. I sincerely hope the next chapter will be on time... But it's my birthday this Sunday, and usually, things always get a bit hectic. I'll do my best, though :)
For a moment, Hiccup simply stared at her. What he wanted to know? *Everything!* He wanted to know everything about her, every tiny bit there *was* to know. What she liked and disliked, everything that had happened in her life so far, her past, her childhood. He wanted to know about her dreams and her wishes for the future. He wanted to know her as well as Eret and her brother did. Better even, so that, hopefully, he would be able to read her better in the future than he’d managed during these few last hours of doubt.

But what could he *ask* her? There were so *many* things on his mind. A part of him simply wanted to take her in his arms, to hold and to kiss her. But it didn’t feel right to directly do so, not yet. Far more important now was to get to *know* her. He cast about for something to start with, something that wasn’t too personal, yet told him more about her and her life. He wanted to ask her whether she’d ever felt anything remotely similar for anyone else, or whether all this was as new to her as it was to him. But it seemed too personal and intimate as a first question. Then he remembered something he’d wondered about earlier and smiled to himself.

“What did Eret mean when he said something about a… ‘scared swan’?” he asked, carefully brushing strands of her hair out of her face to better look at her. That comment about a swan had sparked his curiosity earlier. It had sounded so weird and unconnected, and yet had been so easily able to soothe her brother’s worries.

Astrid’s eyes sparked humorously at that question. “*Really?* That’s what you want to know first? Out of everything?” she asked, grinning.

He nodded, intrigued even more by her reaction. “Yes. Eret mentioned it earlier and it sounded… *interesting*.”

Now, she giggled. “*Interesting?* Maybe. I do wonder though. I always thought he and Daniel like to pretend that day didn’t happen.”

He gave her a confused look, and she smiled, nodded, and then pulled him over to the straw bale with the food basket. "I can tell you. It's a funny story. But let's sit down here. I'm sick of formality." She made herself comfortable on the straw bale, feet dangling off the side, and looked at him expectantly.

Hiccup followed her example and sat down as well, but left some space between them. He wasn't entirely over how he’d felt before when he’d thought she wouldn't want him after all. He still felt so close to her, *connected*. But now, in this strange setting where they could finally talk freely, he felt nervous and wasn't entirely sure how to behave.

"I must have been... two or three years old," she began, eyes gazing unseeingly into the distance. "Eret was six and Daniel eight, and at that time, they often took me with them to play outside. My governesses weren't all too happy, I think, but Father didn't really mind as long as they took care of me. Or maybe he *did* mind, and my governesses were just glad when I let off some steam without them having to run after me. They keep reminding me that I used to be a little wild."
She chuckled lightly, and Hiccup smiled as well at the picture of the wild toddler she must have been. It was an adorable thought.

"Anyway, one day, they again took me with them, not entirely with permission, as far as I've been told. We went to the pond, the one not far from here. It had always been one of our favourite places, and I'd learned early not to get too close to the water. And, as so often happened, Eret and Daniel began to play knights, using some sticks instead of swords while I cheered them on. But I must have gotten bored after all and started wandering around on my own. I found a swan standing around and... well, apparently, I thought it was a beautiful animal and wanted to pet it. It had to be as big as I was, if not bigger. But I've already been used to dogs and horses, big animals never really scared me. So I went to pet the swan."

Hiccup raised an eyebrow at that, but didn’t interrupt her with any questions.

"I'm not sure if you've ever tried that, but I can't recommend it," she continued, chuckling. "It bit me, and I think I must have cried out, because Daniel and Eret came running immediately. From what they told me, they must have been worried sick when they saw I wasn’t with them anymore. They were already looking for me, and when they heard me cry, well..." she shrugged, giggling again. "Although, I bet they weren't only worried for me. They must have been pretty scared at the prospect of getting scolded for letting me out of their sight too. Anyway, they came running, ready to chase the swan that had attacked me away, but they didn't get the chance. Because, apparently, I was already yelling at the swan, flinging my arms around and scolding it for being so mean. Somehow, I must have scared it, because it was already fleeing when they reached me." She was smiling fondly now. "Father and my governesses never learned about it. It had always been our secret, mine, Daniel's, Eret's, and Dagur's and Snotlout's, too, eventually. We never told anyone else."

Hiccup swallowed. "And yet you’ve told me?"

She finally turned to glance at him and nodded. "Yes. Because..." she swallowed, too. Her gaze dropped to her hand as she hesitantly carded her fingers through his. "Because I don't want to have any secrets from you."

His heartbeat quickened, at these words and her touch alike, warmth welling up inside him. "Me neither," he whispered. He saw how she blushed slightly, then averted her eyes again and continued speaking in a lighter tone, her fingers still entangled with his.

"Well, as I said... Nobody else knows. The boys only acknowledged that it happened at all with the nickname they gave me after it."

Understanding dawned on Hiccup. "Swanja... 'Little Swan'," he said, not really asking. It was the old language of his people, after all.

Again, she nodded. "Not because I'm of House Hofferson like everyone else thinks, but because, according to Eret, I can defend myself just as fiercely as a swan."

"It’s a beautiful nickname," he said cautiously. "Even more so with this story." He found himself wondering whether he could get away with calling her Swanja, too. Being this close to her, being a part of her circle of closest friends, those she trusted with her secrets.

As if she could read his thoughts, she said, "You can call me that, too, you know? It would definitely be better than this formal 'Milady' all the time."

"You think that would be okay?" Gods, he wanted to! As if he'd been a part of her life all this time.
As it could have been...

"I do. I mean, sure, it was Eret who came up with this name first. But by now, all of my brothers use it, even Daniel occasionally."

He frowned at that. "Your... brothers?"

Astrid chuckled again. "Yes... I mean, we're not really related, but it often feels like they are my brothers, too. Snot and Dagur, but Eret especially."

Hiccup became thoughtful as those words sank in. "I... won't call you 'Swanja'," he finally said, slowly. When she gave him a confused look, he added, "I... I was wishing I could have been a part of this group of yours. I've been thinking about how it could have been if... if we'd known each other since childhood. If we already knew each other. But now..." he paused, chuckling shakily. To think that, only this morning, he'd been angry at his father exactly because of this. Now, there was nothing of that left. "I... I'm glad we met only yesterday," he finally continued, voice thick with emotions. He raised his head to meet her puzzled expression, and, looking deep into her eyes, he added, "because if there's one thing I don't want to be, it is one of your 'brothers'."

He saw how her cheeks turned a slight shade pinker as she breathed a low, "Okay."

Slowly, he raised his hand to cup her lovely rosy cheek. Biting his lower lip, he watched her intently as her eyes became a little dazed, her lips parting invitingly. No, he wouldn't call her by the name her 'brothers' used.

"Astrid," he breathed, testingly. It was the first time he spoke her name out loud since he'd met her. He’d thought it might be weird to do so, personal and meaningful, but never in a million years would he have been able to anticipate the effect it had on him. On them both. His heart beat faster at the intimate form of address, and he felt how her skin beneath his hand became even warmer. Her eyes turned wide, dazed, and dark, as she gazed up at him with those blue orbs, deep like the sea. He felt how he lost himself in them, and time lost all meaning as he leaned in closer until he kissed her.

Her lips were sweet like honeyed mead, warm like a crackling hearth fire. Kissing her felt good. Right. Like home. They kissed slowly, unhurriedly testing and exploring. Her hands were on his chest, similar to in the tack room earlier, stabilising her as she melted against him, lips parted to welcome him in. Seeking more contact, he let his hand glide over her, cupping her face with both hands, then wandering on down her neck and around her shoulders, up and down her back to finally entangle his fingers into her hair. Her closeness made him lightheaded, and he wanted–

He made a startled gasp as she suddenly made a hasty step backwards. Opening his eyes, he looked at her where she now stood, confused at the anxious look on her face. Why was she backing away from him? Had he misinterpreted her signals after all? A spark of that fear and uncertainty from before rose inside him again. It seemed to be visible in his eyes as he watched her, because she immediately relaxed and gave him an apologetic smile.

"Not the hair," she whispered, voice breathy and low. He gave her a puzzled look, so she laughed shakily and added, "I can get away with a lot after a day at the stables. Dust and wrinkles in my dress and straw and hay in my hair. But not deliberately disentangled braids." A slight grimace crossed her face. "Another way to ensure I behave..."

Hiccup nodded slowly as understanding soothed his anxiety. His eyes lingered on her intricate braids, and noticed that they looked a little different now from how they'd looked yesterday. He'd thought they were just another bit of extensive adornment. But, apparently, that wasn't their
purpose. Or at least not their only one. The thought that they actually got used to restrain her made him grimace. "Okay..." he nodded, and added with shaky laughter, "No hair touching then." It pained him a little as he longed to play with her beautiful golden tresses, but she was right. That would be anything but sensible.

"What was that just now?" she suddenly asked, watching his worried face intently.

Hiccup blinked, not understanding what she meant. "Excuse me?"

"You looked... hurt. And afraid. Why?"

She sounded worried herself, but it took Hiccup a moment to understand what she was talking about. Then a pained smile crossed his face. He stepped closer to her again, taking her hand in his and playing idly with her fingers. "I... earlier, before Eret and Daniel left for their ride, I thought..." He took a deep breath and then added in a lower voice, "I thought you'd changed your mind. About me... us... And when you retreated just now..." he trailed off, inwardly cursing his insecurity. He trusted in her and in this bond the Gods had forged between them. But some habits were hard to get rid of once they were ingrained so deeply.

He felt the fingers of her free hand on his chin and looked up into her warm smile. "I'm sorry if my acting earlier hurt you. But it was just that, acting. I..." Hesitantly, she let her hand drop from his face to place it over his heart. Then she lifted their intertwined hands to place his onto her own chest. His heartbeat quickened as he felt her warm skin, the softness above her breasts. He wasn't really touching them, but his fingers were close.

"This," she continued, an endearing blush on her cheeks. "is the truth. And nothing will ever change that. We are one." Her smile turned a little sad, pleading. "But I'll need to act like before again. As if I don't care for you, as if you are nothing to me. Maybe Daniel won't mind if we become 'friends', but that's all we can be when anyone is around. In a more formal setting when in public, we can't even be that, and without someone else as an alibi, we wouldn't even be allowed to talk to each other. I might even be forced to... to berate or insult you to keep up appearances. So yes, I will act indifferent again, maybe even worse. But it will always be just acting. Because this is the only truth."

Hiccup gazed at her in wonder. Her words, the fact that they couldn't be together openly, should disturb him. But then, he'd already known that. And there was so much more in what she'd said. Her acknowledgement of this divine bond between them and the fact that she was willing to go against all and every expectation, just for his sake. And she was right. In this moment, with her hand over his and his over hers, he could feel how their hearts were beating in sync. There was no need for worries, doubts, or insecurities. Not ever.

Taking a deep breath, he raised a shaking hand to place it over hers over his heart. “Astrid, I...” he began. He wanted to thank her for this assurance, maybe apologise for his stupid insecurities and the doubts he’d had. But once again, speaking her name had a strange effect on them. As if the intimacy of being able to use this name struck a chord deep inside them. He couldn’t tell who moved first, who pulled who closer, but when their lips met, he couldn’t care less either way.

This time, their kiss didn't get interrupted by any rash actions. Instead, it became a heady mixture of sensual tasting and hungry exploring, of fingers gliding over skin and fabric, and of hands clutching tightly. It washed away all traces of shyness and residual insecurity, leaving them breathless and emotionally closer than ever before.

"I guess I shouldn't use your actual name to address you, either," Hiccup gasped as they broke the kiss, chuckling as he leaned his forehead against hers, eyes closed to enjoy the moment. "If that's
"The effect it has..."

He more felt her body vibrating against his than that he heard her laughing. "No, I guess not." He could sense the unspoken question hanging between them, though.

"I guess, 'Milady' it is, then," he said, smiling inwardly. In opposition to her, he quite liked the term. Granted, for different reasons, but still. As expected, she wrinkled her nose in annoyance. It was an endearing sight.

"I don't like it," she pouted, shifting to lean her head against his shoulder. "It's too formal. Sure, it's better than 'Your Royal Highness', but..."

Deeply inhaling her fragrant hair, a smile spread across his relaxed face. "And if I tell you that the word 'Milady' has another meaning for me?" He felt her pause in his arms before she retreated to give him a questioning look. "Where I come from..." he began, wincing inwardly at the reminder, but continued nonetheless. "Among the Northern Tribes, we rarely ever use formal titles. The Chief is the Chief, but aside from that barely anyone pays attention to correct addressments like Grand Duke or Baron, Lord or Lady. If you were to visit them, they probably would address you as 'Your Highness' or 'Milady'. But you’d be the exception and it would feel weird to everyone. Nobody uses it in day-to-day conversations, not like it gets used here."

He chuckled as he wondered how Arndis would react if anyone addressed her as 'Milady', but stopped that thought abruptly as he remembered...

*he would never have the chance to know!*

Fighting for composure at this renewed sting in his heart, he continued his explanation. It really was remarkable how her presence alone made it bearable to talk about his past.

"When we in the Tribes use that phrase," he continued after a short pause. "Then it usually means something different to us. We use it... more *literally*. My Lady. Lady of my life, my home, my heart. It's an endearment used only for someone very special." His gaze intensified, trying to transmit the sincerity of his feelings as he let his thumb caress her cheek and whispered, "Milady..."

She'd closed her eyes to enjoy his touch, but when she opened them again to look up at him, they were gleaming with joy. "And all of a sudden, I like it a lot more," she admitted, chuckling. "So, when you call me 'Milady'..."

"Then it means that you own my heart."

.o O o .

“So, you’re telling me that, among the Tribes, women really have the same rights as men?”

Astrid lay on top of a thin blanket they'd spread over the grass in front of the stables, with Hiccup laying a bit to her side. Occasionally, their hands reached for each other as they looked into the sky, but that was all the contact he seemed to allow. That, and soft kisses every now and then. They were talking about whatever came to their minds, funny stories of their childhood or which colours they preferred. Not once did he refuse to answer one of her questions, just like she readily told him whatever he wanted to know. But she'd noticed how he tensed whenever their conversation turned in the direction of his past, especially his family, and she was hesitant to actually *ask* those questions. Of course, she wanted to know who he was, who his father had been and why he wasn't living on the Northern Islands anymore. He'd said he wouldn't keep secrets from
her, so she was sure that, should she ask, he would answer. But at the same time... nothing of that really mattered to her. She didn’t need to know who he’d been before they met. Not when neither Eret, Daniel, or her father seemed worried about who he’d been, and not when it obviously pained Hiccup to even think about it. Not when there were so many other things to learn about him.

"Not... exactly the same rights," he clarified with only a small strain in his voice. “But definitely more than they have around here, as far as I can tell. They are allowed to do their day-to-day work without any restrictions. They can go to the market on their own, buy whatever they think necessary or useful or even just what they like without asking permission. In some areas they have even more rights than men, when it comes to their children's upbringing, for example, or how to organise the household. They... still are subject to their husbands or fathers, but it's still... different. They have more say in everything. Some even become warriors. Sometimes, they choose not to marry at all, but in opposition to here where one would lose his status for such a decision, it simply gets accepted without any form of retribution, although they do have to take certain oaths to Thor or Tyr. And they also have a say in who they marry. If they don't agree, then that's it. My sister for example, she—"

When he suddenly broke off, Astrid turned her head to look at him. As expected, his face was a mask of pain again, and she quickly squeezed his hand, hoping to distract him from this obviously painful line of thought. "Is that why you said you'd 'ask my father's permission to court me'? I was wondering about that, you know?" she asked calmly. And it seemed like her attempt at changing the topic had worked.

After a few moments, Hiccup noticeably relaxed and gave her a small if pained smile. "Yes," he answered throatily. "Any form of courtship or relationship that goes against the girl's father's – or rather her parents' – wishes is off-limits, just like it is here too. But even once the parents gave their consent, it is still the girl's decision whether she actually wants to marry her suitor."

"That sounds like Valhalla," she murmured thoughtfully. She thought of all the proposals her father had already gotten for her, and how in most cases, she didn't even know who these men were. This northern custom seemed so much more sensible.

Caught up in her thoughts, she hadn't noticed how Hiccup had rolled to his side and was gazing down at her, propped up on his elbow. Only when his free hand reached to caress her cheek did she look up at him again, her belly tingling in anticipation at his soft touch. Barely more than an hour could have passed since Daniel and Eret had left, but she already was so familiar with him, with the way he moved and his body language.

She wasn't surprised when he leaned down to kiss her, eagerly welcomed him, his sweet lips and curious tongue. The way it moved in her mouth, exploring and teasing, left her dizzy. She hummed, enjoying the sensation, and without consciously deciding to, lifted one hand to his head. She carded her fingers through his thick and soft hair, lightly scraping over his scalp and holding him close. Kissing him was wonderful, and she never wanted this moment to end. She more felt than heard the low groan rumbling in the back of his throat, felt how their kiss intensified. Without really understanding why, her heart began to race, beating demandingly against its cage. But before she could react, hold him tighter or try to move her overwhelmed tongue with his, he pulled back.

He gazed down at her, eyes dark and dilated. There was something in them, some wildfire burning hotly. But before she could make any sense of that, that fire guttered and calmed again. He blinked a few times, smiled in a strangely torn way, quickly leaned down to peck her forehead, and then rolled onto his back again.

Astrid wasn't sure what had just happened, why her heart was beating so fast or why pleasant
warmth seemed to pool in her belly. All she could do was gaze unseeingly into the sky above her as she felt his hand squeezing hers once again.

"Tell me more about you," he pleaded after a few moments, voice thick and rough. Without knowing why, it caused something inside her to flutter.

"What do you want to know?" she asked, voice shaking a little. Freya, what was with her?

She felt Hiccup shrug next to her, and when he spoke his voice was almost back to normal again. "I don't know. Everything. Whatever you want to tell me." He paused, and then added, "Tell me more about your childhood."

A smile spread across her face at how he seemed intent on catching up on everything that had ever happened in her life. She cast about in her mind what to tell him next, and decided on a bit that was important for him too. To make him understand why they needed to be so careful...

"Well, where to start... You probably know that my mother died giving birth to me. I don't remember her at all, but I know that Father loved her dearly. Daniel remembers her a little and misses her more, I think. But for me, Father had always been enough. He's cared for us as much as he could, and loves us. But he overdoes protecting us sometimes, because our mother died so soon, I think. Although, Daniel definitely inherited that from him." She grimaced slightly, but then, she couldn't really hold their caution against either of them. "Three years ago, my step-mother died in childbirth, too, and our little brother with her. Ever since then... well, it became worse after that. Father became so overprotective, intent on keeping me away from any danger, and Daniel pulled along." This time, it was she who rolled to her side and propped herself up to look at him. Hesitantly, she scooted closer and laid her head on his shoulder. "That's why it is so important to be careful, you know?" she mumbled. "When it comes to my... safety, they know no sense or reason."

Hiccup had tensed slightly as she'd cuddled to his side, but now shifted to let her lay more comfortably, his arm around her shoulder. "I see," he murmured, relaxing again. "And I'll be careful, I promise, although I do see their point. I wouldn't want you to be in any danger either." His words seemed to amuse him as he trembled with quiet laughter, but Astrid failed to get the joke. Before she could ask though, he continued. "Although, from what I've heard, your mother wasn't exactly the typical quiet and obedient noblewoman, either."

At that, she chuckled too. "No, I guess she wasn't. Father keeps saying how much like her I am. Always moving, always outside. Never doing what I'm supposed to do. I even look a lot like her. We have a couple of portraits of her up in the castle, and..." She trailed off as she remembered how she'd looked at one of those portraits only this morning – and what else had occurred then.

She was reluctant to mention the conversation they'd had with Lord Eret I this morning. But at the same time, she felt like Hiccup had a right to know about it. After a quiet minute of gathering her courage, she said cautiously, "This morning, we talked with your... grandfather."

Hiccup became rigid beside her, and she instantly regretted to have brought it up. But as much as she wished, she couldn't unsay her words. All she could do was wait for his reaction.

After a few tense moments, he somewhat relaxed again, though not entirely. "And what did the old scarecrow have to say?" he scoffed bitterly.

Trying to remember some of the old goat's tirade, she finally shrugged, and said, "Not much of any importance, I think... He... wasn't all that happy when he learned... who you are?" She let her words end in a question, hoping, but not really expecting him to answer it.
"Yeah, I can imagine," he snorted. "I know not of one kind word he ever said about me. Let me guess, he mainly spew around insults? That would fit to what Eret told me about him. What was it? Runt? Wimp? Cripple would fit, too, by now."

Astrid shifted uncomfortably and regretted more and more to have mentioned the incident. "He... called you a weakling," she replied quietly when he obviously waited for an answer. "And... and your father a failure."

Involuntarily, Hiccup's hands tightened into fists. It wasn't new to him that his mother's father wasn't exactly fond of him. Born too early, and small and weak because of that, his grandfather had on more than one occasion suggested to simply 'get rid of him and try anew'. Or that's what he'd been told at least. He'd never met the man before yesterday, not at an age he could remember at least.

No, it didn't surprise him to hear the insults the old goat had directed at him. And it didn't really surprise him to hear those he'd directed at his father, either. But they hit him so much stronger. Because it was too close to what he'd thought earlier too. He'd been angry at his father for the decisions he'd made. The same decisions that had brought Stoick his father-in-law's scorn. But those hadn't been bad decisions. Not having known Astrid earlier aside, Hiccup fully supported every single one. Hearing this insult about his father now only served to heighten the feeling of his own guilt.

"My father was not a failure!" he snarled through gritted teeth. Whoever dared to insult Stoick the Vast of House Haddock had best be prepared for Hiccup to defend his father's honour. Because that was all that was left of him...

"Who... was he?"

Her hesitant words brought him back to the now. Right... Astrid hadn't meant to insult anyone. She'd simply repeated his grandfather's words, just as he'd asked her to.

Hiccup took a deep breath as he braced himself. No secrets. He felt raw inside after he'd already talked more about his past today than he'd thought about it in the last two years. But maybe this was good. Maybe telling her everything would help him truly accept it all and move on.

"My father... he--" he began, but had to pause as a big lump formed in his throat. Images of the broad man appeared behind his eyes. Images framed by fire when his father had steadily commanded the village through yet another dragon raid. Images tainted with anger when he and his father had argued over yet another petty bagatelle. And other images, older ones, filled with the love and warmth that only a loving father could provide. Those last had become rare. But they mattered nonetheless. "He was a... a great man... He--" he broke off again when he felt his eyes burning. He hadn't cried for any member of his family in a long while, but even then it had mostly been for his siblings or his mother. Barely ever for his father. But now, the pain over losing him too – this strong man who'd always been his guidance, despite their difficulties – hit him in full force. His heart ached, raw from the emotional overload this day provided. He struggled to find a way through the pain – when he felt her soothing touch on his cheek.

His eyes that had stared unseeingly into the empty sky above him, focused on her face as she leaned over him, pain and concern clear in her deep blue, radiating eyes.
“I’m sorry,” she whispered, pulling away from him. “I’m so sorry, I shouldn’t have—”

He cut her off by tightening his arm around her waist and pulled her back against him, close to his chest. He felt how she first tensed but then relaxed again, cuddling against him in a reassuring way. He wanted to tell her that there was no need to be sorry, that she’d done nothing wrong. She’d just asked an innocent question after all. It wasn’t her fault that those memories and emotions rendered him unable to speak, unable to cope for now. If anything, she was his means to finally manage. Letting out a quiet sob, he buried his face in her hair, mindful not to disturb it too much, and inhaled deeply. The already-familiar scent, of mayweed and her, soothed him. It was as if her warmth and presence washed through him like a wave lapping at the shore. Not washing away the stones and shells with their sharp edges, but covering them with soft sand and maybe, over time, dulling them to be harmless.

Hiccup didn’t know for how long they lay like this, with him holding her in his trembling arms and her simply letting him hold her. As if she knew how much he needed it. They lay still, with the only movement being Astrid’s hands as she slowly caressed his chest through his tunic until his breathing and heartbeat had calmed down again.

“I’m sorry I brought this up,” she finally murmured. “You don’t need to tell me, if... if you don’t want to.”

Still unable to form any words, all Hiccup could do was nod mutely.

.o O o.

Time flew by in a blur as they kept talking about lighter topics. Astrid told him of the adventures she and her brothers had had; how often they’d gotten into some mischief and only a clever ruse or honest apology had saved them from getting severely scolded. In return, he told her bits of his youth, how he’d preferred to spend his free time reading in the Great Hall instead of play fighting with others of his age. He told her of his fascination with mechanics, and tried to explain how... rewarding it was to actually make something. Something that worked and was useful.

When she curiously asked for an example, he dug the looking-glass he’d made for himself once out of his pack. He showed her how it could be used for looking at distant objects, and she directly used it to search the hills for any signs of Eret’s and Daniel’s return. Hiccup was sure she must have seen something similar before, but her interest seemed genuine. So he explained how it worked, enjoying how she listened avidly, nodding in understanding. With gleaming eyes, she tried the different eyepieces and fiddled with the focusing mechanism that Hiccup had made in happier times, until she could focus the view on whichever point she wanted to.

“This is amazing!” she exclaimed, her view aimed at the forest’s edge in the distance. She’d climbed on top of a straw bale for more height, looking out of one of the stables’ small ventilation windows. “It seems like I’m over there, as if I can touch the trees from here.” She reached out with her left hand that wasn’t holding the looking-glass, then giggled and let it drop again.

Hiccup watched her fondly from where he stood to the side, ready to jump should she lose her balance, and a serene smile on his face. He was incredibly grateful to her for not pressing for answers earlier, despite the fact that he’d promised to not keep secrets from her. It hadn’t been that, anyway, not that he’d wanted to keep the truth from her. He simply hadn’t been able to talk about it. Not today. And he wanted her to know that, at least.

He was about to gather his courage to approach this topic again, when suddenly her face fell. She let the hand with his looking-glass drop and turned her head to look at him, a pained smile on her face.
“They’re coming back,” she said despondently, slumping down on her knees on top of the bale. “I just spotted them. Twenty minutes, thirty at the most.”

Hiccup’s heart fell at the prospect of these precious hours alone with her to end soon. It had been wonderful – but not enough. He stepped to where she still was kneeling on the straw bale and took her hand in his without hesitating. After these last couple of hours, there was no need for that anymore. Not ever again.

“Before they get here,” he began, throat tightening at the topic he needed to address. “I… wanted to thank you. For not digging deeper, earlier, when–”

“It’s okay,” she interjected quickly, squeezing his hand. “I meant what I said, you don’t need to tell me.” She gasped out a shaky chuckle, then continued, “I mean, of course I want to know everything about you. But if there are things you don’t feel comfortable telling me… then that’s okay.” She lifted her hand to place it onto his chest, her eyes searching his. “I trust you.”

For a few seconds, all he could do was stare at her. A part of him wondered what he’d done, in this life or in a previous one, for the Gods to bless him like this. To let their paths cross, to connect them. To let him be a part of her life. A smile spread across his face as he lay his hand over hers on his chest and closed his eyes to savour the moment.

“I will tell you,” he replied hoarsely. “I promise to tell you everything. Everything you want to know. Just… just not today.”

She gave him a warm smile and leaned down a little from where she was still perched on the bale to let her forehead rest against his. “Okay,” she breathed.

Gods, she really was incredible.

“But on a similar note…” she began after a short while of comfortable silence. “There’s something I’d like to try. Before they are back, you know?” She retreated slightly to look at him, at his confused expression. What did she want to try now? It dawned on him as she placed both her hands around his face. “Hold still?” It was more of a question than a command, and he made a small nod, giving her the lead.

Slowly, she leaned down to kiss him. Starting as nothing but a soft brush of her lips over his, she soon became more confident as he made no attempts to take control and let her do as she pleased. He parted his lips for her as he felt her tongue slide over them, placing his hands on her hips to stabilise them both. She froze for just a second, surprised, but then went on, unperturbed. She obviously was no experienced kisser, but that made her picking up her courage to try all the sweeter, for him at least. And she wasn’t bad by any rate, either. Hiccup thoroughly enjoyed how she tried to mimic his technique, her tongue sliding along his and licking along the inside of his mouth, drawing a low groan from the back of his throat.

He put in a lot of effort to hold back and let her do, but eventually, he couldn’t help but kiss her back. Both arms around her slender body, he held her tightly as she pressed herself against his chest, felt her soft breasts as they kissed each other senseless. He was dead set on not going too far, on settling for only kissing. Everything more was wrong for many reasons. But he couldn’t deny that his body longed for more.

He’d been able to hold himself back earlier, when she’d lain beneath him on that blanket, when he’d felt her hand entangled in his hair and her soft moan had vibrated through him. But, now, with her having taken the lead, with her apparently wanting him to touch her – it had become infinitely more difficult.
On their own accord, his hands roamed up her back and around her shoulders, caressing the bare skin of her neck as she carded her fingers into his hair again. Her fingernails on his skin sent pleasant shivers down his spine and through his entire body, and let his blood wander into regions where it had no business to linger. Not with her, not here, not now.

When he felt how his trousers became tighter, he tore himself away from her lips – with more effort than he liked. Gasping for air, he gazed up at her dilated eyes and still parted lips, at her blush that reached all the way from her cheeks to her neckline. It looked like she’d enjoyed this kiss just as much as he had... But in opposition to him, she probably had no experience in these matters, wasn’t aware of how dangerous the ground was they were walking on. As became apparent by her next words.

“Was that okay?” she asked, still gasping for air and with brightly gleaming eyes.

Hiccup chuckled in response, but caught himself quickly again so as to not let her think he would be laughing about her. “More than okay,” he chuckled again, but caressed her flushed cheeks with his thumbs as he did so. Gods, she was perfect, in every way. “And I’d gladly continue… but we don’t have time.”

The reminder of her approaching brother sobered her up noticeably as it did Hiccup, too. As much as he might want to continue kissing her, or feel this close to her without any mental barriers between them anymore, he knew very well that they couldn’t.

“Right,” she grimaced and pulled back a little to regain her composure.

“So, how do we go on now?” he asked, equally trying to calm his heart, his thoughts, his entire being. “How will you behave now? Just so I know how to react properly.”

Astrid threw him a thoughtful look, her mind visibly working through options. “I think… we should try to ‘become friends’,” she finally replied. “I’m tired of acting out being indifferent to you, and I doubt I could do so convincingly enough to fool Eret and Daniel any longer anyway. Besides, Eret even asked me to befriend you, and after a couple of hours ‘talking’ that wouldn’t seem suspicious, either.”

He nodded, throat dry, and made a step toward her to give her one last kiss. But when the clicking of hooves on the stones outside became audible, they only had time for a last warm smile before they needed to ultimately recompose themselves.

.o O o.

When Eret and her brother entered the stables a few minutes later, leading their stallions behind them and laughing at a joke they’d shared outside, they found Astrid sitting on the straw bale next to the food basket. She was laughing about Hiccup’s performance of one of his former tutor’s indignation, concentrating on not looking anxious or nervous.

At first, she’d been surprised when he’d suddenly started talking, telling her yet another story of his past. But then she’d noticed the slightly different tone in his voice, not as intimate as before but more conversational, and the too smooth smile, showing none of his emotions beneath. So she’d started to play along, listening to his story in honest interest while pulling on her gloves again, but focusing on not showing too much of how interested she really was.

“See?” Eret laughed a few seconds after they came in, making Astrid turn toward them in fake surprise. “I told you they would get along.”
Astrid saw how Daniel’s gaze shifted from her to Hiccup and back again, his expression a mixture of concern and worries before it turned into a smile. “Yeah, looks like it.”

“Hey, you’re back,” Astrid noted superfluously and jumped off the bale to greet them, stretching as if she’d sat still for too long. “How was your ride?”

“Uneventful,” Daniel replied quickly, just as Eret said, “Funny,” and then burst out laughing. Daniel threw him a dark look, but Eret couldn’t be bothered.

“You brother misjudged Trample’s strength and got thrown off,” he explained cheerfully.

Astrid threw her brother a concerned glance, but wasn’t really worried. Not with Eret still laughing about it. However, for her brother’s sake she asked, “Are you all right?”

“Yeah,” he replied, rubbing his backside. “Nothing injured, except my pride.”

She fought back a grin, just as Eret added, “That’s why we’re doing this. Just imagine the gossip if this had happened when you’d be back in Westhill. You’d never hear the end of it, especially not from Snot or his father. This only hurt your pride, the other option would have killed it.” Chuckling cheerily, he led Crusher back to his stall. But when Hiccup approached him to help unsaddle the big horse, Eret shooed him off. “No, go and help Daniel. That way, we’ll be done faster. I’m starving, but the horses come first.”

Astrid watched as Hiccup nodded with a murmured, “Of course, Sir,” that made Eret groan in annoyance and everyone else chuckle. He went to help her brother with Trample, and the two of them directly started some discussion about metalworking after an off-handed comment about a few scratches on one of the buckles on Trample’s bridle. The sight made Astrid smile fondly, and she was glad that once again there was no need to hide it.

“They are adorable, aren’t they?” Eret commented dryly, nodding over to the other stall as she stepped closer to carefully pet Crusher’s nose.

Astrid nodded, absentmindedly watching Daniel and Hiccup. Mostly Hiccup. Adorable indeed. She’d loved to listen to his explanation of how his looking-glass worked. She’d never been particularly interested in such things, but seeing how animated he’d become had given her a completely new appreciation for the intricate mechanics of such devices.

To keep her smile from becoming too dopey, she entered Crusher’s stall, too, to stand next to Eret, her back to Hiccup and Daniel. Eret threw her a curious look, but didn’t complain as she picked up a brush and started to rub the big horse down.

“Do they let you actually take care of horses now?” he asked amused as he lifted the heavy saddle off the stallion and carefully laid it on its rack outside.

“No,” she replied, smiling faintly at the memory. “Hiccup showed me yesterday.”

Eret chuckled. “He did? Well, I guess there’s no way to keep you from doing so anymore then. Daniel and everyone else will simply have to accept it.”

“Yes. No rule of proper decorum can make me forget what I’ve learned,” she cheerfully chimed in on his amusement. “Although, to Hiccup’s defence I should add that he didn’t know who I was at that point.”

Eret, who’d just taken off Crusher’s bridle, paused in his movement to throw her a weird glance. “He didn’t?”
Inwardly cursing herself, Astrid chose not to reply. Instead, she decided to divert his attention and took the bridle from his hand. “Here, let me get this to the tack room,” she said, and hastily left the stall.

Gods, she really needed to be more careful! As far as anyone knew, Hiccup had ‘shown House Jag’r’s noble horses to the Princess of Volantis’. Not ‘spent hours joking around with a girl he didn’t know’. Biting her lip and worrying about how much Eret might be able to get out of her thoughtless comment, she wasn’t paying much attention as she once again entered the shadowy tack room. Neither to who might have gone there during the last few minutes nor to who already was in there as she went to look for the right rack for the bridle.

Her body froze as suddenly a strong arm wound around her waist, but her mind and heart knew instantly who it was. She turned in his embrace and Hiccup’s lips were on hers before the dropped bridle even hit the floor. Without thinking twice, she responded, eyes fluttering shut and lips parting. Her arms were around his neck before she could even think, pulling herself closer against him, as close as was possible. But just like earlier, she simply couldn’t get close enough. She wanted more, wanted to feel him and chase this strange sensation he inspired in her lower belly. This fluttering heat that seemed to burn brighter the more he touched her. His hands roaming over her back, his tongue moving with hers this time – it all threatened to overwhelm her.

But before she lost the last bit of her sanity, he broke the kiss. She thought she heard him chuckle quietly as he pressed his forehead to hers for a second, his knuckles brushing over her flushed cheeks. Then he turned, leaving her standing in a daze.

Logically, she knew that it was too dark to make out such details, but as he was about to open the door to the main room and turned to throw her a quick glance, she could swear she saw him wink.

The rest of the day went by in a blur.

After the horses were taken care of, the four of them settled down around the food basket for a late lunch. Conversation started slowly as especially Eret and Daniel seemed ravenous after their long ride. Only occasionally came short teasing comments that made everyone laugh, even the one they were aimed at.

Hiccup sat to the side, laughing with them and enjoying the company, but not really participating in the bantering. He was about to become a part of this group for real, something he hadn’t even thought of only a day ago. But it felt weird… Eret had never made a secret of how he would keep treating Hiccup like an equal, Daniel seemed to accept him easily, and he had no doubts about Astrid anymore. Not after these hours of emotionally connecting. But no matter how easily he seemed to fit in and how much he enjoyed it, he knew it could only be like this behind closed doors like here.

Outside this friendly bubble, things had to be different. It didn’t matter that he might be high-born enough to fit into this group. That was his past, a part of his life he couldn’t go back to. From now on, he was Eret’s squire. That was the path he’d chosen, a path that, hopefully, would lead him to where he wanted to.

His eyes landed on Astrid, inconspicuous as she was talking right now anyway, and he couldn’t help the warmth spreading through him once again at her sight. No, he didn’t hope this path would lead him to her. He knew it would. It was the path the Gods had wanted him to take. Maybe it wouldn’t always be an easy path, but he trusted in the Gods. He trusted that, as long as he did his best, he would succeed. As long as he didn’t give up and followed the path the Gods had laid out
for him, he would one day hold her in his arms, open and for everyone to see, and declare that she was his, that he was hers. It was a future he was looking forward to.

They spend hours with talking and teasing, and eventually, Hiccup joined in, not feeling the need to hold back that much anymore. He still had to be careful when interacting with Astrid, but even that had become easier. He could joke and laugh with her, tease her and get teased without it seeming unnatural. He noticed how Eret watched them with a weird look every now and then, but her brother seemed to accept him as her friend without much trouble. She showed no reluctance anymore when talking to him, and as long as Hiccup kept a certain minimum of distance between them, that seemed to be enough for the Prince.

When the early setting sun shone through the open door to where they were still sitting and chatting, Hiccup realised that this most wonderful of all days was coming to an end. It had started with uncertain anxiety, but now he couldn’t be further away from those emotions. With his eyes covertly resting on Astrid as Eret helped her up, he felt a certain elation, reassured and confident in their bond. Even if they wouldn’t often get the chance to spend hours alone like today, the prospect of spending more days like this, as her friend, was still so much more than he’d hoped for this morning. And the hope that there might be more secret moments like the one in the tack room earlier when they could get closer without anyone noticing made his heart sing.

“Ah, this was a great day,” Daniel stated, stretching and rubbing his back, stiff from sitting so long. “I do miss these lazy days occasionally. Not that it’s not great to finally do something useful, but…” he shrugged.

Eret grinned. “I surely won’t mind having a few more of those before you go back to Westhill. We just need to get Markor’s saddle here, and then we can go for longer rides, maybe a picnic at the lake or on that meadow in the forest. It’s been ages since the last time we did that.”

“I’m more than up for a picnic in the woods,” Astrid chimed in as Eret offered her a hand to help her up. “Although, this one here today was fun, too. I certainly wouldn’t mind a repetition.” She stretched, and Hiccup caught the quick glance she threw him when the other two weren’t looking. He fought back the small smile that tugged at his lips as he contemplated how he certainly wouldn’t mind that, either.

“And we’ll do so for sure,” Daniel said. “But now, we should go back. I can’t wait to see what those crazy twins have come up with.”

Snorting with suppressed laughter, Eret shook his head and turned toward Hiccup. “No idea whether we’ll make it here tomorrow, but you’ll be okay here, right?”

Hiccup smiled at his cousin, and nodded. “I will. There are enough apples to last me a while. Don’t worry, I’ll be fine.”

Eret returned his smile and clapped him on the shoulder. “Right. Good night then, Hiccup.”

“Good night, Sir,” Hiccup said grinning, and bowed exaggeratedly.

Rolling his eyes, Eret returned to Daniel and Astrid, who already waited near the door.

“Good night, Hiccup,” the Prince also bid his farewell. “We’ll see you soon, I guess. And I try to remember bringing you one of the books we talked about earlier.”

“Good night, Milord. And thank you, that would be a most welcome diversion,” he replied, bowing slightly. Then he turned toward the Princess, not hesitating to meet her eyes and enjoying the fact
that he could. He repeated the bowing motion he’d made to her brother, and said in a low voice. “Milady.”

“Good night, Hiccup,” she replied, voice quivering only the tiniest bit.

A few moments later, Hiccup stood in the doorway of the stables and watched the three of them walk up the narrow path that led back to the castle. When the small group reached the top of a hill, they turned to wave at him once more.

The low autumn sun caught in her golden hair, framing her in a halo of light. She seemed to glow, radiating light like one of the Valkyries in his people’s stories and Hiccup was glad that nobody was close enough anymore to see the awestruck expression on his face. At that moment he knew that he would not only do his best to go this path. He would do everything to reach his goal to be with her.

Whatever it would take!

- End of part 1 -

Chapter End Notes

So, this was Part 1... As announced, I'm going on a hiatus of four weeks now, meaning we start with Part 2 on July, 20th. Until then, feel free to reread Part 1 ( ; ) , leave reviews on what you think of this first part, contact me through PM if you have questions, or give my Alpha/Co-author's story A Thing Of Vikings a try.

Okay, where does this part leave us? Hiccup and Astrid now are sure and secure in their bond, their connection. But their relationship has just started and, in addition, has to stay a secret at all costs. They will have to watch their every action and instantly change behaviour according to the situation. It'll be exciting, exhilarating even. But for how long will they manage that?

For those who'd hoped to finally learn everything about Hiccup's past: It's not time yet. A revelation like this doesn't happen in the first act. Although, I feel like I've revealed a lot already anyway.

This chapter's title Never Dreaming What We'd Have To Go Through, also from Anastasia's "At The Beginning", is one of the titles I had in mind pretty much right from the beginning of the story. The whole line is

We were strangers, starting out on a journey,
Never dreaming what we'd have to go through.
And, well... I didn't choose this title without a reason O:)

stesttesttest
Welcome back everyone! :) So, my hiatus is over. I have to admit, I didn't get as much writing done as I would have liked (thanks to a mild case of writer's block). So it's possible that chapters might be a bit shorter occasionally. But I really want to keep up the weekly schedule.

And I'd like to use this moment to thank margarethelstone and poppys-fanworld over on Tumblr who made some incredible fanart/-edits for this story. That meant the world to me!

Part One was about introducing the world and these crazy first ~24h of their acquaintance, how they got together, and how their relationship started. Part Two is about development, on more than one point. And I'll do my very best to not let it become boring, because it's important, for the characters and for the later events. I'd also like to remind everyone that this is E-rated. So far, there wasn't much in that direction... but we'll get there.

As for this chapter's title: Thanks to my daughters (4yo and 6yo), I've been listening to a lot Imagine Dragons lately (I really like their taste in music ^^). This one is from their song I Don't Know Why, and I just... had to use it...

(Five weeks later)

At the end of their ride, Astrid was panting for air and covered in sweat but blissfully happy. With an exhausted sigh, she leaned down and cuddled against the warm body beneath her, smiling as her fingers combed leisurely through the thick auburn mane.

“Mmhh, that was fantastic,” she hummed. “We’re good together, don’t you think?”

The only answer she got, however, was an almost amused-sounding snort, and before she could say anything else, the sound of approaching hooves on stone made her look up. Three more horses entered the place in front of the stables in nearly full-speed and came to a halt beside her.

“Thor, I can’t believe you beat us *again,*” Daniel exclaimed, gasping for air and shaking his head in mock-indignation as his steed pulled up alongside hers. Markor gave a snort and shied away from the more aggressive stallion, but Astrid was used to that by now and quickly had him under control again.

“But blame me,” she replied, grinning widely at her brother. “It’s all Eret’s fault.”

“My?” Eret turned his head toward her, a disbelieving expression on his tattooed face as he reflexively petted Crusher’s broad neck.

“Sure,” Astrid threw back, humour glinting in her eyes. “You’re the one who gave Markor to me.
And you bred and trained him. So it’s your fault entirely that I win every race now.”

“Heh. No, no, no, I won’t take the blame for that. Hiccup trained him, so I say it’s his fault.”

“Right… of course, Sir. As you wish, Sir. It’s all my fault, I’m to blame. Guilty as charged. Where do you want to hang me?” Hiccup replied with his usual dry humour, his exaggerated bow looking comically on Cassie’s back.

Daniel and Eret, who’d eventually given up on altering Hiccup’s formal form of address, both chuckled as they dismounted. Astrid, however, felt a painful sting at that comment, at the horrible image it conjured to her mind’s eye. She quickly fought it down as Eret came to help her and her wide skirt off the horse, but a shade of anxiety lingered even as all four of them and their horses were back inside the cosy stables a minute later.

It was a cool but thankfully dry winter day, a few days before Midwinter, and the sun was setting already, despite it only being mid-afternoon. And just like on nearly all other days during the last five weeks, Astrid had spent the day with Eret and her brother at the stables.

And with Hiccup.

Most of all and foremost with Hiccup. The last few weeks had been like an endless dream, like some fairy tale come true. Everyone seemed to assume her good mood came from being around the horses and her best friend all the time, and Astrid gladly let them think so. But the truth was that nearly all that mattered to her these days was Hiccup.

Every morning, her first thought was of him, whether he was awake already and whether he might be thinking of her, too. Every day, she saw him, in his position as Eret’s squire at the very least, when she accompanied Eret and Daniel on their visits to the barracks, the sparring grounds, or the archery range. And every night, she fell asleep with a smile on her lips, knowing she would dream of him, of gazing into his gleaming eyes so full of life, of kissing his alluring lips without paying attention to the passing of time, or simply of him holding her until the morning came.

In addition, they spend most of their days at the stables anyway where they could interact more freely, talk and laugh like the friends the four of them had truly become. If it was only them, it was easy to forget that he hadn’t always been a part of this tight group. And keeping up the friends-charade most of the time was easy anyway. Because by now, they had developed a certain routine that kept them safe from either Daniel or Eret noticing anything.

After Daniel had learned she now knew how to properly groom a horse, he’d grudgingly agreed to her actually helping with the horses instead of simply watching. But practicality still put a limit to what she could do. She had problems reaching Markor’s high back in order to brush off dust and dirt or to lift his heavy saddle on or off his back, so she left those parts to one of her men and settled for other tasks instead.

Once Markor was safely in his stall, she took his bridle off and left the gelding to a well-earned snack, and ventured over to where Eret was working on Crusher. Without a word, he handed his bridle to her through the window, used to this routine by now. But when she went to Trample’s stall next, there was no bridle waiting for her like it usually was. She threw a careful glance at where Hiccup was busy unsaddling Cassie and bit her lip. “Daniel?” she asked, trying hard not to sound impatient.

“Yes, just a moment,” Daniel replied, distracted as he inspected a particular leather strap of Trample’s bridle, grimaced slightly, but then handed it over. “There’s a small fissure in that buckle. I’d hoped it would be just dirt, but I fear it needs fixing soon. Could you give it a look, Hiccup?”
The last words he spoke louder so Hiccup would hear them; an affirmation came through the wall a moment later.

Fondly rolling her eyes at her brother’s fastidiousness, she took the bridle and slung it over her shoulder to join Markor’s and Crusher’s, and lastly approached Cassie’s stall. As usual. The mare’s light brown and slightly worn-out bridle already hung in the small window at the front of her stall. Wordlessly, Astrid reached for it, just as Hiccup stepped outside, carrying Cassie’s saddle on his arms.

“Ah, perfect,” he said with a simple smile. “Would you be so kind as to close the gate behind me, Milady?”

“Sure,” she replied with an equally nondescript smile. She did as asked, and then hurried after him to open the door to the tack room for him, as he had no hands free to do so himself. As usual.

Quickly, saddle and bridles were all packed away properly, and seconds later, the pair of them were pressed against the wall in the far corner of the room. By now, she was every bit as involved as he was, grabbing his tunic and pulling him closer until there was no space left between them. She thrilled in how eagerly he responded, never hesitant or careful, holding her tight as his lips on her mouth took away her breath and every shred of coherent thought. It was these moments that she lived for, the moments that mattered these days. These stolen minutes when they could discard all masks and pretend that what they did wasn’t forbidden and dangerous.

Of course, it was risky, with Eret and Daniel directly in the room next door. But then, their routine stipulated that they would rub down their horses and then continue with hers, while she would get their saddles put away in the tack room. And even if they were to come in here... The corner she and Hiccup were hiding in wasn’t visible from the door. Even if Daniel were to burst in without warning – which would be very unlike him – they’d have time to separate. All in all, the risk was minimal.

After the first rush of desperate reconnection was over, their interactions became slower, turning more to soft caresses and even softer whispers. Astrid hummed as his hands glided over her neck and what little skin was exposed to the cool winter air, tracing the line of her collarbone beneath the fabric. Lightly he played with a few strands of her hair that had become loose during their ride earlier before he tugged them back into place, careful not to disturb the original pattern. The sensations his touches inspired in her were overwhelming as always, making her body tremble, her knees weak, and her belly flutter with this strange warmth she associated uniquely with him.

Deeply, she inhaled his scent of sweat and dust, of horses and of the wind, all mixed with that musky note that was simply him. This scent was addictive; it always put her at ease while at the same time always made her want more. More of him, his touches, their closeness. More time. But all they had were these limited, stolen moments.

She longed to kiss him again, but held back out of fear of not being able to stop again. They couldn’t hide in here for long, or Eret and Daniel surely would become suspicious eventually. Instead, she reached to trace his face, his jaw, his lips, and eyebrows, lines she knew by heart but never could get enough of.

“I miss you,” he murmured, eyes closed as he snuggled into her hand. It should be a weird thing to say while she was in his arms, so close that his warmth was seeping through their clothes, but it wasn’t. Astrid knew exactly what he meant; she felt it too. This insatiable longing to be close to him, not just physically but mentally and emotionally as well. To spend time with him without always being on guard, without paying attention to what they said or did. Oh, how she wished to get another chance to spend a couple of hours alone with him.
But there was no way they could get those. Not without raising dangerous suspicions.

After that first time where they’d spent those precious hours alone at the stables, they’d only once gotten the chance to do so again. But even Daniel had given her a funny look when she’d proclaimed to ‘not be in the mood for a ride and to rather stay behind’. He had accepted Hiccup’s offer to keep her company again, but they hadn’t dared to use this excuse again.

Instead, they’d settled for secretly stolen moments in-between, quick but heated kisses in shadowy corners, or soft caresses when nobody was looking.

It was exciting and exhilarating – but never enough.

“I know,” she breathed, and placed one hand onto his chest, over his heart. His hand was over hers not a second later, his forehead resting against hers as they listened to their heartbeats thrumming in each other’s chests. It was one of the most beautiful sounds she knew, and she wasn’t done listening as he tried to be sensible and drew away.

Not yet ready to let go of him, she pulled him back and into another kiss after all, deep and ardent. Despite her better judgement, she buried her fingers in his hair, drawing one of these deep groans out of his throat she just loved to hear and that always made her dizzy.

Hiccup complied without reluctance; his arms were around her in an instant and he kissed her with a passion that quickly robbed her of all senses. The way his tongue moved with hers and their lips slid together, it made her head spin wonderfully. When the fluttering heat in her belly became stronger, she whimpered and, purely acting on instinct, drew herself closer to him still, searching contact and warmth. His hands tightened on her shoulders, and with a low groan, he tore his mouth away from hers. But instead of retreating, he let it wander along her cheek, to her ear, and down her neck, covering her with damp, open-mouthed kisses, gasping against her skin.

“Hiccup…” she moaned weakly as his mouth reached the collar of her dress and he made a half-hearted attempt at pushing it aside to wander further. She wanted him to go further.

And yet, they both knew they couldn’t. Hiccup paused, just as she regained some of her senses, too.

“We need to go back,” she breathed after a few moments and he nodded, his hair brushing against her jaw.

“I know.” He sounded hoarse and swallowed before he added, “I just wish…”

He didn’t finish his sentence, didn’t phrase his wish, and he didn’t need to either. Astrid knew what he meant. As much as they enjoyed these forbidden moments, they weren’t enough. They needed more, more time together, to talk freely without hiding anything or lying to everyone.

Not for the first time during the last weeks, the faint idea of trying to talk to Daniel resurfaced in her thoughts. Maybe she could convince him, slowly. Warm him to the idea of her actually wanting a man in her life, someone other than another brother, someone she had chosen. Maybe, if he understood that… maybe he would support the idea? Possibly even help them? He liked Hiccup, didn’t he? It sounded almost too good to be true, but she had to try. She just needed to find a way how to bring it up.

Instead of replying to Hiccup’s unfinished sentence, she turned her head to nuzzle into his hair, inhaling deeply, before she carefully but determinately pushed him back. He didn’t resist, only smiled wistfully as he reached for her hand on his chest and pulled her along to the door. Back
toward reality.

Before he opened the door though, he paused and lifted their intertwined hands to his lips. As usual. He breathed a couple of butterfly kisses onto her knuckles which made a small lump form in her throat. This was the last unobserved moment they had, and as always they shared a last smile before the bittersweet moment ended. Then Hiccup let go of her and pushed the door open.

“...and then the Baron’s son actually mucked out all the stalls without complaining,” Hiccup said cheerfully as he held the door open for her. “Afterwards, he’d been probably dirtier than ever before in his entire life, but he stayed true to his word.”

Chuckling shakily, Astrid walked passed him. It was part of their routine, acting as if they’d exchanged nothing but funny anecdotes. “I bet that made a good impression on the stable masters.”

“What, Baron Hammond’s son?” Eret threw in as they approached. “Not just the stable masters, that much is for sure. Hel, the boy even impressed me. If he keeps putting that much effort into working with the horses, I wouldn’t have any complaints against him leading one of the smaller stud farms in a couple of years in case my sister is still that fond of him then.”

Hiccup responded with a low chuckle and a nod, quickly lifted Markor’s saddle off his back, and then returned to Cassie’s stall to rub her down. Astrid covertly followed him with her eyes, but then quickly continued with their usual routine. As she went to carry Markor’s saddle to the tack room, a truer smile replaced the tense one from before. Spending these days with her brothers, the horses, and with Hiccup – away from her gilded cage – was great. She honestly enjoyed every minute of it, despite the nagging fear for Hiccup’s safety and the uneasiness lying to her brothers brought.

They all worked in relative silence for a while, the men rubbing down their horses while she carried the remaining saddles to the tack room and then started to work on Markor too. But it didn’t take long until the gate to Markor’s stall got pushed open again and a very welcome head poked through the opening.

“Do you need my help here, Milady? Cassie is cared for already,” Hiccup’s words were calm as was his voice, but the whimsical grin he threw her surely was anything but innocent. It wasn’t surprising that he was the first to have finished off his own horse, despite having started later. Cassie was smaller and much calmer than the other horses after all. Markor might be a gelding... but he’d still been bred from a warhorse bloodline; he was small only by the standards of his brothers.

“That would be most welcome, Hiccup,” she replied politely, and made way for him to step past her to where an additional brush lay. And shuddered slightly as he let his hand glide down her cloth-covered arm in passing. In here, the two of them didn’t dare to do anything compromising with the others so close by. But hidden from view as they were, sharing occasional loving glances and light caresses was simply too tempting.

They settled into a calm working routine, Astrid working with her right hand, Hiccup with his left, and their unoccupied hands resting on Markor’s flank between them. Every now and then they sought each other’s contact, fingers lightly brushing over or plainly carding through the other’s. They knew they couldn’t do more in here, but it was at least something. This stall too was a fairly safe place, the routine of the past weeks calming Astrid’s nerves, and even her quickly drawing her hand away from his when Eret’s footsteps approached wasn’t causing her to panic anymore. “Okay, I’m done,” Eret said in his usual cheerful manner, and poked his head through the window. His gaze wandered directly to her, a weirdly serious expression on his face. “I’ll take over now, so you--”
He got interrupted by hastily approaching footsteps, obviously someone running toward the stables in a hurry, and turned his head in the direction of the sounds. Hiccup used the moment of distraction to once more caress her hand, his fingers gliding over her skin ever so lightly but leaving a burning trail nonetheless. Astrid’s eyes fluttered shut in bliss – when Eret unexpectedly turned back toward her before the door to the stables even opened.

“Ah, I guess they really made it... Swanja, you should be going, and–” He broke off and paled, eyes widening when he noticed Hiccup’s hand on hers.

Astrid reacted in a heartbeat. She quickly pulled her hand back and made a hasty step away from Hiccup, looking at him in surprise as if his accidental touch had startled her. He reacted just as quickly, his wide eyes on her before they dropped to the ground a frantic heartbeat later. “I– I’m sorry, Milady. I didn’t...” he stammered, pretending that it was just the accidental touch that caused this behaviour – and not Eret catching them.

Astrid hoped with all her heart that their acting would convince him.

But before either of them could say any more, the door to the stables flew open and Tuff burst inside, hair in disarray and panting for air. “Oh Thor,” he gasped, hands propped up on his knees to catch his breath. “Seriously, can’t you move over to the main stables? This place is way too far to run to all the time.”

“Where would be the fun in that?” Daniel snorted from where he was still busy tending to Trample. “It’s so wonderfully quiet and remote here.”

Timothy grumbled to himself, but didn’t object any further. Instead, he straightened and walked straight over to where Eret still stood in front of Markor’s stall. He opened the gate with a wary eye at the big horse, but then turned his attention to Astrid. “You, young Lady, are coming with me. Now! And I don’t care whether your horse is taken care of or not. You need to be presentable, and we only have about two hours. Again!” When he was met with a row of confused faces, he added, “House Berserker’s ship just landed in the harbour, half a day earlier than expected. But there’s no way Dagur’s accolade could be brought forward from tomorrow, so there’s going to be an official reception tonight instead. Now, hurry!”

He made another step into the stall to shoo Astrid out, and she reacted hastily, incredibly grateful for this interruption. Hopefully, this news would distract Eret enough to not think about what he’d seen, to forget about it and not tell anyone.

Oh, please!

Astrid didn’t look at anyone as she followed Tuff out of the stables. Not at Eret to see what she might read on his face, and not at Hiccup either. It pained her not to look at him one last time for today, to not say her farewell or share a smile. But she didn’t dare to draw the attention back to him.

Chapter End Notes

duh~duh~duuuuhh...

There's this secret writer's club called 'Hides Under Rocks'. ... ... ... That's where I'll be... probably for the entire rest of this story. Just in case anyone is wondering...
Comments and feedback very welcome. :)


Astrid had an intense sense of déja vu.

Entirely caught up in her thoughts, she once again was following her warder up the path to the castle, letting him lead her through the brimming corridors and into her rooms, and stood still as he and his sister cleaned her up and got her dressed. And all the while, she wasn’t able to think about anything but Hiccup.

But unlike that day a few weeks ago, when her head had been full of that confused longing for a near-stranger, all she felt today was **fear**.

How much had Eret seen? Had he just noticed Hiccup touching her *accidentally*? Or had he seen more? Had he seen how his fingers had lingered, caressing her tenderly, her blissful smile as she’d enjoyed his touch?

The uncertainty was driving her crazy. She itched to get out of her rooms, out of this silent bubble where no news could reach her. Had their acting been enough to convince Eret? Or had he gotten suspicious, had he been able to put two and two together? Had he told Daniel? Surely, a small touch like that wouldn’t be enough to directly hang Hiccup... right?

But if they cut off his hand...

She swallowed hard at the thought and tried to keep her breathing at a normal pace. But while she struggled to outwardly appear unperturbed, Astrid couldn’t stop her thoughts from running in circles over and over again. What was happening to Hiccup right now? She was sure that she would know if something... **bad** happened, that she would **feel** it if... if...

**No!**

She couldn’t even **think** about it, wouldn’t **let** herself think about it. Hiccup couldn't die, he simply **couldn’t**.

Fighting her anxiety, she tried to keep her facade calm as the twins bustled around her. Once her hair was fixed in one of its usual complicated patterns, her hands and arms were covered in elbow-long golden gloves, and every part of the blue-and-golden dress sat correctly on her form, Tuff led her through the crowded castle to the upcoming reception. She had to put in a lot of effort to not simply run ahead, but instead keep with Tuff’s entirely too-slow pace. She was desperate to reach their goal, to see **him**. As Eret’s squire, he would surely attend formal occasions with his knight, an occasion such as the reception for another Grand Duke and his heir... wouldn’t he?

*Oh please, Odin, Frigga, and Freya, please let him be there. Let me know that he’s all right.*

But this time, her prayer went unheard.

When they finally reached the formal room where her father and the rest of her adopted family were waiting, her heart dropped painfully. Hiccup was nowhere to be seen, not standing behind his master and not standing at attention at the side of the room either.

Breathing shakily, Astrid stepped inside as Daniel and Eret greeted her with smiles that held too
much tension to be called calming. In fact, all of the men were strangely tense, their brows furrowed and their shoulders bunched together defensively, with jaws set in dour and contemplative expressions. The sight didn’t help to relieve Astrid’s own anxiety, not one bit. This was supposed to be a joyful reunion of friends, wasn’t it? Had something happened that overshadowed the happy event? Something that, maybe, involved someone they’d all cared about at some point?

The thought made her chest tighten further. Was there concern in their eyes? Some reassurance maybe that her offender was... ‘dealt with’? Astrid wished she could look into their heads, learn what made them so tense, could ask what had happened while she’d been locked in her rooms, ask why their friend wasn’t here. But that was a dangerous idea in this formal setting.

While Astrid had to wear her mask as Princess Royal of House Hofferson, she also knew that her father and the others had similar masks to wear. At the moment, it wasn’t her father, adopted uncle and brothers in the room, but King Hofferson, Crown Prince Daniel, Grand Duke Eastervale, and Knight of the Realm and Ducal Heir Eret III instead. And asking those men after a squire’s well-being would only raise unnecessary suspicions.

And she didn’t get the chance to place any inconspicuous remark either. The moment she took her place at Daniel’s side, her father nodded to one of the servants and the parade began. The first to enter were some of her father’s highest ranked vassals, followed by those of House Jag’r – Eret the Elder, followed by dozens of dukes, counts and even a few lucky barons having attached themselves to the retinues of their lords. She recognised some of their faces – like Duke Thuggory – while others were only vaguely familiar to her, if at all. Next came another group of richly clothed noblemen, House Berserker’s vassals no doubt, judging by their tanned skin and brightly coloured robes.

As her gaze wandered through the room, her nervousness grew. More than one high lord or knight had brought their squires, and she couldn’t keep her gaze from flickering to Eret. Why wasn’t Hiccup here as well? Usually, she dreaded interacting with him in such a public setting where she couldn’t even smile or exchange a friendly word with him, but him not being here set her on edge in an entirely different way.

She took a deep breath to calm herself. Hiccup was fine, he had to be. She wouldn’t let herself believe anything else. The tense looks on the men’s faces bothered her, but something was weird there. Of all four, Eret looked the least upset, and wouldn’t he be the most worried if his squire had gotten punished? But Eret didn’t look upset. On the contrary, he looked eager and anticipatory despite the tension a minute ago, his gaze directed straight at the gate at the other end of the room.

Of course... He wasn’t thinking about Hiccup or his well-being at all right now, Astrid thought despondently. And if she was honest with herself, she couldn’t even blame him.

Her gut churning with anxiety and her mask with the pleasant smile in place once more, she stood still, waiting, as the Grand Duke of Southshore, Admiral Oswald of House Berserker, and his son Dagur finally came into view. The Grand Duke’s long black hair stood in direct contrast to his son’s wild red mane, but they both shared the same green eyes that always seemed to twinkle humorously. A small buried part of her was happy to see them, as they were two other members of the group that she considered to be her closest family, blood or not – but the tension in her heart quickly drowned out that happiness again.

Her father greeted their guests ostentatiously, welcomed the Grand Duke and all his vassals to the capitol. Many big words were exchanged, words which Astrid barely registered. At some point, the formal formation had loosened up, and she took the opportunity to greet Dagur and his father.
“Hey, little sis,” Dagur greeted her merrily, scooped her up in one of his trademark hugs, and whirled her around in a mad circle. “Look at you, all grown up. How long has it been now? Three years?”

“One,” she corrected him, laughing shakily. Dagur made it easy to push aside troublesome thoughts, and she loved her adopted brother dearly for that. She really needed his distraction right now.

“No way!” He threw her another cheeky grin, then turned to Daniel who had just finished greeting Lord Oswald. “And you, still in one piece, I see? What exactly are you doing in Westhill all the time? Playing dress-up with Snot?”

Snorting, Daniel shook his head. “Good to see you too, Dagur,” he said, but added, “I think,” when he, too, got pulled into a hearty hug.

“I’ve heard the Malarians aren’t as stupid as we think. They know our Prince is far too valuable to simply kill him, so they try their best to capture him alive and unharmed for the ransom.” Eret commented dryly as he clapped one hand on Dagur’s shoulder to get his attention. The two men shared a grin as they grabbed each other’s forearms in greeting.

“Man, it’s good to be here again,” Dagur said after they’d parted, looking around the room with a wistful grimace. The gathered noblemen were breaking up into small knots of conversation centred around the high tables that were scattered around the periphery of the room. This wasn’t a full meal like Eret’s accolade had been or Dagur’s tomorrow would be, so the small tables allowed people to circulate and socialize without the difficulties of seating. “Look how everyone is so civilised, talking without yelling insults or open death threats.” Sighing, he shook his head.

Astrid cocked her head in confusion, but Eret and Daniel shared a knowing grimace, before her brother nodded, “Yeah, Father told us about the message you sent ahead. Are things really getting that bad around Southshore?”

Dagur hesitated as two serving girls came by, offering them drinks and a plate with appetizers, grinning at Dagur as they did so. From what Astrid knew from Heather, Dagur was quite popular among the kitchen staff for his compliments for their cooking – and for how politely he treated Heather’s co-workers.

The group all took one of the offered glasses – wine for Astrid, beer for the men – and pastries. Astrid’s heart cramped at the taste of honey and nuts, at yet another reminder of Hiccup. But Daniel’s last comment somewhat eased her anxiety. Apparently, there was another explanation for the men’s tension earlier; a message sent by Grand Duke Oswald, and not the failing of a squire. That was reassuring, at least. She looked up from the pastry in her hand, determined not to panic, and concentrated on Dagur again.

He eyed his own pastry with a small smile before eating it in one swallow. Then his face turned grim and he nodded at Daniel’s and Eret’s questioning look. “Yes, it’s been... rough lately.” He washed down the pastry with a swallow of beer and sighed. “An entire town was burned down the week before last, in an act of spite. The whole place was reduced to smoking rubble, rendering one of our major trade ports and shipbuilding centres flat out gone. We haven’t even found all of the bodies yet, and the survivors are all homeless and lost everything... and all because that... that bastard wasn’t willing to give up the land he’d stolen from Count Ravenledge.”

“If I can’t have it, nobody can’?” Eret asked disbelievingly, and Dagur nodded again.

personally, grateful for finally being allowed to do something.
“Aye. That’s even pretty much exactly what he said before Father took his sword and dropped his head from his shoulders.” Dagur scowled. “Quote Father, ‘If you’re so determined to act like one of the enemies that you’ll burn one of our own towns, then I’ll treat you like one!’” He let out another sigh, more pained than the first. “Hopefully that’ll put a chilling effect on these disputes, but they’ve been getting worse. While this was an escalation in size, we’ve already had hamlets burned.”

“We will have to find a solution for that, and soon,” Daniel agreed. “I’ve looked into the reports lately, and, well, for all of the smoke, this fire seems to be mostly because a small number of high lords are being greedy and support their vassals in border disputes – and then it escalates when the displaced nobles try to take their homes back… or, if they can’t, then they try to take someone else’s. It’s like… like they’re all struggling over a sheet of cloth, not caring if it gets torn, only that they get the biggest piece! As if we wouldn’t have enough on our plate already with the Malarian raiders…” He gritted his teeth. “But as for Count Ravenledge… From what father said about the message you sent, he came with you, right? Which one is he?”

Dagur let his eyes wander through the room for a moment, then nodded toward Grand Duke Oswald. Astrid followed his gaze to a man standing behind the Grand Duke. He was old, with greyish hair and a stern look on his worn face, but his eyes were alive and full of spirit. Next to him stood who had to be his son, a young man, hardly more than a boy really, tall with dark brown hair.

“That’s him, the poor fellow over there,” Dagur explained offhandedly. “He wants to petition for help in rebuilding his town. Currently, most of his subjects found some kind of accommodations in the surrounding hamlets, but… well, it’s not practical in the long term. The people need their healer to be reachable, just like their craftsmen, and don’t get me started on the temples. Frigga’s Herra holds her court in a barn these days. Anyway, despite him being… difficult occasionally he’s one of our more loyal vassals, so Father is going to support his petition. I also took his younger son as my squire. Or rather, will take him… once I’m a knight.” At that he winked, grinning, and the almost-depressed atmosphere from a moment prior lightened noticeably.

“Right,” Daniel said, fighting the grimace off his face. “We’ll spend enough time talking about politics, let’s not go there today.” His gaze wandered back to where Count Ravenledge stood, then gave a small nod as if to himself. “But to be fair and keep up appearances… why don’t you introduce your squire?”

Dagur looked at him puzzled, but then his face cleared. “Oh, you mean…” he trailed off, eyes shifting to Eret.

Astrid swallowed as the reference to Hiccup brought back her anxiety. But neither Daniel or Eret seemed concerned or upset in any way at his mentioning. So maybe Eret hadn’t really seen anything after all, had believed their little stunt? Gods, she hoped this was the case.

“So, he agreed?” Dagur continued curiously. “That’s good to hear. And yeah, sure, I can introduce him to you. Reminds me though, what happened to your squire, Daniel? What was his name? Miles?”

“Milburn,” Daniel corrected and added dryly, “And I left him in Westhill. He needs the sword training with the soldiers and the tactical training with the captains far more than I need someone to help me get dressed.”

“See? You’re hardly better than I am when it comes to formality,” Eret chuckled as Dagur beckoned the youth over. He reacted eagerly, as if he’d only waited for this to happen even though custom hardly demanded for a squire to be introduced personally to the Prince. Hiccup had been a reasonable exception. She still wondered why Hiccup wasn’t here, but at least he didn’t seem to be
in immediate danger. She just needed to wait, to play her part, and surely, she would learn about it, sooner or later. There was no need to worry...

As the boy walked over toward their group, Astrid was even more reminded of Hiccup. It wasn’t that the boy actually looked *that* much like him. Sure, he was tall and slender as well, but where that was Hiccup’s natural build with lean muscles hiding beneath smooth skin, this boy only looked lanky and gangly. He had brown, shaggy hair, but it was a few shades darker than Hiccup’s; missing the reddish hue in it, and not thick and naturally unruly, but rather carelessly untidy-looking. And his eyes were mostly brown with only a slight tone of green in them. His clothing also had a sort of hard-used, *practical* feel to them, underneath the silk tabard in House Berserker’s golden hue that he wore, very much like the outfit that Hiccup had worn during Eret’s accolade. Although, instead of patterned leather, his was a quilted gambeson that, while quality, had clearly also seen hard use.

No, all in all, he didn’t resemble Hiccup that strongly. But even though she still didn’t know whether Eret had noticed anything, her immediate fear for her soulmate was quenched and the usual yearning for him set in. Astrid missed him even after only a few hours, *longed* to see him and knew it. And every similarity, no matter how small, reminded her of how he wasn’t here with her.

When the boy had reached them, Dagur put on an almost comically serious expression and said in a deliberately exaggerated formal voice, “May I introduce: His Royal Highness, Crown Prince Daniel, Her Royal Highness, Princess Astrid, and Sir Eret III, Heir to House Jag’r. And this is Lord Harold of House Ravenledge, my squire-to-be.”

Astrid thought she heard a slight quiver in Dagur’s voice as he spoke of House Jag’r, but decided it best not to pay it any attention. Instead, she watched the youth as he gave a curt nod toward Daniel. “It is an honour to meet you, Milord,” he said in a sure voice and took a spot around the table. Daniel paused at the lack of formality, but then shrugged and gave Harold a scrutinising look. “House Ravenledge…” he began thoughtfully, then his face lit up. “Of course. I knew your father looked familiar. Your brother Angus is part of my Westhill contingent, isn’t he?”

Harold nodded, a stern expression on his face. “He is, Milord, which is a shame. We really could have used his help during the last few weeks.” The look he gave Daniel wasn’t challenging, not really. But the way he daringly held his Prince’s gaze wasn’t deferential in any way either.

The bluntness seemed to surprise Daniel. Or was it carelessness the young man showed? Was the boy even *aware* of how inappropriate his words had been?

Ignorant to the slight tension that was building, Harold turned away from Daniel without being dismissed, and nodded to Eret in silent greeting before he turned his attention to Astrid. He stepped forward to reach for her hand and, holding it tightly in his, placed a firm kiss on its silk-covered back.

Surprised by that bold and unrefined action, she quickly drew the hand back – maybe *too* quickly to be polite. But the boy didn’t seem to mind. Instead, he gave her a wide smile and said, “It is a pleasure to meet you, Milady. You really are as beautiful as everyone says.”

Astrid blinked. Who was this boy? Or, more to the point... Who did he *think* he was? While he hadn’t violated the letter of social etiquette, his tone and manner seemed... off, with his bluntness and lack of circumlocution and courtesy. Holding her hand tightly pressed to her chest, she regarded the young man in front of her with bewilderment, while, around her, Daniel and Eret threw Dagur wary looks.
"Well, he obviously still needs to learn about etiquette," Dagur sighed with an apologetic shrug. "His father made a point of keeping with the soldiering tradition and all that, and left little time for the social niceties."

"Meaning...?" Eret asked leadingly.

Harold turned and looked Eret in the eye – making Astrid’s own eyebrow raise up despite herself – and said, “Well, Father always said that this,” he tugged at his gambeson, “is truth, and this,” he pinched the silk Berserker tunic and nodded towards Astrid’s silk dress, “is a distraction from what we are.” He crossed his arms. “Our grandfathers didn’t become lords because the gods chose them. They became lords because they were the hardest...” his eyes glanced at Astrid and he swallowed his next words, “the hardest and hardest warriors, and took it from those who had grown soft and forgotten the truth of the sword and armour.” He thumped a fist on his heart. “House Ravenledge doesn’t forget that truth.”

And yet you had a town taken from you... Astrid thought, frowning slightly.

Daniel nodded. “I’ve heard your brother make similar comments. And I can attest that he hasn’t forgotten this truth either. But here we don’t have to be soldiers.” His lips tweaked for a moment. “So at ease, soldier.”

Harold nodded, and Dagur clarified, “But that doesn’t mean complete familiarity, mind you. This is new for you, but you had best behave yourself and act like the nobleman your grandfather fought for you to become.”

“Meaning...?” Harold asked leadingly, obviously mimicking Eret’s former tone.

"Well," Daniel said with a raised eyebrow, "technically, it's too late for this now, but a bit of advice for your future, Harold: The general protocol is that you're allowed to forgo formal titles outside of formal situations, as we won't be using those come summer anyway. But keep in mind that not every nobleman likes being spoken to in such a manner." And, with a tight frown at Astrid's hand, as she was still clutching it to her chest, he added, "Or every Lady, for that matter."

The look Harold threw her and Daniel showed nothing but confusion, and Astrid felt sorry for him. Somehow, Harold’s presence made her feel uncomfortable, but there was no need to make it harder for him. All this had to be utterly baffling for the boy, especially with what Dagur had said about his upbringing and, in addition, with what had happened to their town.

Taking a deep breath, she called forth memories of Hiccup to wash away her uneasiness. She remembered the soft kisses he’d breathed onto her hand earlier, and it made her feel better in an instant. And it reminded her that it wasn't the boy’s fault she was so anxious today.

"Ah, he'll learn that soon enough," Dagur said, dismissing the boy with a friendly nod and a wave of his hand. "But on to more entertaining points. What about our bet? Have I won? Which stallion did he choose?" He grinned widely at Eret who chuckled and rolled his eyes.

"You can't 'win a bet' when we both agreed on what the outcome would be," Eret said matter-of-factly, but there was a barely hidden smile on his face.

"Ah, we agreed? I don't remember it that clearly anymore, not after all of that beer. Well, we could always ask... ah... your squire. Maybe he remembers what we said exactly in that tavern. Where is he anyway?" Dagur looked around the room and Astrid bit her lip, trying not to show how interested she was in this question too.
"He's not here," Daniel said. He sounded calm, but there was something else in his voice, a certain solicitude that simultaneously worried and soothed Astrid. Daniel seemed concerned for Hiccup, so he obviously didn’t know. But why was he so concerned? Why wasn’t Hiccup here?

"Huh, I see...,” Dagur grunted, and when he changed the topic, Astrid was glad over the distraction. Apparently, she wouldn’t learn why he wasn’t here, and thinking too much about him, worrying over him, wouldn’t do her any good tonight. He didn’t seem to be in any immediate danger; that had to be enough. “Anyway... I was right, wasn’t I? Which stallion did you pick? It was Twilight Shadowrunner, or whatever he's called. The black one?"


"Trample, yes," Daniel confirmed with a sly grin. "I'm that predictable, am I not?"

"You definitely are," Eret laughed as Dagur clapped Daniel on the shoulder, and even Astrid's lips twitched slightly.

"Ah, and that means everything goes as I’d hope. I get Blazing Thunderstriker – that name alone gives me goosies – and he’s such a pretty animal, with his golden fur and black legs and mane.” Dagur stared into the distance with a ridiculously dreamy expression, before he became – somewhat – serious again. “Seriously, I was in love with this horse since I first saw him. And, even better, Snot gets the other one, the wild one. Anyone up for a bet how often he'll get thrown off in, say, the first week? Ah, I can see it in my head already, we'll have so much fun. That is... At least, if it’s still the plan that I and Snotman get the other two?"

"Yes, don't worry. Those two are still supposed to be gifts for your accolades. But nice to see that you already know everything about this surprise," Daniel snorted through the general amusement.

Dagur lifted his arms in comical defence, maybe in an attempt to look innocent. He failed miserably. "Hey, it's not my fault that the stable boys weren't talking about anything else when I accompanied this chipmunk here,” – he nodded at Eret – "back to the stud farms. They were all about what a great honour it was that their horses were to be such treasured gifts. And also how much they'd like to see our faces the first time they throw us off. Mind you, I don't think they knew who I was when they told me, but it was great fun. I know for a fact that there are several bets on Snot's stallion to be the first to throw anyone off."

"Well, in that case, there are going to be many boys mourning their losses once we return," Eret grinned. "Because Trample beat Chomp to that. Right on the first day, Daniel tried a jump over a tree trunk, and..." he made a bell-shaped motion with his hand to indicate the flight route. "It was spectacular."

Dagur looked as if he wasn’t sure whether to laugh or to cry. “I can’t believe I missed that,” he finally whined.

Laughing, Eret clapped him on the shoulder. “I’ll describe it all in detail later, all right?”

“All right,“ Dagur grinned back as Daniel gave an exasperated groan, and Astrid was sure he didn’t see how Dagur winked – when Harold suddenly spoke up.

“Will the squires get new horses too?” the boy asked eagerly, causing them all to turn to him in surprise. “You know, to keep up? I doubt my father’s old pony would do.”

Astrid blinked in surprise, having almost forgotten that the boy was there. By all rights, he shouldn’t have; he had no official standing within this group, and would not until he became
Dagur’s squire. They’d handled introductions, and decorum dictated that he should have returned to his father’s party once those were handled and the talk had turned to personal topics. But even now, with four disapproving gazes of varying degree on him, he didn’t waver. He only looked expectantly from one man to the other, and Astrid fought down the spark of exasperation. Harold didn’t know any better.

“No, the remaining horses will be bought by interested noblemen, or will be returned to Eastervale in a few weeks,” she explained calmly, her sense of fairness winning out over her irritation.

“Oh.” Harold’s face fell visibly.

Astrid kept a scowl from her face. Lord Ravenledge had not served his son well by neglecting his courtly training, no matter how much he romanticised the warrior ideal. Sighing, she wavered between irritation and sympathy, but decided on the later and added, “But maybe your new master can provide you with another horse. It surely would be in his interest for you to be able to keep up with him.” She threw Dagur a wry smirk which he returned, clearly more amused than irked by her suggestion.

Daniel, however, gave her an astonished look, and even with knowing her brother quite well, it took her a few minutes of thinking before she could make rhyme or reason to it. But when it hit her, it sparked an idea in her mind, and she barely noticed how the men kept talking as she pondered.

Since the... incident last spring, this was the first time she’d openly and easily talked with a stranger upon their first meeting – at least as far as Daniel knew. Sure, directly after that day, she’d been too scared of any contact. But for months now, the distance she’d kept to every man was more or less solely because of Daniel’s law and not because she was actually afraid.

But Daniel didn’t know that. As far as he knew, she’d even been much more reserved toward Hiccup in the beginning. Daniel didn’t know about the peaceful hours she and Hiccup had spent together at the stables on that first day, nor did he know about the secret meeting during Eret’s accolade, the connection between them, or the intent and intense hours of the following day. All he knew was that it had apparently taken an entire day and Eret’s assurance before she’d started to open up to Hiccup.

And here now was this boy, another squire of one of her brothers, one she was freely interacting with directly, and on their first meeting.

Slowly, a plan formed in her mind, one that, for once, made her feel hopeful. Maybe this was it, her chance to convince Daniel that his law was unneeded. If she showed how easily she could interact with this young man, then maybe Daniel would finally retract this law he’d made to keep her safe. All she had to do was treat Harold without any signs of fear or even reluctance. If she could just show Daniel that she wasn’t intimidated by his presence, then he hopefully would see how unnecessary his law was. That she didn’t need the protection it offered anymore.

In addition, if she showed no reluctance to interact with Harold, then Daniel would hopefully trust her judgement when she eventually told him about her feelings for Hiccup. Or, even if all that was too ambitious, she at least could divert attention from Hiccup when they interacted too familiar. But then, there weren't all that many people who knew about that. Only Daniel and Eret knew, and maybe Tuff suspected something. But if she showed the same open friendliness to Dagur’s squire then to Eret’s...if she showed that she treated just everyone this friendly again, nobody would think is suspicious if they eventually saw her joking with Hiccup either. Or if Daniel noticed how she was more friendly to Hiccup, that wouldn't seem suspicious in
comparison… right?

Right.

All she had to do was befriend Harold too.

Even if the boy was irritatingly annoying…

.o O o.

“Well, I’ve had enough training lately,” Harold stated in a proud tone, waving his arms in a gesture that was eerily similar to Hiccup’s gesticulations as the group stood around the high table; Harold had already plaintively asked where the “good and honest trestle tables” were, as opposed to the effete standing tables that they were using. Well, ‘effete’ wasn’t the word he’d used – he’d said “impractical”, but she’d gotten his opinion of them, loud and clear.

However, the talk of the lack of rigour and general weakness of the nobility – as seen by House Ravenledge’s scions – had long since passed. The men’s conversation had turned to fighting skills by now, and both Eret and Dagur had admitted that they would probably need to put in some refreshment training before the summer. But apparently, Harold was above such things.

“I won every tournament we held, just so you know,” he bragged. “And I beat every opponent I duelled. Surely I don't need to attend any more fighting training, and definitely not with a group of inexperienced beginners.” Snorting, Harold took a swallow of his beer and afterwards confidently looked around into the faces of Daniel and Dagur, seeking their approval.

Astrid fought to keep a smirk off her face. Judging by what the boy had claimed about his skills during the last half hour or so, he probably could walk through the mountain passes like a jotunn, defeat the scattered princes of the lands of Maladur single-handedly, unify them under his command, and bring the long-awaited peace all on his own. In his mind, at least.

If only things were that easy.

“Don't worry, Harold,” Daniel replied with impressive patience. “You can show your bladework to the fighting masters later this week. They will assert your skills and help you to improve.”

Harold seemed to think about this suggestion for a moment and then nodded. “Yes, that’s acceptable, I think.”

Astrid quietly snorted to herself. As if he had any choice on the matter… But to make her plan work, she had to actually interact with him, however annoying it might be. “I'm sure the fighting masters will rank you appropriately,” she said with a friendly smile and only a small hint of sarcasm in her voice. Hiccup’s sense of humour might have rubbed off on her. Eret gave her a dry look, but Harold seemed not to notice.

“I should think so, Milady,” he instead replied with an approving smile. “And I can’t wait to put my skills to use against the Malarian bastards either.”

“Well, I should add that these skirmishes aren't just about fighting,” Daniel commented now, changing the topic before Dagur and Eret couldn't keep themselves together anymore. They seemed to childishly enjoy how the boy made a fool of himself, and Astrid couldn't really blame them. Harold seemed to be utterly resistant to advise. “Most of the time, we'll be travelling, patrolling from one outpost to the other, go where we're needed. So, Harold, I hope your stamina in the saddle is just as good as your sword skills. You'll need it.”
Harold affirmed that with the same boisterous enthusiasm he'd shown all night, and Astrid noticed how Eret quickly hid his grin behind his glass.

“Ah, don't scare him,” Dagur said, maybe in an attempt to preserve some of his squire-to-be’s dignity. “I mean, I know there luckily won't be fighting every day, but it won't take *that* long to travel from one outpost to the other.”

Daniel grimaced, and pulled out his notebook. “Depends on what you consider to be *long*. But it'll definitely take up a considerable amount of our time.” He flipped through the pages of his book, then held up one that showed a sketched map of a part of the Western Mountain range. “One example, for my planned trip to Loki’s Teeth next week, we'll spend over a week just *getting* there from Westhill.” He traced a line from one spot on his map to another. “And that's not even taking into account travelling from one damaged outpost to another. Discouraging, if you consider that we only have three months to do all the necessary repairs before many men are needed for working the fields again.”

At that, Dagur frowned. “Okay, I’m not really an expert for travelling over land,” he stated, eyebrows wrinkled in confusion as he inspected the sketch Daniel held up. “But I *do* know my maps. And I’m pretty sure the distance between Westhill and Loki’s Teeth can be crossed in one day, two at the most, even if you're riding with a group. It’s not *that* far, is it?”

Daniel snorted and shook his head. “No, *on a map* it’s not that far. I think most maps even show something of a road connecting both places. But believe me, it will take us a week to reach that mountain and the outposts around it. Probably even longer when there’s snow. Because there is no road, not anymore. The Malarians make sure of that wherever they get hold of some land. Destroying the roads, if possible in the middle of a clearing. There are usually narrow paths along the former road, but it would be foolish to use them.”

“Because of ambushes?” Eret guessed and looked over Dagur’s shoulder at the map.

Exactly,” Daniel nodded. “Carefully leading our horses past a badly broken part of the road exposes us too much, especially when an enemy *knows* we’ll have to slow down on that spot. So we use other paths instead, through the mountains or forests.” He drew another imaginary line onto the paper with his finger, crossing what looked like no man's land. “The Malarians don’t know about these paths, it’s not *their* land. Travelling there is much safer, but also takes a lot longer.” He sighed heavily, shoulders slumping as Eret and Dagur nodded understandingly.

Astrid stood to the side, idly playing with her glass, but only listened to their conversation about the struggles of warfare with half an ear. It was loud around them, the reception in full swing, and a part of her wanted nothing more than to leave. She was happy to see Dagur, but knew she would see plenty of him during the next weeks anyway. And tonight, her brothers would probably talk about nothing but their upcoming summer campaigning anyway. It was late enough by now so that it wouldn’t be considered rude if she excused herself and retreated to her rooms for the night… But she decided against it nonetheless. Who knew whether or when she would get another chance like this.

Even if Harold wasn’t making it easy to be friendly to him...

“Why don't you simply repair the roads?” he now asked, causing the men to turn to him with looks that were starting to show irritation instead of amusement.

“Because that would take even longer than slowly leading the horses past those spots,” Astrid explained calmly before one of her brothers could scare him away after all. Warfare might not be her area of expertise, but in this case, even she could put two and two together. Just like in all the
other cases where Harold had asked rather obvious questions before. She was trying to be patient, friendly, to treat him like she would treat Hiccup in a setting like this, but it was growing harder with every minute.

“So?” Harold asked, raising his eyebrows at her in a condescending manner. “Maybe it would take longer, but then the road could get used again. That would be better for everyone.”

Anger sparked up in Astrid. He obviously thought her incompetent and simple-minded, and judging by other comments he’d made before, that was probably what he thought of every woman. But she wouldn’t let his backward attitude spoil her plan.

Before Dagur could interfere on her behalf, she had her pleasant smile back in place and explained, “Those are still good places for ambushes. If the Malarians wait for a group of soldiers to stop where the road is broken, they won't care whether they want to repair the road or simply pass that spot. They will simply attack them either way.”

“And it would be a waste of time and material anyway. They would simply destroy it at the next opportunity again, on that spot or another,” Daniel added. “We'd never catch up. It’s far easier to destroy than to build.”

At that, Harold nodded thoughtfully as he apparently took Daniel’s words far more seriously than hers. Astrid raised her wine to her lips to hide her irritation, emptying the glass with one last swallow. Her and Hiccup’s first meeting came to her mind, how he hadn’t hesitated to show her how to groom a horse, something that was, by custom, men’s work. How he’d treated her like an equal and had respected her. Harold was nothing like that...

“Why don't you let the residents repair the road then?” the boy asked suddenly, obviously after some thinking on the matter, as Daniel, Eret, and Dagur were already talking about something else.

“How would that be different?” Astrid asked, puzzled and struggling to focus on him again. Even as her mind kept conjuring up pictures of Hiccup instead. “The Malarians wouldn't hesitate to attack civilians either.”

Harold gave her a patronising half-smile. “Because they are just that. Civilians. Peasants. If they can’t fight for our grand kingdom, they at least can contribute in another way. We risk our lives to defend their land; I think it's only fair if they do the same so we can defend them. I mean, it's not like they do a good job at providing food or anything else for the Kingdom. Supporting our troops is the least they should do.”

There was a moment of stunned silence as four people gaped at the boy.

“I assume this wasn’t meant to be serious,” Daniel pressed through gritted teeth. “The people in and around Westhill have given enough during the last few decades to earn all the support we can give them. Yes, their farms aren't as productive as those around Southshore and the mines can hardly be worked at all. But do you think that's because these people are lazy?” It wasn't really a question, and Harold only reacted with a dismissive shrug before Daniel went on. “Besides, there are barely any able men left to do hard labour like that. Most have already joined with the levies to fight back the invaders and defend their land.”

At that, there was suddenly a highly unpleasant smirk on the boy's face. “Then I hope the remaining women value the presence of all those soldiers defending them, and support them in… other ways,” he half-laughed, then gave Astrid a wink.

Bile rose in her throat, and she cast her eyes to the ground so as to not show any emotions. Was he...
serious? Was he actually suggesting that those poor women, who feared or mourned for their fathers, husbands, sons, or brothers, should break Frigga’s and Freya’s sacred rules and invite strangers into their beds, in addition to all of the other burdens they had to bear? The thought was infuriating! But judging by Harold’s cool smirk he’d meant exactly that.

Initially, she’d been reluctant to being exaggeratedly friendly toward Harold. As annoying as he was, he didn't deserve to be used. But that primary reluctance had faded by now, her last concerns wiped away by Harold’s own comment. She could never befriend someone with such an attitude. But then, she didn’t need to, not really. All she had to do to prove her point was being friendly like she would be to everyone else anyway.

Taking a deep breath, Astrid actively reminded herself why she was doing this.

For Hiccup. She was doing this for Hiccup, so that he would be safe in the future.

Seemingly casually, she lifted her hand to brush over that spot on her chest where she could feel his presence. She thought of his excitable smile when he talked about one of his inventions with Daniel, of his peaceful expression when he helped Eret with the horses, and of that fluttering heat he was able to elicit in her belly with little more than one intense look.

Yes, she was doing this for him. For his sake, this plan had to work, and she would do whatever was necessary to convince Daniel. She just needed to pull through this. Aiming to calm her nerves, she lifted her glass to take another sip of her wine – but then remembered that it was empty already.

“T’ll get myself another glass of wine,” she murmured into the cold silence that had followed Harold’s comment. How backward had his upbringing been that he made comments that even Eret the Elder would struggle to approve of? She really hoped she wouldn't need to spend too much time with Harold, that he would stay with the other squires and not accompany them all the time like Hiccup did. Or at least that Daniel, Dagur, and the other squires in his group would soon be able to get some manners and sense into that boy.

Daniel, his face dangerously calm, gave her a small nod to sign that he'd heard her, and with a sigh, she turned to leave. Before she’d made even one step away though, a hand was around her upper arm, holding her back. Rough fingers dug into her, almost painfully, and with a desperate little whimper, she froze as her mind conjured up a flood of memories – painful, agonizing memories.

Chapter End Notes

Comments are always welcome :)
It's All You've Got To Just Be Strong

Chapter Summary

Trigger Warning: There's going to be a scene near the end that'll receive an additional warning. Its start and end are marked for those who want to skip it.

Chapter Notes

I want to add a small explanation of the use of titles in this world as it probably varies greatly from how they were actually used. One addresses the King as (Your) Majesty, the Prince and Princess as (Your) Highness, a (Grand) Duke as (Your) Grace. Knights receive the title Sir upon their accolade. Every other nobleman/-woman, even the sons or daughters of high ranked noblemen, are addressed as Lord/Lady, or Milord/Milady. These titles can be used for those who also carry other titles, but it implies a certain familiarity that usually has to be specifically granted.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The memories that flooded her mind were overwhelmingly clear, like crystal.

_Sunshine on a dusty plaza, cool shadows between the houses, and distant cheerful voices._

_A man’s rough breathing behind her, his heavy body against her back._

_A strong arm around her waist, hands on her breasts and over her mouth._

_An unfamiliar voice whispering disgusting words in her ear._

_Pain and helplessness._

It probably lasted only a heartbeat or three. But to Astrid, it felt like an eternity had passed before the hand digging into her arm was gone. It was replaced by a broad arm around her shoulders, one she wanted to fight off before she realised that it was Eret’s. Eret meant safety, he would protect her. The words he murmured into her ear didn’t make any sense, but his familiar voice was comforting nonetheless. Comforting enough to calm down her shallow panting breaths and to register her surroundings again.

Dagur stood where he’d been before, a little to the side now as Eret had moved to her side and Daniel was firmly placed between her and Harold. The Berserker heir watched them with a confused expression, and Astrid tried to focus on him. On one of her brothers, on how funny he looked with one of his eyebrows raised and his mouth in that typical crooked line. Familiar. Safe.

“Hey, what’s this now?” rang Harold’s voice in her ear, scratchy and unpleasant.

“You _don’t_ touch her,” Daniel said, the cold tone in his voice betraying his rage beneath.

“Wait, what? I didn’t... I just wanted to make her wait and ask her to bring a new glass for me too.”
Astrid pressed her lips and eyes shut, and forcefully pulled herself together. Nothing had happened. He hadn’t meant to harm her. She was just overreacting. Everything was fine.

She mustn’t let Daniel see how much that simple touch had affected her.

“It’s all right,” she said, trying to sound light despite having problems to breathe normally. Brushing off Eret’s arm, she straightened her shoulders and made half a step around Daniel. “I’m fine. He just startled me, that’s all.”

Daniel threw her a scrutinising look that made her doubt he fully believed her, but then slowly nodded.

Putting in more effort, she turned toward Harold, a tight smile on her face, and said, “Why don’t you accompany me, Lord Harold? I’m sure the others wouldn’t mind some refreshments either, but I doubt I could carry so many glasses.”

“Eret can accompany you,” Daniel said determinately, and shared a look and a nod with the other man. “I need to talk to Dagur and Harold for a moment.”

Gently, Eret led her away, and she only caught a short glimpse at how Daniel positioned himself in front of the confused boy, arms crossed in front of him.

“He won’t harm the boy… right?” she asked shakily as they paused once they were out of sight behind a dividing screen. This couldn’t be happening. She couldn’t let her brother actually enforce that horrible law. He’d never done so before; the threat had always been enough. And she needed him to forget about it all, to trust in her mental strength and her judgement again. If he punished Harold now… that would only serve as a really bad precedent.

Eret gave her an estimating look before he carefully shook his head. “No, I don’t think so. Even a rude and unpolished provincial like him deserves a warning first. Which is what he’s receiving right now. Don’t worry, I doubt he’ll get too close to you again.”

Covering up her hysteria as something like laughter, she turned to go and get hold of a servant to place an order. She really needed a drink. “I was worried for him. I’m fine,” she blatantly lied. “Really, he just surprised me, I simply didn’t expect…” She took a deep breath, and repeated, a little calmer, “I’m fine.”

But, clearly, Eret wasn’t buying it. “Right,” he snorted. “That’s why you’re shaking like a leaf.”

Astrid was incredibly glad as a serving girl approached them just then, as it saved her from answering. “Your Highness, Sir Jag’r, can I get you anything?”

“A glass of wine. But not watered down, please, and in a normal glass,” she emphasised, glancing at the smaller glasses most others around them carried around. She would need that to get a grip on her nerves.

Eret had one eyebrow raised as he glanced at her, but didn’t comment and turned toward the waiting serving girl instead. “And four beers,” he ordered, and added, “With water.”

The girl left them to get their orders, and Astrid looked around aimlessly to prevent Eret from raising the previous topic again. She couldn’t appear as if Harold touching her arm had frightened her, she simply couldn’t. So far, Eret didn’t seem to have said anything about Hiccup and that accident in the stables this afternoon. But who knew, seeing how much a simple touch like that just now had actually affected her could easily change his mind.
For Hiccup. She could be strong for Hiccup, could play her part. She had to. This was the best chance she could hope for to change Daniel’s mind.

Suddenly, a hand landed on her shoulder, and she yelped as a painful jolt of shock shot through her. Momentarily panicking, she whirled around, moving away from the unexpected touch – but only to look into Daniel’s worried face.

“It’s just me,” he said softly.

“Yes, of course it’s you. Who else would it be?” The smile on her face felt weird, false, but it was the best she could manage.

Her brother exchanged a glance with Eret who shrugged and shook his head. “I warned him not to get too close to you again, so you don’t need to worry,” Daniel said in a calming tone. “But if you want to leave, then that’s all right. None of us can accompany you, but I can send for Timothy so you–”

“No, I’ll stay,” she interrupted him quickly. Odin forbids that she might flee now. That would only make things worse. “I told you already, I’m fine.”

Neither of the men looked convinced, but they didn’t object further.

A few minutes later, they returned to Dagur and Harold, drinks in hand from the serving girl. Dagur had an unusually stern expression on his face while the boy had his gaze on the ground, possibly intimidated.

As they got closer, Dagur gave Harold a nudge upon which he looked up, his resolute eyes meeting hers without a flicker of hesitation. “I’m sorry, Mi- Your Royal Highness,” he said, sounding more grudgingly than actually sorry. “I didn’t mean to frighten you.”

With more effort than she was used to, Astrid put on her mask of a pleasant smile. “No need for an apology,” she said, putting a light tone into her voice. “It was nothing but a misunderstanding, if even that. Let’s not worry about it again.” She held out the one glass of beer she'd carried toward him, an obvious peace offer. He took it with an appreciative smile, as if he hadn't expected anything less. It made irritation churn inside her, but she quickly smothered the emotion. Instead, she called forth the memory of Hiccup kissing her knuckles this afternoon. It was a good memory that made her feel lighter and served to make the smile she gave Harold a few shades warmer.

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Without a warning, the sound of glass shattering on the ground sounded through the room, and Astrid flinched. Everyone was turning in the direction of the noise so her reaction didn’t raise any suspicions. But deep down, Astrid knew it was different.

After the incident of Harold thoughtlessly reaching out for her was settled, their conversation had continued. Astrid had managed to not behave differently, but she was having a hard time concentrating. Usually unthreatening things kept triggering more flashbacks. A woman’s sudden loud bark of laughter. The slap of leather across skin as two young hotheads challenged each other to a duel to first blood. A certain perfume wafting to her nose. All those little things she'd thought she'd left behind now made her tense every time again, let her heart race and her breathing go faster. But she couldn’t let that show.

She barely paid attention to what her brothers were saying, and kept her focus on Harold instead, trying to listen to what he said so that she could answer or comment, in order to show that she
wasn't afraid of him. Daniel and the others occasionally threw her puzzled looks, but she didn't react to them, couldn't react. If she let her concentration waver, she would lose it.

Harold, on the other hand, seemed delighted by the attention she paid him, and eagerly engaged her into a conversation whenever he got the chance.

“So,” he began as Daniel, Eret, and Dagur were occupied in a conversation with a Duke out of Lord Oswald's retinue. “Which fighting style do you prefer, Milady?” He'd stepped a little closer to talk privately, though not close enough to make her feel uncomfortable. Not really.

“Excuse me?” Astrid asked in return, distracted by keeping her heart from beating too fast. He was just trying to be friendly, dammit!

“Fighting,” he replied. “I once heard you are fond of marksmen, but forgive me if I say that I find that particular art of combat disdainful. It's how cowards fight, hiding and attacking from the distance.” He gave a humorous snort, and Astrid swallowed her answer.

As with so many, Harold apparently didn't believe the rumours about her and her skills with bow and arrow. He assumed that it was just a skill she admired in men. She was looking forward to putting him in his place herself during the next few days. The fact that she was able to shoot an apple off Daniel's head – and that he let her do so – always made quite an impression on the new recruits.

But instead of telling Harold off and alienating him now, she just cocked her head, encouraging him to speak on. Keeping up a friendly charade was easier when she didn’t need to keep her voice in check.

“I see you don't disagree,” he noticed condescendingly. “Well, it is commonly known that sword-fighting is the only true art, I guess. No hiding in the distance or on horseback, just you and your opponent, skill against skill.”

The smile on her face was genuine now, even though it wasn't for Harold himself but for his words. It were words many young idealists used – until they got hit by a padded arrow or toppled over by a pony in one of their training fights. Warfare was no gentle duelling, and Harold would learn that soon enough too.

She looked up as she suddenly noticed how quiet the boy had become and saw how he looked at her expectantly, obviously waiting for an answer. Odin help her, what had he said? “I agree,” she tried her luck, not wanting to admit that she hadn't hung to his every word. “And I'm sure your skills with the sword will prove to be outstanding.”

The words tasted foul on her tongue, not used to use unearned flattery at all. But it seemed to have been the right thing to say as Harold beamed at her and nodded eagerly. “I surely think so, and can't wait to see the astonished faces when a young countryman beats all the highborn lords in the arena.” He laughed as if he'd made a great joke, and Astrid managed to join in with a shaky chuckle.

Gods, being friendly to a poser like Harold was more difficult than she'd thought. But glancing at where Daniel threw her a concerned look, she felt as if she still needed to do better. With a slightly trembling hand, she reached for her wine glass where it stood on a table nearby, but Harold beat her to it. Their hands collided halfway and the unexpected contact made her freeze, a cold shiver running down her spine.

He reacted similarly, stopped mid-movement as his fingers met her silken glove. But instead of
pulling back – as he should have done – he just glanced at her, weirdly unperturbed.

Astrid couldn't think, couldn't react as that subliminal fear threatened to bubble up inside her again. She didn't want him to touch her, not even indirectly like this through her silken gloves. In fact, she wanted nobody to touch her, nowhere.

Nobody but Hiccup, which only further proved that he wasn’t just anyone to her.

She felt the urge to pull her hand back, to reprimand Harold for his forwardness, especially so soon after he’d been warned. But she was aware of the possibility that Daniel could be watching them, so she fought to hold still. Even managed a false smile to show to everyone who might be looking that she wasn't afraid. She couldn't be afraid…

She tensed further as Harold not just didn’t pull away, but also let his hand linger, let his fingers glide along hers before he finally took her glass and held it out for her. The hand he’d touched felt too numb to react, so she took the glass with the other, nearly dropping it with how much the hand trembled. Why hadn't he pulled away? Why had he even lingered? Hadn't Daniel warned him not to touch her again? Was Harold so full of himself that he didn’t take his Prince’s warning seriously?

She took a big sip of the heavy wine and let it flood her mouth and her mind, let it soothe her nerves until she could function again. She dreaded to look up again, to see how he reacted to their contact, what he would comment. But to her utmost relief he didn’t react at all, wasn't even looking at her. Instead, his eyes were directed past her as if–

“Milady Astrid,” another voice drawled from behind her, and only with much effort did she manage to suppress a groan. She very much wished to forego this conversation. “You look exquisitely beautiful today if I may say so. This golden fabric really plays out your hair nicely. Although, it seems a bit unpatriotic, don’t you think? Isn't that the fabric Ketil Losnedahl bought from one of those Malarian traders a few weeks back? Someone could think you secretly support the enemy.”

With a stony expression, Astrid turned and fought hard not to show any emotions. “Duke Thuggory,” she coolly greeted him. “Thank you for the compliment. But no, I don't see supporting people who suffer from fighting as treason. We're not at war with civilians, after all. But please tell me, how did you last hunting trip go? Not as favourable as you’d hoped, I heard? Something about it being... ‘the horse’s fault’?” That was the official story, at least. But they’d heard it from Hiccup, who had it directly from Thuggory’s grooms. Thuggory had pushed his horse too fast during the opening leg of the hunt, and regardless of how much he spurred it, it hadn’t had the wind left to chase after the stag. It had gotten clean away, which had made Astrid’s day regardless.

The Duke of Meathead’s face darkened noticeably, but he didn't comment on her reminder of his latest failure. He did, however, step uncomfortably close and even though she would have liked to roughly push him back, she knew that her position forbid that. Instead, she made a hesitant step backwards, away from him. She couldn't really help it, even though Thuggory had never actually done something, not to her at least. But she knew that he'd earned the nickname ‘the Creep’ quite well. However, she realised too late that her retreat made her bump into Harold, and as his breath brushed over her neck, another spark of panic threatened to rise inside her.

No, no, no, no, no!

Why hadn't she paid more attention? Why hadn't she been more careful? This was her fault, her own fault, all this, everything…

Taking a deep breath, Astrid fought for control and forced her mind to focus. One problem at a
time. The boy behind her, as annoying as he might be, didn't mean her any harm. There was no reason to be afraid of him. She could ignore him for now and concentrate on the man in front of her instead.

Thuggory had watched her with dark glee in his eyes, but now let his eyes wander curiously toward Harold behind her. “And who would be your new companion?” he asked with a sly smirk, seizing up the boy.

“I’m Lord Harold of House Ravenledge,” he replied, nodding toward the duke. “I’m pleased to make your acquaintance, Lord Thuggory.”

There was cool amusement playing around Thuggory’s lips as he regarded Harold. “An interesting new friend you found there, Milady,” he said, not reacting to Harold’s words in the slightest. “I just hope he fares better than your last one. What happened to him, by the way? I can’t remember seeing him again after the accolade a few weeks back. Did you get rid of him in secret to avoid attention? Let me warn you, young Lord Harold. Getting friendly with this lady can easily cost you your life.”

Astrid pressed her lips together to keep herself from throwing what went through her mind back at Thuggory. She wanted to deny his comment about how being her friend could be dangerous, no matter how right he might be. She wanted to assure Harold that Thuggory was exaggerating, simply to annoy the later as, right now, her sympathy was definitely with the former. And she wanted to tell Thuggory exactly where her other friend was, that his assumptions were so far off, it was ridiculous. But telling Thuggory would be an incredibly stupid thing to do. And she didn’t even know where Hiccup was anyway...

In the end, she said nothing. She just glared at the young duke, trembling with suppressed anger and fear, feeling as if everything was crashing down on her today. It was all too much, and she wanted nothing more than to get away, to have a few minutes to herself, to calm down. No, what she really wanted was to know that Hiccup was safe, to feel his arms around her, his reassuring voice in her ear. But that was impossible right now...

Suddenly, there was a hand on her back, lightly resting there in a supportive gesture. Astrid's mind blanked out for a second, unable to react. A part of her wanted to spin around, to yell at Harold, to tell him off for touching her again. But she couldn’t show any weakness, especially not in front of Thuggory. And… if she was honest with herself, then it didn't feel that bad to have someone’s support right now...

“Thank you for your concern, Milord,” Harold said with the same self-confidence he’d shown all night. “But I know about this law already, so your warning is unnecessary. And now… if you would excuse us? The Lady and I have private matters to discuss.”

Astrid wasn't capable of feeling much anymore, else the surprise over Harold’s words would have made her turn toward him with at least a raised eyebrow. But instead, she stood still as a statue, more looking through Thuggory than at him.

The duke regarded them with a smirk, his eyes resting on Harold’s arm where it disappeared behind her back. “I see. Well, then don’t let me disturb you.” He nodded in farewell and then retreated, the dark grin never leaving his face.

Once he was out of sight amidst the crowd, she exhaled in relief. She hated interacting with this man who hid behind his high rank, but whose actions couldn't by any measure be called noble. She was even grateful to Harold to an extent for his rude and inappropriate comment that had made Thuggory leave, even as she could still feel his hand on her back.
She was about to change that when he pulled his hand away on his own accord. At first, she thought he'd somehow guessed her thoughts or even understood how unwanted the contact was to her, but when she saw how someone else was coming their way, she wasn't so sure anymore.

“Astrid,” Daniel's voice sounded concerned as he stepped close enough that none of the uninvolved bystanders could overhear him. “I'm sorry, I saw him too late. Glad you already got rid of him though. What did Thuggory want?”

“Oh, just the usual. Making everyone uncomfortable,” she replied, but even to her own ears her lightness sounded forced. So, with more enthusiasm, she added, “But thanks to Lord Harold here, he left quickly.” She didn't add that she would probably hear comments and rumours about her new companion for a while now, but she'd given up on paying those any attention ages ago.

Daniel looked at the young man in astonishment, but then something like a small smile spread across his face. “Well, no need to worry then. I need to return to Father, but it looks like you're in good hands here. I guess I can trust you with looking out for her, Lord Harold?”

“Indeed you can, Milord,” Harold confirmed with a slight bow, chest visibly swelling with pride. “I will take good care of her.”

With a nod, Daniel left them again, and Astrid managed to keep her ever-calm facade, even though, for once, she more felt like rejoicing out loud. This was it, what she'd hoped for. Daniel acknowledging that not every man posed a threat to her, that she was fine even without his overprotective bearing. Her plan was working. If things kept going as she hoped, maybe she could even tell Daniel about her feelings for Hiccup before he left next week. Maybe then, they wouldn't need to hide all the time anymore, wouldn't need to fear getting caught.

It sounded too good to be true.

Astrid was euphoric.

Thoughts of her plan working, of her and Hiccup being together more openly, of him being able to court her publicly and properly, made it easy to keep an honest smile on her face, and not even Harold’s endless bragging was able to put her off. The reception would be over in another hour, she could easily endure him that long. “Oh, I don't doubt that I could easily control one of House Jag’r’s famous stallions,” he said as their conversation turned back to horses after a while. “I mean, in the end, they are nothing but dumb animals. Whether or not they obey their master depends on how good they are trained, I say.”

Usually, a comment like this would at least annoy Astrid, if not actually make her angry. Horses, and especially the Jag’r-bred horses, were so much more than dumb animals. But tonight, not even that was able to darken her mood.

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“So, you say whenever one of these high-strung war stallions bites or kicks someone he's not supposed to, it's the fault of his former trainer?” she asked, amusement twinkling in her eyes. “Sir Eret won't be happy to hear that. He trains most of them himself, you see.” Calling her friend Sir felt weird, but she tried to make a point in using proper etiquette around Harold. He definitely had to get used to it if he wanted to survive among the higher noblemen.

A clearly visible blush spread across Harold’s face, which amused her even more. “No! No, that's... not what I meant,” he hastily corrected himself. His brows furrowed as he scrambled for a
clarification, and Astrid had to raise her hand to her mouth to hide her grin. “What I meant is that these horses need a strong hand. They need to know who their master is, need to regularly get put in their place. Yes, that's what I meant.” He looked satisfied with how he'd gotten himself out of this.

Unable to keep her amusement hidden any longer, Astrid allowed herself to chuckle into her hand. If it wouldn't undoubtedly lead to Harold’s very painful death, she would have liked very much to see him try and put Chomp ‘in his place’.

Harold, who obviously didn't understand why she was laughing, smiled with relief. Then he leaned in closer, even conspiratorially placed a hand onto her shoulder, and said in a low voice, “You won't tell Lord Eret what I said before, right? I don't want to make a bad impression. He might not be my direct superior, but he's still... important, I guess.”

Astrid had sucked in a surprised breath at the contact, but fought down the sense of discomfort quite effectively. This boy was too ridiculous to be taken seriously, no matter how uncomfortable his touch made her feel.

And she really ought to get over her pathetic fear!

Not for the first time, she mused how being around Hiccup was so much easier… His presence or touches didn't scare her, and never had. He was special in so many ways that she hadn't even thought about why this law existed anymore. But this… This here, right now, this was good. It was progress. Not just convincing Daniel but actually getting over her fears. The right way.

Instead of tearing her arm away from him and stepping away like she wanted to, Astrid forcefully held still and looked up at Harold. “I won't tell him,” she reassured him, intending to actually keep that promise to not make Harold’s life unnecessarily harder.

Harold returned her smile, then emptied his beer with a big gulp. Glancing at the glass in his hand, he said, “I'm really glad you serve our southern brew here, even though I'd gladly forego the water in it. Anyway, I think I'd like to get another one. Would you mind accompanying me?”

Astrid hesitated, glancing at where Daniel, Eret, and Dagur stood talking to a small group of southern noblemen, but then shrugged and nodded. “Sure, why not?” she agreed, and turned to lead the way to the slightly separated part of the room where servants hustled about to take orders.

But they didn't make it there.

Once they were out of sight from the gathered crowd, Astrid suddenly felt a pair of arms around her waist, a hard chest against her back, and for the second time tonight, her mind went utterly blank.

Some small voice in her mind was screaming at her for being so stupid, was telling her to fight, to struggle free. Daniel had been through this so many times with her, elbow back into the man's chest, her fist into his nose or groin. He'd made her practise uncountable times – on him no less – until she knew exactly what to do. But right now, she remembered none of that.

She stood frozen in shock as the arms around her tightened, restraining her arms and movability, and damp lips touched her neck. “Finally,” Harold murmured against her skin. He ran his nose up and down her neck, almost lovingly. The sensation made her sick.

“Let go of me…” she managed to get out, voice thin and barely more than a whisper. Her head was spinning as she tried to make sense of this change in behaviour. He'd been rash, yes, but this?
“Let go of you?” he chuckled, nuzzling into her neck. “You don't really want me to do that, do you? No, of course not. I admit, when I came here in the hope of making a fortunate catch, I hadn't expected that the princess would be interested in me. But here you are, unable to take your eyes off me, and I surely don't mind. You're pretty enough I suppose, despite all that silly fabric. And your father's money will easily rebuild our former glory.”

Astrid gasped in surprise as his words sank in. Had she unintentionally flirted with him? Had she encouraged this? “No,” she tried to reason, struggling against his hold. She had to end this before anyone noticed. “No, I didn't mean… I'm sorry, Harold, I don't… please let me go, let me explain, I–”

“I didn't mean it?!” he interrupted her, laughing quietly. “Oh, how often have I heard those words… But I don't believe you. You want this just as much as I do, don't deny it. You've been quite obvious, Your Highness.”

Nausea rose inside her as she felt him behind her even through her skirts, pressing his groin hard against her rear. She wanted to scream, but smothered the urge before she ruined everything. If she screamed now, if people found them like this, then her plan would be ruined. This was just a misunderstanding, just her own stupidity. She just had to set this right. For Hiccup.

“Harold, please stop,” she whispered urgently. “Please, this is a misunderstanding. I’m sorry, I didn't mean to fool you. Let me go. Let me explain.”

But he didn’t listen. Instead, he was moving closer, his body grinding against hers, his sickening groan rumbling through them both – his hand groping and squeezing her breast painfully.

“LET GO OF ME!” she yelled, panic finally taking over completely. There were no reasonable thoughts left in her mind, no sticking to her plan, or he had just misunderstood her. She didn't want him to touch her, and there was no space in her head for any other thought.

Astrid didn't know what happened then. In one moment, his hand had been rough on her breast, and in the next, he was gone and she found herself kneeling on the floor, hyperventilating. Suddenly there were so many people around them, too many for her to make sense of anything. There were voices, so many voices all talking at once, some people crouching down beside her, helping her up – it was all just chaos.

And then there was Daniel.

He was furious.

“... that’s how you interpret ‘looking out for her’? I trusted you!”

Astrid could only see her brother's back as he faced Harold, but she could imagine how he looked, fuming and eyes blazing. Remembered it all too well.

This couldn't be happening.

With her head still spinning, she stumbled forward toward her brother. She had to stop this, before–

“Your Highness, please. I'm begging you,” sounded another voice through the noise. An elderly man stood by Harold’s side, one Astrid recognised only vaguely. His father, of course. “He's just a boy, foolish and inexperienced. He didn't think–"
Daniel cut him off with a curt gesture of his hand. “That's why I'll take his hand and not his life. May this serve as a reminder that—”

“No, please,” Astrid begged upon finally reaching the men. “Don't do it, Daniel, please!”

Her brother gave her a confused look, momentarily distracted, so she went on as long as she had the chance. “It was nothing, just a misunderstanding. He was just misinterpreting… it was my fault, really. Please don't punish him, please, I'm begging you.” She mustn't let this boy suffer for her foolishness. And she couldn’t let Daniel enforce his law. She couldn’t!

For an endless moment, everyone was quiet. Everyone was watching the scene, the Crown Prince and the Princess Royal, the old Count and his son. Everyone was waiting for the Prince's next words.

But for this moment, they weren't the royal siblings everyone else saw. For this moment they were just Daniel and Astrid, just brother and sister. And, for once in their lives, her brother listened.

He gave her a long scrutinizing look – and then nodded. “All right,” he said quietly before he announced, loud and clear, for everyone to hear. “As requested by the Princess Astrid herself I will overlook this… accident. But know that I'll be watching you. And if you so much as stumble into the wrong direction, that verdict can be changed in an instant. Is that clear?”

Harold didn't answer, didn't so much as twitch and only glared angrily. His father, however, reacted quicker, bowed deeply and urgently pushed his son backwards and away. “Of course, Your Highness. Thank you, Your Highness,” he murmured again and again.

When they were almost out of earshot, Daniel turned toward Dagur who stood next to him, and said in an emotionless voice, “I suggest you pick another squire.”

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Astrid stood in a small curtained alcove and forced herself not to think about what happened earlier. Instead, she gazed through the large windows out into the night, at the waterline between Lake Vola and the grassy hills around, illuminated by faint starlight. It was beautiful. Familiar. Calming.

And somewhere out there was Hiccup, hopefully peacefully asleep and safe. Slowly, she raised her hand to brush over that spot on her chest. It had become such a routine gesture during the past weeks, something she did when she missed him, when she wanted nothing more than to be in his arms, but couldn’t. It was soothing to feel this warm spark of his soul inside her, something to hold on to. But, oh, what would she give if he could be here for real… What would she give to feel the wiry strength of his arms around her waist, his soft lips on her neck. His warmth surrounding her, his reassuring presence.

Behind the curtains that separated this small alcove from the rest of the room, the reception was slowly coming to an end, her father and the Grand Dukes seeing their noble guests off. But she didn’t pay it any attention anymore. Everyone thought she’d needed time to calm a bit, and to an extent that was true. Harold’s assault had torn at wounds she’d thought were healed by now, and having a few quiet minutes to get a grip on herself surely helped. But that wasn’t the only reason why she’d retreated in here, not even the main reason.

No, the main reason was that she didn’t want to be reminded of how spectacular her plan had failed. How stupid she’d been that she’d unintentionally fooled Harold into believing she was interested in him. And how, after Harold’s brash move on her and her rash and utterly stupid
reaction, Daniel would be even more adamant about his law now.

Her eyes began to sting and she pressed them close, fighting down the tears that threatened to well up. No, she didn’t want to think about that anymore. All she wanted was for this gathering to end, to return to her chambers, to sleep, and to forget. And tomorrow, she and Hiccup would need to figure out how to be more careful, because talking to Daniel had moved beyond reach.

Successful in her efforts to ignore everything around her, Astrid didn’t notice the rustling of the curtain behind her, nor the steps on the carpeted stone floor. She knew that her brothers would be keeping watch outside, that they wouldn’t let anyone past them. So when suddenly someone was behind her, every reaction came too late.

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Trigger Warning: Explicit Attempt of Non-Con/Rape

If you want to skip this part, you can keep reading after the next break.

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Before she knew what was happening there were hands on her back, pushing her up against the wall, and it was all she could do to lift her hands to not hit it face-first. A heartbeat later, a rough hand covered her mouth, smothering the scream that was building, and a heavy body pressed against her back, keeping her from moving even one inch.

“All this is your fault,” Harold snarled into her ear, his hot breath sticking to her skin. “I lost everything, and for what? Just because you don’t know your place, you devious slut. But you’ll pay, oh, yes, you will. You owe me, and now I’ll take my payment.”

At first, Astrid was too stunned to react. Everything happened too fast for her mind to process, her heart skipping a painful beat at the unexpected assault. But when his free hand glided up her body to land on her breast once more, she fought back on reflex. Shrieking into his hand in the hope someone might hear her, she did whatever she could think of, struggled and writhed, using the wall as leverage to throw him off.

Not again!

But she’d misjudged his strength. With an annoyed growl, Harold hurled her around and pushed her back, and with a dull thud! her head hit the wall, hard. For a horrible moment, all she could see were stars exploding behind her eyes. “Stop fighting,” sounded his angry voice into her dazed mind. “You’re only dragging it out.”

Astrid, however, had no intention of stopping fighting him. Once more she used the wall to blindly push herself forward, to knock him over or simply to hurry past him – but froze with a choked gasp as something tightened around her neck. Instead of using every second to fend off her attacker, her hands flew up to her neck. There was thick and embroidered fabric beneath her fingers – the curtain?

With seemingly practised swiftness, Harold caught her hands as she tried to pull her neck free. His grip was strong, bruising, and the next thing she knew was that her wrists were effectively tied to her waist as he wrapped the heavy fabric around her.

“No, you look lovely all tied up,” he snarled, his face only inches away from her. She made attempts to yell, at him or for help she didn’t even know, but he pushed her to the side and
whatever sound she would have made got cut off as the noose-like loop of fabric around her neck tightened. “Yes, choke on your etiquette,” he grinned darkly. “So much expensive fabric, and for what?”

He retreated a little, staying close enough to keep her in place and strangled, but still far enough to reach for the collar of her dress. With one quick jerk, he tore it open, all the way across her breasts and almost down to her stomach.

Astrid stared in shock, eyes wide and chest heaving as cool air hit uncovered skin. This wasn’t happening… This couldn’t be happening!

_Oh, Frigga, please…_

Once more, she struggled in her hold, but the curtain around her waist wouldn’t budge. All she managed was for the loop to further tighten around her neck with every movement. She could barely breathe anymore.

Harold, not paying her fight for air any mind, scrutinised her with a menacing sneer. “Now, look at your unblemished porcelain skin, all soft and white. I do wonder though, how many men have you showed these?” He worked one hand between the torn fabric, and she couldn’t help the desperate whimper that escaped her when his calloused hand groped untouched skin. “I’m not your first, am I? No, surely not, with what kind of corrupt and frivolous noblemen you’ve become. Too bad really, I’d love to believe in your… innocence. But I guess you’re just playing dumb, just like you did before. But you can’t fool me, no. You want this, want a real man to put you into your place, right? You need that.” He squeezed her breast once more, edging toward painful before he pulled his hand back, brushing her torn bodice open for him to ogle her. Judging by his appraising grin, he liked what he saw. It made Astrid sick.

“G-get away from m-me,” she croaked, the loudest sound she could manage. Her knees were trembling, with rage but also with fear. With only a few motions this apparently silly boy had rendered her helpless, unable to move and with her vision swimming with lack of air. If he only pushed her a bit more to the side or if her legs gave way beneath her, if that noose around her neck tightened a little further…

Harold cackled. “No, I don’t think so. We’re only getting started.” While he spoke his hands wandered down toward her wide skirts to hike them up. Panicking, she put all her strength into struggling free, into fighting him off, but he was stronger than he looked. More and more cloth gathered around her waist until his hand reached between her legs, roughly groping her. “Mmhh, yes. That’s where you want me, right?”

He audibly loosened his belt, and Astrid made another desperate attempt to get away, struggling against him and shrieking as loud as her tight throat allowed. “Oh, you’re so eager, squirming into my hand. Yes, that’s it. Just a moment, and–”

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Safe to keep reading

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But Harold didn’t get the chance to continue. Behind him, the curtain to the alcove flew open and Daniel burst through, followed by Eret and Dagur. All three men wore equally furious expressions on their faces, but in opposition to her adopted brothers, Daniel’s face turned into a cold mask once he’d taken in the situation.
“I warned you,” he said coolly, eyes drilling into Harold’s as Eret and Dagur slipped past him to free her. “I warned you twice even. I’ve been lenient, thoughtful of your situation. But now it’s enough.” He grabbed the lanky man by the arm and, entirely the warrior he had become, hurled the boy away from her and out of the alcove. There was a gasp outside as he hit the ground with a thud.

Through the opening and past Eret’s comforting form, Astrid could see the crowd that had formed outside, drawn by the commotion no doubt. But Daniel didn’t pay them any attention.

“Guards!” he yelled above their heads. “Get this man into the dungeon.”

“But it’s her fault!” waved Harold’s voice toward her, sounding terrified. “She did that on purpose, that bitch lured me in. She wanted it, she–”

Harold got cut off by Daniel’s fist in his face. Dazed, he stared at the Prince as guards dragged him away, sputtering unconnected comments like “That bitch,” and “She wanted it.”

“And send for the Fyrirs Gothi and Alvin. I’ll need their services in the morning,” Daniel called after them with cold determination, and Astrid realised... This wasn’t her brother anymore. This was Prince Daniel the Strong – and he had justice to dispense.

Astrid watched the whole scene in a trance, numbed by shock. She was glad to have Eret and Dagur kneeling on either side of her, not sure whether she would have been able to keep herself upright otherwise. Weirdly detached, she watched as Daniel shook out his hand, noticed his split knuckles, saw how he exchanged a look with their father who gave him a stern but approving nod. She saw how Harold got dragged out of the hall, but could neither hear his screams nor his father’s pleas anymore.

All this was her fault.

Clutching at her torn dress, she let Eret place one arm around her waist to support her trembling legs. He helped her up and guided her to a chair in a quiet corner, with Dagur right behind them shielding her from any concerned comments.

“I’m so sorry,” he stammered once she’d sat down. His tanned face was pale, nearly ashen grey. “I shouldn’t have… Gods, I’m so sorry, little sis. This is all my fault, I never should have brought him here. I’d heard rumours about Harold’s behaviour, but I didn’t believe… Thor, but if only part of those are true, then he deserves every punishment.”

A shudder ran through her as once more the memories of the last spring festival resurfaced in her mind. A just punishment. Shaking her head to chase the image away, she looked up at Dagur’s anxious face and forced a small smile on her lips.

“It’s okay, Dagur. You’re not to blame,” she whispered weakly. No, the only one to blame was she herself. If she hadn’t tried to be friendly, hadn’t tried to deter suspicions from Hiccup by treating Harold the same, if she hadn’t tried to convince Daniel not to punish him right away – none of this would have happened!

“Astrid!”

Before she knew what had happened, Astrid found herself in Daniel’s arms. Weird. She hadn’t even noticed how he’d approached. Reflexively, she clutched him closer, her safe haven, her big brother. The one who had always taken care of her. The one she was lying to every day. Silent tears ran down her cheeks, soaking his shirt, as the tension gave way inside her. For a few minutes, she
allowed herself to be weak, to let her brothers take care of her, before she straightened up again.

“It’s okay,” she said with a smile that convinced nobody. “I’m okay.” She wasn’t and they all knew it.

But Daniel nodded, squeezed her hand, and then stood up. “I need to… deal with this situation,” he said solemnly as he took off his jacket and laid it around her shoulders, covering her. Then he turned to Dagur. “And I need you to come with me. You and your father need to be there as witnesses. Eret, can you see Astrid to her chambers and meet us then?”

Eret nodded. “Certainly.”

“I don’t need to watch again?” Astrid asked in a small voice, looking up at the men standing around her. She didn’t allow herself to show relief. Harold was going to die and it was her fault. It was horrible. But not being made to watch again – she felt relief, and that only made it worse.

Daniel, however, gave her a pained look. “We’ll see...” he said quietly. “Nothing will happen until the morning.” Then he nodded to Dagur and both men turned to leave.

As she followed them with her eyes, Astrid noticed that the room had become empty during the last minutes. All the guests were gone as were her father and the Grand Dukes. Aside from her and Eret, only a few servants were bustling about, cleaning up what was left of the party.

“Can you walk?” Eret asked softly, crouching down next to her chair. “Or do you want to rest a bit longer?”

Astrid swallowed, thinking for a moment, but then nodded. “I can walk… I only want to get away from here.” She let Eret help her up and lead her away. They didn’t talk on their way, and she was grateful for the silence. She wasn’t sure whether she could have stood idle small talk right now, and anything meaningful would have been too much.

She hadn’t noticed, but apparently, Eret had been deep in thoughts as well. Right before they reached the corridor that led to her chambers, he paused at a corner, making her stop too.

“Astrid,” he began, and she perked up at him using her actual name. Eret never did that. “I… I don’t know how to say this, but… Hel, I thought this law was just to scare people off! I hadn’t thought he was serious, that he would actually…” he trailed off, shaking his head. Astrid wasn’t sure what to say to this, but before she could answer, Eret already continued. “… want to thank you. For… for not calling Hiccup out today. You know, for his carelessness. I thought it was funny how scared you looked, but… but I never actually considered what could happen. I want to believe that Daniel wouldn’t harm him, that this just now was… different. But…”

“Don’t worry,” Astrid replied in a monotone voice as he trailed off. “I never wanted Daniel to enforce this stupid law, and certainly not on… a friend.” She’d wanted to say ‘Hiccup’, but caught herself in the last moment. Speaking his name right now would be too much. She couldn’t even let herself think of him right now, or she would lose control.

She walked the last few strides to her door where Eret bid her goodnight when he saw that Timothy was already waiting for her. Obviously, he and his sister had already gotten message about what had happened as they bustled about without asking her a single question. Good, so she wouldn’t need to explain anything.

Mutely, she let the twins get her out of the torn dress and put her in her nightgown. She let Rachel brush out her plait and mechanically braided her hair into her simple night-brait to keep it from
entangling too much. It seemed to take hours, but at the same time, she barely noticed the passing of time. Everything was a blur.

She didn’t let herself think about Hiccup, not until she finally lay alone in her bed. Then she let the tears run freely, let the sobs tear at her. So easily it could be Hiccup getting executed in the morning. If Daniel ever found out… At least Eret wouldn’t say anything about what he’d seen, which was a relief.

But she had to talk to Hiccup!

She had to tell him, to make him understand that he had to be more careful. Daniel mustn’t notice anything… ever!

Eventually, after many long hours, her tears ran out and she fell into a fitful sleep.

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Chapter End Notes

So, erm... Who wanted to see Harold dead? :|
Anyway... still no Hiccup here. We'll get back to him, I promise.
(In the previous chapter, I forgot to also ask your opinion on Dagur. I could do so now, simply to lighten the mood... but I'm not sure that's such a good idea right now... Just kidding. Of course, I want to know!)
In addition: A fair warning: Next weeks chapter will be a short one.
Astrid woke to a grey morning sky, her eyes feeling gummy and her body sore with fatigue. When she’d actually fallen asleep, she had no idea. She vaguely remembered having tossed and turned for hours, haunted. The images that had plagued her were a mixture of memories and fearful imagination, all underlaid with the knowledge that everything that had happened had been her fault.

That man whose name she didn’t even know, his hands on her. That menacing gleam in his eyes and later his hatred as guards dragged him past her toward Odin’s Tree. The hatred in Harold’s eyes last night, the panic in his voice. The way the other man’s body had fought against dying and how his corpse had been left to rot, for the ravens to feed on it. How, in only a few short hours, Harold would meet the same fate.

And how easily this could become Hiccup’s fate too.

All because of her.

Desperate sobs shook her body once more, and she pulled her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them in an attempt to keep herself together.

She had to warn Hiccup. She had to let him know that he couldn’t – no, mustn’t let anything slip or show. That they had to be more careful, had to find another way. Whatever hope she had that Daniel might enact this law were thoroughly crushed after last night’s events, and who knew how he would react to even the slightest breach now.

But how could she warn him? It wasn’t as if she could send someone to deliver a message to him. And trying to tell him in private or even to sneak him a note once she would go with Daniel, Eret, and Dagur to the stables... That might already be too late.

No, there was only one possible way.

As quietly as she could, Astrid snuck through the waking castle, barely noticing where she was going or how she’d gotten there. The corridors seemed endless and the angles were strange in the dim light, her urge to find Hiccup clouding her mind and her legs feeling like she was dragging them through jelly. Strange sounds echoed in her ears, like people talking just around the next corner or in the next room. But there was nobody. Just the sound of the wind, howling around corners and rustling in the leaves outside.

It was confusing, but she couldn’t focus on anything but finding the door. She had to get outside, had to get to Hiccup, had to warn him... but no matter how many corridors she crossed, she couldn’t find a way out.

“Astrid!”

The sudden call of her name startled her. It had been Daniel’s voice, calling from behind her... somewhere... and her heart started to hammer in her ribs. No, no, no! She couldn’t let him find her,
not now. Not when she’d gotten away, not when she had to find Hiccup first.

She tried to run faster, down the hall and over unfamiliar carpets, past unfamiliar portraits, whose eyes seemed to follow her and whose painted mouths seemed to whisper in her wake.

_She’s here..._  
_Come get her..._

“_Astrid!”_ Daniel called again, closer now.

She bolted, turning down another hall – but found herself at a dead end. Above her, her grandfather’s life-size portrait hung on the wall, Ragnvald the Blessed looking down at her like he had her whole life.

“_Astrid!”_ echoed her name from behind her again, making her heart drop. She mustn’t get caught, not now.

And then she heard her name once more... from _in front of her! From behind_ the painting...

“_Astrid?”_ It was Hiccup’s voice, and she didn’t hesitate for even a second. Desperation fueling her strength, she ripped the portrait from the wall and leapt through the door that had been hidden behind it.

She was in another corridor, but it was empty. She turned around, searching, and saw a hint of motion at a corner further down. Giving chase, she felt like her legs were encased in mud, too slow. But she reached the corner, turned...

And there he was, walking slowly, limping as if his leg was hurting him. Everything was dark and the shadows blurred her surroundings into greyish chaos, but she would have recognised his shape everywhere. With a small cry, she ran down the corridor and threw herself into his arms.


Unable to speak, she burrowed into his chest, letting the comfort of his embrace wash over her. It brushed away every trace of anxiety, every thought of warning him, of being more careful. He was here. He was alright. And for the moment, that was all that mattered.

Instead of answering him, she stretched and sought the reassurance of his lips. If he was surprised by the intensity of her kiss, he didn’t let it show, and before she knew it there was hard stone against her back, supporting them both. His warmth all around her was an intriguing contrast to the cool wall in her back as his whole body was aligned to hers, his hands quickly roaming up and down her sides as he kissed her hungrily.

Astrid couldn’t suppress the low moan that escaped her, her hands fluttering uselessly up his back. Gods, it felt so _good_. His warmth, his closeness, the reassurance and the sense of _home_ he emitted. She needed more of this, of him, needed to feel him. She moved, wriggled against him in search of more contact, and he responded eagerly, pressing against her in ways that made her dizzy and silently begging for more. It was overwhelming and made her forget everything else.

With a low gasp, he moved his mouth away from hers, leaving her breathless, and let his lips glide along her jaw to her ear. “You’re safe now,” he murmured, voice rough and heavy. Astrid gasped out a laugh and clutched him even tighter. She was more worried about _his_ safety than anything else.
But it was hard to think about anything right now. Weariness, darkness, and finally being with him after that nightmare of a reception made all caution fly out of the window. She didn’t even think of stopping him as he nibbled his way down her neck. All she did was clutching his shoulders tightly, keeping him close, so wonderfully close.

“What in Odin’s name—”

The angry voice and the light startled them and momentarily tore them out of their bliss. Astrid knew instantly who had found them, even though she couldn’t see him past the dazzling light.

With only a few steps, Daniel was on them, his face distorted into an angry mask. “You!” he spat, grabbed Hiccup by the collar, and pulled him away from her. “How dare you! I warned you. I trusted you!”

“Daniel, wait—!” Astrid tried to intervene, but her brother wasn’t even listening.

“I’ve been lenient with you! I gave you a second chance. And now I find this?” He turned, dragging Hiccup with him, and called, “Guards!”

Astrid watched in horror as Hiccup got pulled along; he didn’t resist, and just went with him. When she met his eyes, she saw sorrow and regret in them as he silently mouthed her name.

“What… what are you—” she called after them. Awkwardly, she climbed back onto her feet as two guards appeared and took Hiccup by the arms.

Daniel looked at Hiccup, his shoulders tense with fury. “What I should have done weeks ago.” He shifted to look at the guards. “Take him to the dungeon and send for the Fyrirs.”

“No! No, Daniel, you can’t. You can’t! Please, I… wanted him to— I kissed him first. Please, let him go. Please!”

But this time, her brother didn’t listen.

Ignoring her desperate pleas, he made another threatening step to where Hiccup hung in the guard’s arms, and, grabbing him by his collar, pulled him up to snarl at him. “How dare you? She’s just a child. How dare you take advantage of her innocence? HOW DARE YOU?”

With a sickening crunch, Daniel’s fist collided with Hiccup’s face, and Astrid cried out as Hiccup went limp in his captors’ arms.

Astrid wasn’t sure how she’d made it here or how much time had passed. But suddenly, she found
herself on a dais not far from Odin’s Tree. She sat in a richly decorated chair that must have been brought there specifically for her, beneath a thin canopy that shielded her from the bright midday sun. Her hands were clenching and unclenching, wringing and wrinkling her skirt, but she didn’t care.

Hiccup would get executed every minute now, and there was nothing she could do to prevent it.

Daniel had refused to listen to her, and after what had happened the last time he’d done so, she wasn’t even surprised.

Next to her sat her father, the only person who could overrule Daniel’s decision. But one look at his hard and angry face was enough to know that he wouldn’t interfere. He wouldn’t pardon Hiccup, not after what Daniel had witnessed.

The plaza around them was filled with angry looking people, all yelling and screaming for the culprit to be punished, for justice to occur. Nobody seemed to care that he had done nothing wrong.

At the edge of the crowd, she spotted Eret, arms crossed in front of him and with a stony expression on his face. He might be the only person who also cared for Hiccup, who didn’t want this to happen. But, clearly, he wouldn’t act against his future King’s wish, wouldn’t spring Hiccup, even if he wanted to.

Gods, if she could, she would free him herself. She wanted to grab a bow to shoot the rope the moment he fell so that they could escape together. But she couldn’t even move. She wanted to scream, to yell and cry, wanted to beg them to listen to her, to stop this madness. But no words left her mouth. She was paralysed, too stunned to move or even to speak, her body and mind too numb to do anything.

No, there was nothing she could do, and never before had she felt so helpless and alone. All she could do was watch as Daniel pushed a stumbling Hiccup toward another dais at the other end of the plaza, right beneath a strong branch of Odin’s Tree.

He looked horrible. His hair, usually endearingly tousled and dishevelled, stuck to his scalp, sticky by what could be sweat or even blood. His clothes were torn, his skin beneath bruised and bloodied as if he’d received a thorough beating since the last time she’d seen him. The thought made her throat tighten up until she could barely breathe anymore.

Daniel stopped beside a man clad in the recognisable robes of one of Odin’s executioners – a sight that filled Astrid’s heart with terror.

This wasn’t happening. It couldn’t be happening! It wasn’t possible. The Gods had wanted them to be together. Surely, they wouldn’t let this happen. They would interfere, would save Hiccup. They had to.

Caught in her numb and unresponding body, Astrid watched in horror as the Prestr of Odin laid the noose around Hiccup’s neck and placed him over the falling board. The man read out the list of Hiccup’s crimes, but over the rushing blood in her ears she didn’t hear a single word. Her eyes were locked on Hiccup’s as he looked at her, conveying all their feelings for each other without a single word. Sorrow and regret for the life they could have had. Fear and desperation over what was about to happen. That persistent spark of frantic hope for a miracle.

But there was no miracle.
The Prestr finished his speech, and, without further ceremony, pulled the lever for the falling board.

There was nothing she could do as Hiccup fell through the opening, as the rope tightened around his neck without breaking it. As his legs kicked uselessly. As his entire body twitched and spasmed, unseeing eyes bulging out of their sockets as he desperately fought for air. As he eventually stopped moving...

All she could do was scream.

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Still screaming, Astrid sat upright in an instant, hands outstretched and vision blurred by tears. She was panting heavily, and it took her a few horrible seconds until she understood where she was.

She lay in her bed.

Outside, the sky was a dark grey, still long before dawn.

Only slowly, she realised: It had been nothing but a dream.

Nothing but a horrible nightmare.

Shaking vigorously, she buried her face in her trembling hands and let uncontrollable sobs tear through her body.

Thank the Gods, it had only been a nightmare.

A nightmare that so easily could come true.

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Chapter End Notes

First... A clarification: Hiccup is not dead! All this wasn't real. It was just a nightmare.

Second... Sorry, still no Hiccup. If it's of any help: Next chapter is Hiccup's POV.

Third... Sorry that it's just this short one this week...

and now, I'll return to 'hide under rocks' again...
Hiccup woke with a start.

With his heart hammering in his chest as if he’d just run for miles, he practically threw himself out of his nest of blankets and landed in a crouch. Instinctively, he reached for a knife he kept nearby, a habit courtesy of his years on the road, and let his eyes wander around through the dark interior of the empty stall. But he couldn’t determine what had woken him.

All he knew was that something was off.

With an uneasy feeling, he got up and looked around. The silvery moonlight pouring through the gaps in the window shutters told him it was the middle of the night, and even the horses weren’t really awake yet. Anxiously, he made a round through the stalls, and then another one outside, but he couldn’t find anything out of the ordinary. Maybe it had just been another animal that had woken him, some mice, maybe, or a raven on the roof.

But none of that could explain the trepidation he felt like a tight ring around his chest.

Bewildered, he lay back down onto his makeshift bed amidst the straw bales in the spare stall and tried to go back to sleep – but found that he couldn’t. No matter how hard he tried to distract himself, to calm his thoughts and his body as he’d learned to, he couldn’t sleep anymore. All he could do was stare at the dark ceiling, unable to calm his rapidly beating heart or to contain the uneasiness that churned in his guts.

Something was wrong, and he couldn’t shake off the feeling that it had something to do with Astrid. The tension seemed to radiate from that piece of her soul in his heart, tearing at him. But that realisation didn’t serve to ease his anxiety. Not at all.

What was happening to her?

Too restless to lie still, much less go back to sleep, he stepped outside into the cool night air to clear his head. Without intending to, his eyes wandered toward the castle in the distance where it stood up on the hill. Only a few of the lower windows were dimly lit with the soft glow of candles, probably from some scribes at work or some servants on early duties. There were no signs of further activity, no additional rooms lit or guards running around with torches. Nothing that would indicate something had happened up there.

Chewing his lip, Hiccup contemplated simply walking straight up to the castle to look for her.
Even though nothing seemed to have happened, he still felt like something was wrong with her. And whatever it was that was causing this distress, he wanted to help make it better. He wanted to hold her, to comfort her, and to be there for her.

But he knew that it wouldn’t do him any good to approach the guards. He couldn’t simply go there and demand entry to the Princess’s chambers. At best, they would laugh at him, but getting arrested was far more likely. Either way, he definitely wouldn’t be let through to see her.

He almost went anyway. Staying away, waiting and not knowing while his heart wouldn't stop pounding… That was simply impossible.

But before he could actually do something as stupid as risking his freedom or maybe even his life, the anxiety eased to a bearable degree, and his logical mind took over again.

He couldn’t go looking for her. Every day, she reminded him that he mustn’t risk anything, and he had no intentions of doing so anyway. Being with her was too important to him. She was his own personal sun, filling his former cold and empty life with light and warmth. The mere thought of a life without her made despair claw at him, made it hard to breathe sometimes.

No, he wouldn’t do anything that posed a threat to the life awaiting them. Especially not after they’d almost gotten caught yesterday. Hiccup still wasn’t sure what to make of Eret’s rather obvious lack of reaction. He’d at least expected some comment, maybe a reprimand or a reminder to be more thoughtful around the Princess. Not that he would have needed such a reminder after his heart had dropped to his knees upon almost getting caught...

With a sigh, Hiccup rubbed his chest and forced himself to be patient. In a few hours, she and her brothers would come here as they did every day. Then, he would learn what had happened. If anything had happened...

He could wait that long.

... o O o ... 

Waiting was driving him insane!

Waking up early had Hiccup done with his usual morning chores in record time and left him with far too much free time to ponder. During the hours from early to late morning, his uneasiness grew constantly, and even doing some routine maintenance of the small tack room couldn’t distract him for long. Something was wrong, and he knew it. By now, it wasn’t even the intense anxiety which had woken him anymore, just a dull throbbing in the back of his mind, but no matter how hard he tried to distract himself it wouldn’t go away. And it made calming down impossible.

Waiting for Astrid and the others to arrive was bordering on torture, especially as the usual hour of their arrival came and went without any news reaching him. Instead, another jolt of anxiety hit him, and even though it was over quickly, it hit him hard and unexpectedly.

Hiccup had been in Markor’s stall, mechanically petting the gelding just to have something to do, when it had happened. His chest tightened, making his breath leave him in an audible gasp, and his heart began to race without apparent reason. Panting, he clung to Markor’s side, glad over the big horse’s presence, as he surely would have fallen without his support. The whole incident couldn’t have lasted longer than a few seconds, but to Hiccup, it felt endless as he stared unseeingly to the ground. When the sensation finally ebbed away, he straightened only slowly and, running a hand through his hair, tried to comprehend.
What had happened? Was she hurt? Sick? Injured? Should he go looking for her after all? Growling like a trapped animal, he clenched his hands into fists to keep them from trembling. So far having to hide their relationship from everyone had been bearable, nothing but a necessary nuisance. But right now, not being able to go looking for her felt oppressive. He just had to know.

Hiccup was a nervous wreck when finally the familiar voices of Daniel and Eret approached. He let out a deep and relieved sigh before hastily composing himself. Pretending to be busy in Markor’s stall, he waited eagerly for the door to open, to see her again, to get the confirmation that she was all right. She had to be all right...

But when the door opened and three figures stepped inside before it closed again, it was almost impossible for him to keep his composure. Behind Daniel and Eret, the vaguely familiar figure of Lord Dagur of House Berserker entered the stables – and no one else.

Hiccup’s face drained of all blood, and he had to hide behind the big horse for a few moments. What in Loki’s forsaken name had happened that would keep her away from the stables? Once again, his thoughts were running wild, and he barely registered the tired “Afternoon”s from Eret and Daniel.

“Good afternoon, Milords,” he replied belatedly and forced more vigour into his voice than he really felt. “And the same to you, Lord Dagur.”

The red-head with the peculiar tattoos across his left eye gave him a puzzled look before a small smile spread across his tired face. “Hi there, Hiccup. Good to see you again.” He looked tired, exhausted even. But considering that he’d spent the last few days on a ship, tacking and rowing up the Volantis River to reach the castle, that wasn’t really surprising.

Hiccup slightly bowed his head in response, but then quickly turned toward the other men, not having the patience for this conversation now. He longed to ask after Astrid, but didn’t dare to risk being too obvious. Searching for a way to inconspicuously bring up her absence, he got distracted by how down the men looked.

Eret, but Daniel especially, looked even more tired than Dagur, and that was without the excuse of a long journey. But, no, they didn’t look tired, not exclusively at least. They looked worn out, mentally as much as physically. There were gloomy expressions on their usually excitable faces, and the way they moved spoke of severe exhaustion.

Biting his lip, Hiccup pondered his options for a minute, but then settled for inconspicuously stating the obvious. “You’re late today,” he said, putting a light tone into his voice. It was something reasonable to say, wasn’t it? Something a friend could ask, right? Not something that directly hinted at what concerned him most – Astrid and her absence – but just some friendly small talk instead. That was allowed, right? Gods, he couldn’t even think straight anymore...

At first, he thought he wouldn’t get an answer, as all three men visibly tensed. It made Hiccup tense too, because, surely, whatever bothered these men couldn’t mean anything good, regardless of whether it was about their sister or not.

Eret was the first to leave their frozen state. He inhaled deeply before raising his head to meet Hiccup’s eyes, a disturbingly unsettled expression on his usually unperturbed face. “Yes. Something came up. Something—” he broke off, shaking his head as if to get rid of the memory.

“Did...did something happen?” Hiccup asked, barely able to keep calm anymore. Gods, what was it that he’d missed?
This time, it was Daniel who answered. “Yes, it did. I...” he took a deep breath and raised his head to look at Hiccup with weirdly empty eyes. “I sentenced Dagur’s squire to death. He was executed this morning.”

At first, these words served to somewhat calm Hiccup. Nothing had happened to Astrid, just someone breaking a law. But that sense of security didn’t last long.

“He wasn’t my squire,” Dagur corrected bitterly. “He should have become, but... Damn, I’m so sorry! I never should have brought him here. And just... Damn!” Angrily, he slammed his fist against the nearest wall – which happened to be Markor’s stall. Skittish as the gelding sometimes was, he made a scared step to the side – where Hiccup was standing. One hoove grazed on his left foot, and Hiccup was barely able to keep the pained groan inside.

“Oh, shit, sorry!” Dagur stepped away from the stall, hands raised in a placating gesture and guilt written all over his face. Apprehensively, he watched as Eret joined Hiccup inside the stall.

Stabilizing him with one arm, Eret laid the free hand on Markor’s flank to calm the gelding. “Are you hurt?” he asked, worried, and helped Hiccup to sit on one of the straw bales nearby.

Hiccup just slowly shook his head though. “No,” he mumbled, his strained voice giving away the lie. “He just grazed me but didn’t break anything. I’ll have a nice bruise, but that’s all. I bet I won’t even notice it anymore in a few minutes.”

Eret nodded, concerned, but before he could say something else, Dagur spoke again. “I’m so sorry, Hiccup. Gods, why am I even here? I should have stayed in Southshore, then none of this would have happened, and Astrid–”

“That wasn’t your fault,” Eret interjected firmly and Daniel nodded, grim expressions on both their faces.

Hiccup sat where Eret had left him, too stunned to move. His foot hurt, but the pain was weirdly surreal, not important. No, what really concerned him, what clouded his mind and made forming any coherent thoughts impossible was what Dagur had said.

“Astrid...”

Her name was nothing but a weak sigh on Hiccup’s lips, inaudible for any of the other men. But even if he’d been louder, he couldn’t have cared less as everything started to make sense. He wasn’t closely familiar with every rule and law in the capitol, but he at least knew of one law that could lead to a man’s immediate execution. One crime a young man could commit and directly be punished for, even though he’d only arrived at the capitol a few hours prior.

*And Astrid wasn’t here.*

“The Princess,” he brought forth, louder this time and more composed than he felt, but still noticeably shaken. “Is she... all right?” That was another reasonable question... wasn’t it? Daniel had accepted that he’d become her friend, after all. On tenterhooks, Hiccup waited for a confirmation, for a smile and a nod, a reassurance that she was all right, that his soulmate was unharmed.

But instead, Daniel pressed his lips into a thin line and shook his head. “No, she’s not,” he proclaimed hoarsely.

Hiccup felt as if someone had pulled the rug out from under him, and was incredibly glad that he wasn’t standing.
“That boy, he... he assaulted her. And...” the Prince trailed off, clearly struggling with his words.

Hiccup could have interrupted him, could have claimed that he didn’t need details, that his friend didn’t need to explain further. But that would have been a lie. Anxiously, he waited for Daniel to continue, to hear what he had to hear.

“And this morning at the execution... She was so calm, almost composed even, until... until she just... broke down. And then she refused to leave her rooms at all again, and...” He shrugged and helplessly shook his head. “I never should have let it come this far,” he blurted out after a pause, more lively now, angry. “I should have convinced Father to let her stay in her rooms directly: I knew she didn’t want to watch. Hel, I should have stopped that boy the first time, I should have–” he broke off as Eret laid a hand on his shoulder.

“There’s nothing you could have done differently,” Eret said despondently. “Not defying your father, and not ignoring her plea. No, if anyone is to blame, then that’s me. If that slime Thuggory hadn’t pulled that stunt with the serving girl to distract us all, to distract me, Harold would never have been able to slip into that alcove, and...” He took a deep steadying breath. “But our Swanja is a fighter, remember? She’s tough, tougher than anyone I know. And she wouldn’t want us to writhe in guilt. She’ll come around, and we’ll be here to support her.”

“You don’t understand,” Daniel said quietly, empty eyes cast to the ground. “I haven’t seen her like this in months, not since... And I vowed to her that I wouldn’t let anything like that happen ever again. I swore that I would protect her.”

Hiccup just sat, unmoving, and listened. The words made little sense, but they started to paint a picture. One he didn’t like at all.

Eret and Dagur shared a troubled look. “You can’t protect her from everything,” Eret said slowly. “Besides, you weren’t the only one there. Dagur could have sent him away before already. And I shouldn’t have let the boy slip past me. If you go that road, we’re all to blame.”

But Daniel shook his head. “But she’s my sister. I’m responsible for her. How can I leave next week, when she’s–”

“Bullshit,” Dagur interrupted him sternly. “She’s all our sister, remember? We’re all responsible for her, always have been and always will be. We’ll keep our eyes on her, care for her as long as necessary. Just like we always did. Don’t you worry.”

Daniel’s gaze wandered from Dagur’s determined face to Eret’s which had a similar expression. Then he nodded, lips stretching into a weak smile. “You’re right... Thanks. Really. And I’m sorry. I know you care for her too,” he took a deep breath and then added, sighing, “Besides, I couldn’t cancel that trip anyway; Uncle Spite would impersonate Surtr if I delayed those repairs.”

Both men snorted in agreement and let the topic drop; instead, they turned their attention to the horses, clearly to distract themselves.

Still sitting on the bale, Hiccup’s eyes were glued to the ground, his hands clenching into the straw as his thought ran riot. What had happened? What in Odin’s many names had happened to her?

Cursing himself, he closed his eyes. He should have been there. By all means, he should have been at that reception, should have accompanied Eret. He could have kept an eye on her too. Whatever had happened, he should have prevented it. She was his soulmate, more important to him than his own life. He should have been with her.
The following hours stretched out endlessly.

Hiccup didn’t dare to ask after Astrid again, what exactly had happened, how she’d looked or what she’d said. The other men seemed happy not to talk about the incident for a while, and bringing it up would only raise suspicion. Eret’s occasional worried glances were disturbing enough.

Instead, they all focused on the horses, something calming to occupy their minds and to keep their thoughts from wandering. Or that had been the idea, assumably.

As he’d expected, Hiccup’s foot didn’t bother him much anymore a few minutes later, and after Dagur had gotten reacquainted with Squish, they all decided to go on a ride. But with Dagur not being that much of an experienced rider and Daniel riding Chomp for a change as Hiccup hadn’t gotten the chance to fix Trample’s bridle yet, it was only a slow ride, barely more than a stroll on horseback. Definitely nothing that needed his avid attention, and the fact that Hiccup was riding Markor to avoid Chomp getting territorial over Cassie didn’t help him to focus either.

Without even a minute’s break, Hiccup’s thoughts constantly circled around Astrid. What exactly had happened at the reception? How was she? Had she really been ‘calm’ at that execution, as Daniel had said? Or had she been hiding behind that mask of composure he’d seen so often during the last weeks? He knew by now that Astrid had a profound aversion against what she called ‘pointless deaths’, but would she regard the death of someone who’d attacked her as pointless? Why had she broken down?

Once they were back at the stables, Hiccup tried to force his mind to focus on his surroundings again. He was supposed to show Dagur the subtleties of tending to the Jag’r-horses, starting with Markor before they continued with Squish. But being in this stall after a ride wasn’t exactly helping his concentration, the whole setting too closely linked to Astrid to think about anything but her. More out of reflex than anything else he worked on the gelding, cooing and murmuring as he took off the bridle and saddle while Dagur stood to the side and watched.

“You weren’t kidding, eh?” Dagur asked, throwing Hiccup a funny look with one eyebrow raised. “You actually sing to these horses to calm them? I always thought Eret was joking.”

Despite his troubled mind, Hiccup’s lips twitched into a small smile. “Yes, it’s an effective way to let them distinguish between friend and enemy. Sure, they learn quickly who their rider is and not to attack him. But look at it from my perspective. I’m glad to be able to let Chomp over there know I’m just a groom and not a horse thief.”

Dagur chuckled at the dry comment, but quickly sobered up again. “But you’re not really a groom, right? I heard you made your decision.”

Hiccup looked up, startled, but of course, Dagur knew more about his situation than most others. “Yes, I did,” he confirmed, his eyes returning to Markor’s glossy hide beneath his brush. “Being a squire is the better choice. I’m not sure the simple life as one of Grand Duke Eret’s stable masters or as a craftsman somewhere else would be enough for me.”

It was a blatant lie. Hiccup would have loved to live such a simple life without any trouble or danger, just peacefully living from day to day, so long as Astrid was at his side. But that dream, initiated by the vision he’d seen all those weeks ago, would always stay a dream. All he could hope for was gaining a title for himself, distinguishing himself enough to be given a barony or maybe even a county as reward for his deeds. Chances for that were slim, he knew that. But with the Gods’ blessing, he was confident to reach this goal. Eventually…
But of course, he couldn’t exactly say so.

“We are what we are, I guess,” Dagur nodded. “But it must be weird to act all deferential when in public. I don’t think I could do that convincingly.”

At that, Daniel’s low chuckling was audible from where he brushed down Chomp, and a moment later, Eret’s amused voice sounded toward them. “I have no doubts that it would be difficult for you to act deferential, Dagur,” he snorted. “But believe me, that’s not true for everyone. I only wish he’d just act that way in public. Or just act at all.”

Hiccup could practically feel Dagur’s puzzled look on his back. “But you’re still–”

“I’m Sir Eret’s squire,” Hiccup interrupted him, sternly continuing with his work. “That is who I am now. Pretending to be anything else would be foolish.”

“I see,” Dagur said after a short and weighty pause. “But don’t you dare to go all Sir on me after my accolade. It will be weird enough when others do so on formal occasions, I don’t need that in my free time, too. I’ve heard you fit in here quite nicely, let’s keep it that way.”

Hiccup, suppressing a humorous smirk, turned toward Dagur and bowed deeply. “As you wish, Milord.”

Dagur groaned exasperatedly, followed by Daniel’s and Eret’s rough laughter, and for a short moment, everyone’s mood lightened.

“But tell me,” Dagur went on a minute later. “If you’re so devoted to your new position, why weren’t you at the reception last night? Shouldn’t you ‘support your master’, or something? I had a nice talk with some of the local counts around here who commented about how Eret regularly not bringing his squire is seen as a disgrace.”

Hiccup, who’d returned to work on Markor, paused in his movement and dug his head. He’d known that staying away from social events could harm Eret’s standing… But hearing it said like this made it worse, even though neither of the other men seemed to care all that much.

“And what were they saying about me?” Daniel snorted, sounding more bored than irked. “I mean, obviously, I’m not bringing my squire either. Am I a disgrace too? An embarrassment to all those of noble blood? I wonder if they see the irony, as none of their families were noble before two generations ago…”

“Actually, they were quick to excuse Mike’s absence–”

“Milburn,” came Daniel’s automatic interjection.

“As he’s still in Westhill. Because, of course, they would never dare to insult their Prince. Eret though? They know his squire is within reach. They’ve seen him regularly, only not to any official events. Although, to be honest I doubt they really mind his absence. I mean, we know these people would never leave out a chance to discredit someone they see as an obstacle on their way to power.” Hiccup wasn’t sure what Dagur meant by that, but didn’t get the chance to even think about it as the redhead continued without a pause, now talking to him again. “But that leads back to my question. Knowing you lot I’m sure there is a reason. So… yeah… why weren’t you there?”

“Because we all agreed that it would be better that way,” came suddenly Eret’s calm voice from the stall’s gate, answering in Hiccup’s place. “It might not be likely, but it’s always possible that someone might recognise him, which would do none of us any favours right now. Besides, you know damn well that I don’t give a shit on what those highborn noblemen think of me. Am I a
disgrace for not regularly sending my servants on unnecessary errands? Maybe. But if that’s customary then I enjoy being eccentric.”

Hiccup gave his cousin a tight smile, but then turned back toward the horse again, effectively hiding his face as worries clouded his mind. Was his reluctance to accompany Eret on those social events causing him trouble? Hiccup didn’t want to attend to those meetings. Not necessarily because he feared getting recognised, but he always felt like that wasn’t his place anymore. But maybe he should change his habit on this point. Causing Eret trouble just to avoid being around noblemen was selfish, and it surely didn’t help to distinguish himself either.

There was another reason to stay away, however, a more personal one. Acting deferential, as Dagur had called it, was incredibly hard when it was Astrid he was interacting with. Every part of him yearned to always make her smile or laugh, to make her happy. But doing so while playing his role as hardly more than a servant was nigh on impossible, and showing how he was more than that always risked raising dangerous questions. So they’d both tried to avoid meeting in public.

But what if... What if he’d been at that reception last night? Could he have prevented whatever it had been that had happened? He wouldn’t have let Astrid out of his sight at any rate, maybe he even could have interfered, could have kept her safe. At the very least, he would know what had happened. Still being ignorant was constantly nagging at him, and the friendly small talk just now, distracting as it had been, hadn’t been enough to keep his thoughts from circling around her for long.

What had happened? How was she? The same questions kept circling in his mind over and over, and they were driving him insane. He needed answers but knew he couldn’t simply ask for them. No, if he wanted answers then he would need to find them himself. He had to find her! But how? How could he excuse seeing her, looking for her, when she wouldn’t come here? He couldn’t even go up to the castle without raising suspicions, for Odin’s sake.

Or maybe, he could. Maybe, today was just the right day to provide him with a suitable excuse.

Glancing at the angle of the sunlight pouring in through one of the windows, he affected a frown. “Don’t you need to go back soon?” he asked, puzzled by how relaxed and unhurried the men seemed to be. “It’s getting late, and don’t you need to prepare for someone’s accolade?” Dagur’s accolade was the perfect excuse. It was an important enough event that suddenly accompanying Eret after all wouldn’t raise any suspicions… right? But apparently, luck wasn’t on his side today.

“Ah, no, we don’t,” Eret said, just as Dagur gave a theatrical sigh. “My big day – ruined because some idiots insisted on being idiots,” he whined, and leaned back against the wooden wall, sulking. At first it almost seemed funny, but there was more to his demeanour than exaggeration and humour. There as a bitterness in his voice, and Hiccup remembered how the Berserker heir was prone to overact to hide his real emotions.

“So… the accolade was cancelled?” Hiccup asked hesitantly, curious despite himself. There wasn’t much the heir to a grand dukedom could do to be denied the honour of being knighted – and he was fairly sure that Dagur had done none of that.

“No, not cancelled; just pushed back a few days,” Daniel explained, having joined Eret in the open gate to the stall. He was rubbing his temple, expression grim, and Hiccup realised his question had brought back the darker mood from before.

“Holding Dagur’s accolade on the same day as his squire’s execution seemed like a bad idea already,” Eret explained, eyes cast into the distance. “But then the boy’s father acted up, and…”
“And now, we have to hold a trial to determine whether Count Ravenledge is a traitor to the Crown,” Daniel continued through clenched teeth. “Executing a rapist is no fun, but it’s a… a simple trial. His traditional upbringing in combination with arrogance and utter stupidity led to his death, and there was no doubt about his guilt – especially after he admitted to Fyrir Gothi to have gone after other girls in his county already. The trial for his father will be much more difficult.”

“You think? I mean he attacked Dagur, and there were plenty of people around who witnessed it all. Dagur has it even memorised by now, right...?” Eret said leadingly.

Pushing himself off the wall again, Dagur nodded. “Right. He came running toward me as they led Harold up the dais, shouting how I had to do something, because the boy was ‘supposed to become my squire’,” he snorted, and threw his arms up in exasperation – and came without resistance as Eret pulled him out of the stall, away from the skittish horse. “And when I explained to him that his son had actively tried to commit high treason and that he should be glad not to be going to the Tree as well, he just yelled at me. Told me that the boy was his son. As if that excused everything. I didn’t even get to mention the former rapes he confessed during the night. I mean, those alone would have been enough to punish him. If only—” he broke off, averting his face, and Hiccup noticed how his hands were balled into angry fists again.

“Hey, you didn’t know,” Daniel said in a voice that held too many emotions at once... but he also seemed to be hiding something else.

Eret, who still had his hand on his friend’s shoulder, squeezed him reassuringly. “You said it yourself, choosing him to become your squire was purely a political decision. You couldn’t know those rumours were true.”

Angrily, Dagur shook his head. “They sounded so much like the lies people tell everywhere about their rivals to discredit them. And the timing was just too perfect, right before Father and I made the final decision. As if someone purposefully wanted to bring me up against him. So I didn’t believe… But I should have. I should have known!”

Hiccup stood still, not moving as he listened. Rape. So this man, this Harold had actually tried to rape Astrid. Swallowing, he stared right through his hands into nothing. If only I’d been there!, he numbly thought for the umpteenth time. If I’d been there I could have prevented this.

“And what else happened?” Eret asked after a minute of silence, clearly trying to distract them all from their depressed mood.

Dagur snorted. “He told me that I wouldn’t want to have him as an enemy just because of a bagatelle like this. A bagatelle! As if Astrid...” Dagur gritted his teeth and visibly fought to calm down. After taking several deep breaths, he continued. “I couldn’t resist to tell him the same words Father used. That, if he’s determined to act like one of the enemy then I’d treat him like one, too. I thought hearing those words would let him see just how... idiotic he behaved. Or that’s what I think I thought… But that idiot actually asked whether that was meant as a threat – as if he didn’t know damn well what happened after Father said them the first time. And then he yelled something… something about how he should have listened to His Grace – and then he attacked me. He actually drew his sword, right there in the middle of the plaza, only a few steps away from his King and Princess. I’m still not sure whether that was arrogance, stupidity, or simply a death wish.”

“And that’s where our problems begin,” Daniel commented, rubbing his temples. “If it was only grief for his son that clouded his mind then his action might be excused. But...” he hesitated, “his son confessed to other things.”

“What else?” Dagur asked, and overacting or not, Hiccup could tell that this was news to him.
Daniel shook his head. “I was originally planning on running a full investigation and then arresting him when we had ironclad proof... but now...”

Dagur scowled. “I seem to be messing up everything la–”

“Stop right there!” Eret’s voice came like a whipcrack, and they all looked at him. He was scowling at Dagur. “No, you don’t get to blame yourself for what he did. They have their own will, and their own minds, and you didn’t push them into doing anything. I get that you’re feeling guilty over what happened, but it wasn’t your fault!”

The pair of them locked gazes for a moment, Eret’s expression set... and after a few heartbeats, Dagur looked away.

“You’re right. I...”

“Don’t say you’re sorry,” Eret scolded.

Dagur pursed his lips and then burst out in bitter laughter after a moment. “That’s unfair!”

“No, what’s unfair is you grabbing more blame than you’ve earned,” Daniel said pointedly. “We all bear some culpability – for falling for Thuggory’s distraction, if nothing else – but trying to take more than that takes guilt away from the guilty men.”

“Aye, Sire,” Dagur said, mock-petulantly.

Daniel glanced at Hiccup and rolled his eyes. “Now don’t you start. That’s Hiccup’s gimmick, and you don’t get to take that either.”

The joke, weak as it was, broke the tension, and they chuckled.

“So... what happens now?” Hiccup asked carefully.

Daniel sighed, his smile evaporating. “We have a trial for the Count scheduled for later this evening. Between what his son confessed to and his actions this morning... he’ll be going to the noose.”

“And we had to drag him,” – he nodded toward Daniel – ”away from trying to oversee every detail of the preparations,” Eret said tightly.

Daniel clenched and released his hands. “But it has to be done right!”

“So trust the men that you gave the jobs to!” Eret fired back. “You hovering in the background like some stern dragon waiting to roast someone wasn’t going to help any!” He glanced up at Hiccup. “And that’s why we were late.”

Daniel sighed and his shoulders slumped. “And you were right to do so. I wouldn’t have been any good for the trial tonight if you hadn’t forced me here.” His shoulders tensed again. “And I have questions I want answers to.”

“‘Should have listened to His Grace’,” Dagur said darkly.

“Exactly. Was the attack on Astrid spontaneous, as Harold insisted it was? Or was he set upon her by some malefactor who saw an opening to undermine the Crown, perhaps through his father? Or something else?” Daniel slammed a fist into his other palm. “I want to know – but before I can have the Count questioned, he needs to no longer be a count. And that’s the purpose of the trial.”
“That’s one Hel of a stick...” Eret said carefully. “What’s the carrot? Since he’s going to the noose anyway?”

“If he cooperates, his eldest son Angus will inherit his title. Otherwise, he’ll remain as a knight, though downgraded to a lower rank, and the title will revert to the Crown, to be bestowed on someone else more worthy of it.” Hiccup barely kept himself from snapping his head up as Daniel scoffed and continued, “Gods know that we have enough loyal and decent men who have proven themselves to be honourable and whose home fiefs were stolen out from under them!”

Hiccup’s heart was pounding in his ears and throat as Daniel calmed and continued. “But there’s also the fact that a public trial will help restore confidence in the Crown.”

Eret scowled. “Aye. I was hearing murmurs that you were too hasty, that Harold was a ‘victim of circumstance’.” His expression roiled with anger. “Most of them didn’t see what had happened, didn’t see her. They just know that he was executed this morning after having arrived last night and his father is seen as a grieving victim whose largest holding was burned less than a month ago.”

Daniel inhaled deeply and then let it out slowly. “Yes, he has his pity-supporters, for now. But he won’t by tomorrow.”

“So, what’s the plan? What can we do to help?” Dagur asked.

After that, Daniel and the others laid out a plan for the trial later, but Hiccup had no desire to engage in that conversation. Their voices were tense, the whole topic surely important, but the way they discussed telling everybody what had happened to Astrid, maybe even letting her testify herself to underline the severity of Harold’s crime, was too sober for Hiccup to bear right now. Instead, he limped over to Squish’s stall, fighting to ignore the pain – in his foot and in his twinging leg alike – and methodically began working on the stallion; humming and cooing to calm the beast, taking off bridle and saddle, brushing out the yellowish fur – everything to keep himself from going crazy. He understood why the trial was important and respected Daniel, the future King, for being level-headed enough, for concentrating on the outcome. But he himself couldn’t do that.

All he could think about was Astrid. Absentmindedly, he stared out of the open front gate of the stables, at the dusty place outside lit by the pale sunlight. Oh, how he wished she would suddenly appear in the door, framed by a halo of light in her golden hair. She would smile that beautiful smile of hers, make some funny remark about how he worried too much. She would give him one of her playful punches to chase away his troubled thoughts, and reassure him that she was okay. But of course, that wouldn’t happen.

Sighing, he rubbed that spot on his chest, feeling oddly closer to her by doing so. Eret might be right, she was strong and surely would be back up eventually. But that didn’t change the fact that she’d broken down earlier. That she’d locked herself in her rooms. That she hadn’t even come here.

No, she wasn’t okay.

And all he wanted was to be there for her.

Letting out a heavy breath, he concentrated on that divine connection between them, hoping to get any sense of how she felt. But that wasn’t how it worked; he still had no idea what these weird jolts of something he’d felt earlier had been. All he knew was that he missed her terribly, and the prospect of not seeing her today at all was almost too much to bear.
“Hey, you all right?”

Hiccup looked up as Eret’s words brought him back to the now. His cousin looked curious and concerned, eyes on where his hand still rested over his heart.

_No, I’m not ‘all right’,_ a part of him wanted to scream. How could he be _all right_ when the other half of his soul so obviously wasn’t? When she was alone, and he couldn’t be with her, and… and...

But maybe he could. He just _had_ to try. Letting his hand linger to draw courage, he made a snap decision.

“Yes. I just…” he paused, nervously licking his lips, and then added, “I was just thinking. If you want to build a strong front against this Count Ravenledge you’ll need every bit of support you can get, right?” Eret nodded, so he went on, “Then I’ll come with you to this trial.”

Chapter End Notes

Okay, so I hope this answered the question regarding Hiccup and what he was doing... And I also hope Daniel could be redeemed, as he didn't get away well in the interlude...
And It’s A Fight Just To Keep It Together

Chapter Notes

If this chapter (and possibly the next too) is a mess then I'm sorry. At some point, I only wanted to get these done and move on to the next bit. So, I hope these two chapters aren't too horrible, but I can't make any guarantees.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Outside, the sun was setting after a day that had felt much longer than it should have.

Astrid sat at the desk in her small sitting room, eyes glued to the small object in front of her. Almost without blinking she stared at the small music box, and forced herself not to think of anything. She didn’t want to think. Instead, she focused all her attention on the small figurine and its movements.

Half a round to the left, a twirl, a quarter round to the right, a double twirl. Then it began anew. The tiny dancer followed this pattern eight times, moving in time with the slow music, before it abruptly stopped. As always.

Mechanically, Astrid reached for the box, shook it a little to unjam the mechanism, and the whole process started again. Ever since Uncle Oswald had given the box to her when she’d turned five years old, it had been her constant companion, a friend even, and she must have played it thousands of times by now. She vaguely recalled that, once, the music and dancing pattern had been longer, but it had picked up the jamming stutter years ago, and since then, it only played to this point in the pattern. By now, the music was so ingrained into her that her hand reached out practically on reflex even before it got stuck, knowing exactly when it would happen.

Over and over she watched the dancer move and twirl, head swaying with the simple melody, anticipating every second. Not letting herself think about anything else.

Not about Hiccup, and what so easily could have happened to him. Not about what actually had happened. And not about Daniel either. No, definitely not about Daniel...

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“Hey, Astrid? Wake up.”

The voice was soft, but it jerked her out of her sleep almost brutally. Wide awake in an instant, Astrid stared at her brother as he sat on the edge of her bed, one hand still half-raised from where he’d nudged her shoulder just now.

The sky outside was a light grey, many hours after that nightmare had woken her. Tears and exhaustion might have eventually let her fall asleep again last night, but that didn’t mean that she was well-rested now. Or that those dream-images of Daniel and what he’d done didn’t still linger in her mind. How he’d bullied her aside. How he’d punched Hiccup. How he’d ordered him executed.

Involuntarily, Astrid scooted away from Daniel, not able to stand being that close to him. She
knew that all that hadn’t been real, but that didn’t help to shake off the fear of it getting real.

Daniel pulled back his hand and gave her a sad smile, as if to reassure her that he wasn’t hurt. But his kindness hurt even more. “I’m here to tell you that… that Harold has been found guilty,” he explained in a low murmur. “He will be executed in an hour.”

Inhaling shakily, Astrid nodded and averted her eyes, gazing down at the crumpled blanket enveloping her. She hadn’t expected anything else, but hearing it being final still hit her. Another life ending because of her.

“And also,” Daniel continued after a short pause, discomfort clear in his voice. “I’m also here to take you with me to the execution.”

At that, Astrid’s head whipped up. “What?” she croaked, frantically shaking her head. “No! No, I don’t want to watch. Please, don’t!” She couldn’t. Not again. Not after that nightmare. She couldn’t!

Carefully, Daniel reached for her hand, but she pulled away reflexively. She couldn’t bare his touch right now, not with those images still lingering in her mind. He sighed, sounding apprehensive. “I know, and I’m sorry” he whispered. If he was upset by her rejection, he didn’t show it. “I told Father that it would be better to let you stay away. But he insisted… I’m sorry, Swanja.”

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No, she didn’t want to think about Daniel.

But she knew that she had to. Her feelings for him were too twisted right now to interact with him; she even felt a vague sense of fear whenever she thought about him, one she couldn’t even explain to herself but that kept her from interacting with him like she usually would. But she wouldn’t be able to avoid him forever, and she knew that those images in her head – of him shoving her to the ground, of his fist colliding with Hiccup’s jaw, of him silently watching as her entire world broke apart – weren’t real. She knew that they only were a confused jumble of memories and frightened imagination, mixing up what had happened before with what she feared the most.

She knew that her brother wasn’t like that. He was righteous and just, caring and funny. He’d always looked out for her, wouldn’t willingly hurt her, ever.

And yet… She also knew that at least some parts of what she’d seen in her dream were how Daniel really was. The righteous anger at someone who’d betrayed his trust. How cold he’d become in order to do what he deemed necessary. All that had really happened, and even though there was no doubt about whether Harold had deserved his fate, the thought made her shudder. Because no matter what she wanted to believe, that dream had been too close to reality.

If Daniel ever found out about her and Hiccup… would he even listen to her? Would he let her explain? Her big brother had vowed to protect her, no matter what – but did that include keeping her from making what he would consider bad decisions? Her dream had been just that, a dream. But it was a dream that could come true all too easily.

Once more, Astrid reached to get her music box started, a silent tear running down her cheek as she remembered the horrible sense of déjà vu from this morning. How close to reality her dream really had been.

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Only dimly she remembered how Daniel had escorted her here toward Odin’s Tree, how Eret and Dagur had joined them on their way. Everything was so surreal, as if her mind refused to participate in what happened around her.

And now, she sat in an ornate chair, on a dais beneath a thin canopy that shielded her from the bright late morning sun. With mixed feelings, she waited for the things to happen, knowing that Harold deserved his fate, but not really wanting him to die either way. Around her, the plaza beneath Odin’s Tree was filled with people, all yelling over one another, and once again, she felt as if she wasn’t able to move even one finger, was caught in her nightmare all over again.

Of course, there were differences too. Eret sat close to her side, and if she needed support, it would be easy to reach him. Then there was that interruption with Dagur and Harold’s father. She didn’t really get what happened there, her mind too numb to pay attention, but that, too, was different from her dream.

And Harold. Harold wasn’t Hiccup, and that was the biggest difference. The difference she clung to desperately.

When Daniel led him to the other dais beneath Odin’s Tree, he looked… normal. In opposition to Hiccup in her dream, he was unharmed, no clothes torn, no bruises or blood, no limping. Of course not. The one punch Daniel had given him wasn’t exactly usual procedure, had been just an act of the moment, and of course, Harold hadn’t been beaten. Of course not…

Once he stood in place, his eyes quickly found her across the plaza, but there was no hint of sorrow or regret in his eyes, no sign that he felt sorry for what he’d done. Instead, he looked furious, face contorted into an angry mask, his hateful eyes drilling into hers. He spewed insults, but over here, she couldn’t understand a word. The difference to her dream was so profound, it almost made her laugh. Almost…

Harold’s death was different from the one in her dream too. No mistakes happened, neither willfully nor accidentally. The executioner in Odin’s robe read the list of his crimes, a ridiculously long list, and wouldn’t let Harold’s neverending insults interrupt him. And when the lever was pulled and Harold fell through the opening, he died instantly with a snap of his neck. There were no minutes of fighting the inevitable, no twitching body, only a short murmur running through the crowd and then it was over.

Astrid wasn’t looking. Her eyes were firmly locked on a distant spot behind the Tree. She knew that she wasn’t allowed to close her eyes or look away, but she definitely wouldn’t look either. Slowly, the people on the plaza left, murmuring and muttering, returning to their daily life while she and the other noble representatives sat still and waited.

“Hey, Swanja. Let’s go,” came Eret’s voice after what felt like an eternity, sounding rough and subdued. His hand on her arm was comfortably warm, and gave her enough strength to stand up. As if in a trance, she let Eret lead her down the few steps, face unmoving, eyes unseeing, as she focused entirely on keeping herself together. She knew that Harold had been a bad man; she’d heard what else he had confessed. And yet, she couldn’t shake off the feeling that his death was her fault. If she hadn’t been so stupid...

A few steps away from the dais, they found Dagur who was just finished talking to some scribes. He looked up as they approached, dismissing the scribes with a wave of his hand and a last muttered order, and gave her a small but honest smile. His sight lightened Astrid’s mood, as always. One couldn’t stay all gloomy for long when in Dagur’s presence.

“Is everything settled?” Eret asked, nodding at the retreating servants. He laid his hand on
Dagur’s upper arm, worried and comforting alike.

“Yes, yes, all the legal stuff is done,” Dagur muttered, subconsciously placing his hand over Eret’s. “The guards are escorting Count Ravenledge to Fyrir Gothi as we speak, and a dozen runners are already on their way to execute the change of plan for today. I can’t believe how different this day is from what I imagined,” he added, laughing bitterly.

“True,” Eret murmured. “But do you really want your accolade to be on the same day as this execution? I’d say the postponement is for the better.”

Dagur snorted in reluctant agreement, and Astrid felt a sharp sting of guilt. She should comfort her adopted brother, should apologise for sabotaging his accolade, however indirectly. But she didn’t know what to say, couldn’t find the right words in her clouded mind, and couldn’t find the strength to move her lips either. Instead, she stood still, face expressionless, and let Eret cheer him up instead. He was better suited for this task anyway.

A short while later, Daniel joined them too. “Okay, everything’s settled here,” he said in a grim voice, and the others nodded mutely. Astrid could practically feel her brother’s concerned gaze on her, but didn’t look at him. All this was still too close to the horrible images of her nightmare; the bright sun on the plaza, the people around them... the knowledge that a life just ended. “Let’s head back.”

Astrid followed them as they turned to walk back up to the castle, but paused again when Dagur suddenly cocked his head in surprise. Looking back toward Odin’s Tree, he asked, “You’re taking him down?”

All the while, Astrid had managed not to take a look at the dangling body, at yet another man who’d died because of her. She could definitely forego having that image in her head. But when everyone turned at Dagur’s comment, she followed—and regretted it instantly.

Under the surveillance of Fyrir Alvin, a group of guards was, indeed, busy with cutting the rope, succeeding in the very moment Astrid turned. And once her eyes locked on the scene she couldn’t look away anymore.

She saw the limp body fall down. One of the guards caught it before it fell to the ground and laid it out on the wooden dais instead. She saw it lying still, the lanky shape with wiry limbs, the sun catching hints of red in the tousled hair, and for a second she would have sworn the dead eyes had an emerald-like gleam.

From one second to the other her heart felt like it wanted to break out of her chest, painfully pounding against her ribs. Her eyes widened and her breathing faltered as, for a moment, all she could see was Hiccup.

And then, suddenly, everything went black.

. o O o .

Over and over, the events of the execution replayed in Astrid’s mind.

Over and over, she saw the same images again until she was too numb to feel anything anymore. Instead, she clung to the differences, to what distinguished the reality from her horrible nightmare. To remind herself that none of that had been real.

Harold hadn’t been beaten. Daniel wouldn’t allow that to happen to a prisoner, no matter how much he might hate him. He was occasionally harsh, but not cruel.
And they hadn’t made any mistakes during his execution either; no slowly dying as further punishment, like—

A knock on the door tore her out of her apathy. She didn’t look up at whoever opened the door, but cocked her head as a sign that she was listening.

“Milady?” came Rachel’s unusually cautious voice, and under different circumstances, it would have made Astrid laugh. Never in a million years would she have thought to ever apply the attribute cautious to her maidservant. “It is time… We should get you ready for the trial.”

Swallowing, Astrid dug her head and concentrated on the tiny dancer again. “I’m not going,” she whispered, almost inaudible, but Ruff seemed to hear her anyway.

“All right. I’ll send Tuff to deliver a note to your brother.” The door closed and Astrid was alone again. Alone with her trusted music box and her chaotic thoughts. She reached to start the box again, something almost like a weak smile playing around her lips as memories of what happened after the execution pushed away those dreadful images.

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Astrid only had faint memories of what happened directly after the execution. Dimly, she recalled being cradled in Eret’s arms, the strongest of her brothers, as he carried her through endless corridors. She recalled how Eret had laid her down on her bed, and how Ruff had ushered everyone but a quickly summoned gythia from Freya’s Order out of her bedroom. She remembered lying still, unmoving, as the gythia examined her, not saying a single word, even as the woman asked her cautious questions. She couldn’t detect any wounds, couldn’t explain why Astrid had so suddenly broken down, and Astrid couldn’t explain it either. Not to her and not to anyone else.

Her heart was still hurting from the shock over that instant of seeing Hiccup’s lifeless body instead of Harold’s. She knew perfectly well that it had only been an illusion, only her fearful imagination running wild. But that wasn’t helping much

Once the gythia and Ruff left the room to let her rest, Astrid curled into a ball beneath her blanket, hands pressed to her aching chest. She wanted to see Hiccup, had to know that he was okay. She wanted to see his comforting smile, feel his reassuring arms around her. All this was too much for her, too much to bear without him.

She wasn’t sure how much time passed until Daniel sat down on the side of her bed once more.
She didn’t react to his presence, didn’t say anything, didn’t even look up. She just lay on her side, curled up, and stared at the wall behind him, until, after several minutes, he spoke up.

“I’m here to tell you that Dagur’s accolade was postponed,” he said quietly, almost careful even.

But Astrid didn’t react. What should she say anyway? She’d already heard about that, after all.

After a minute or three of silence, Daniel went on, “There’ll be a trial instead.”

At that, Astrid’s eyebrows furrowed slightly. A trial? Why? Harold was already dead.

“Against Count Gunter Ravenledge,” Daniel added. He’d probably seen her frown so he explained further. “He... his actions made him a traitor to the Crown. And to his office. Harold confessed a few... interesting things last night.”

She cringed at that name, but still didn’t say anything.
Daniel stayed quiet for another minute, shuffling uncomfortably and making Astrid wonder. It wasn’t like him to insecurely squirm like that. He looked at her apprehensively, biting his lip, before he spoke again. “We’ll need your testimony. About what Harold did to you.” Panic rose inside her at the prospect of reliving it all, and in front of a full trial no less, but Daniel went on quickly. “But you don’t need to attend personally.”

Slowly, Astrid sat up and finally looked at him, confused. “But Father…” she murmured after a pause, voice nothing but a weak whisper.

“I already talked to him,” he interrupted her quickly. “You can send for one of Frigga’s gythias to take your evidence. You don’t need to be there if you don’t want to, don’t worry.”

Astrid averted her gaze, but nodded. Talking about it to a gythia would still be far from pleasant, but it was definitely better than the alternative. “Thanks.”

Daniel reached for her hand, squeezing it comfortingly, and this time, she let it happen. “I… I need to get back, give a few last instructions for the preparations. But me, Eret, and Dagur are going to go to the stables afterwards. Taking a break to get a clear head, you know? Are you coming too?”

Her head snapped up as he mentioned the stables. Of course, she wanted to come. Spending time with horses had always been her go-to-activity when the castle-life became too much to bear, and today, it felt nothing but oppressive. Of course, she wanted to go, wanted to hide in Markor’s stall and let her mask drop where nobody could see her. She wanted the simple comfort and affection only an animal could provide.

And, of course, she wanted to go to Hiccup. The prospect of being with him... Of doing what she did every day, accompanying her brothers to the stables and spending a few light-hearted hours in his presence... it was overwhelming. But at the same time...

What if he let anything show, slipped up like he’d done yesterday? She still hadn’t had the chance to warn him. And merely thinking about what could happen let another surge of panic wash through her. If he wasn’t careful enough and Daniel noticed something... No, she couldn’t let that happen!

“No. I... I’d rather stay here,” she replied, voice unsteady. She looked away, not wanting to let Daniel see the lie in her eyes, hands clenching into the blanket. Her chest was burning with the desperate longing to see Hiccup, to make sure he was okay, but she couldn’t risk putting him in even more danger. Not now. Maybe never again.

“No,” came Daniel’s belated reply in an unsettled voice. “I... Well, I’ll let you rest then, and... and we can talk again tomorrow, okay?” He left, but not before he’d thrown her another troubled and worried glance from the door.

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The small smile still lingered as Astrid accepted how foolish she’d been acting. Daniel wasn’t as cruel or callous as that nightmare version of him had been; this trial and the fact that he’d arranged for her not to participate was proof of that. There was no reason to be afraid of him. But if she was honest with herself, then she wasn’t afraid of Daniel anyway. All her worries were only the result of her nightmare, but none of that had been real. He hadn’t done any harm to either her or Hiccup, ever. He had done nothing wrong, had done everything in his power to care for her, had even stood up against their father to spare her more pain. Everything he’d done had been to protect her, and she couldn’t begrudge him that. Even if he was overdoing it. A lot.
Idly running her fingers over the intricate carving on the outside of the music box, Astrid let out a deep sigh, the smile slipping off her face. No, the reason why she was such a mess today wasn’t that she was afraid of Daniel – even though she’d been quite efficient in focusing on him and pushing the real reason out of her thoughts. The truth was that she was afraid for Hiccup. She missed him terribly, but the mere thought of putting him in danger tore her apart. If anything happened to him, because of her no less, then she would never forgive herself.

Her hand tightened around her music box as her thoughts finally wandered to where she’d so desperately tried not to go. She couldn’t put Hiccup in danger anymore, not like she’d done during the last few weeks. Maybe yesterday had been the first time they’d gotten caught, but as careless as they’d become that wasn’t really surprising. And knowing the effect they had on each other, how they were unable to keep their eyes and hands off the other, it surely hadn’t been the last time. Maybe they could try to be more careful, but deep in her heart, she knew that wouldn’t be easy. The longing to be with him was already so strong that they barely made it through one of their usual days of friendly bickering with the others around. They needed those small outlets, there was no other option.

No, being around him all day without getting careless and risk getting caught by their friends wasn’t feasible. She knew herself too well for that. But what was the alternative? Not being around him? What if she didn’t go to the stables anymore? What if she stayed away from him, not even risking putting him in danger?

Whimpering, she clutched at the music box, her whole body trembling at that idea. The mere thought of staying here all day, away from her brothers and the horses, of that small sanctuary alone, was almost more than she could bear. But not seeing him anymore… A sob tore itself from her throat, her vision blurring, and her hands were shaking vigorously as desperation welled up inside her. She couldn’t stay away from him, she simply cou–

Astrid yelped as the small box suddenly slipped out of her numb fingers. She tried to catch it, but wasn’t fast enough. All she could do was watch in horror as it landed on the hard floor and something inside broke audibly. For a second, she just stared. Then she slid off her chair with a small cry, and reached for the box.

“No, no, no,” she whined, turning the key to wind it up, hoping despite everything that it would still work. But it didn’t. She shook the box, just like she always did; lightly at first and then more frantically. But there was nothing but an odd rattling noise, and then nothing. No music, no movement. Sobbing, she clutched the box to her chest. Not this too. Not today. She couldn’t take another blow, not today...

Letting go of all pretences, Astrid let her tears flow freely, rocking back and forth on the cold stone floor and not caring a bit. Silly as it might be, the breaking of her music box had put her over the edge, and she felt like she was falling helplessly into an abyss of despair. For she didn’t know how long, she stayed where she was and for once let herself be weak; let herself cry over her broken toy and let her thoughts wander roads she usually wouldn't allow herself.

Selfish as it was, she couldn’t bear the thought of staying away from Hiccup. The fact that they wouldn’t see each other for months when he and Eret would be back in Eastervale or accompanied Daniel to Westhill was bad enough, and she forcefully refrained from ever thinking about that. But intentionally keeping her distance when he was so easily within reach? No, she couldn’t do that. There had to be another way. Even not having seen him for a single day now already hurt, her chest burning from how much she missed his presence. By now, she deeply regretted not having gone with Daniel and the others earlier, not being able to at least see him. Surely, she could have managed to hold herself back, to not directly throw herself into his arms, right? Just seeing him,
just exchanging a friendly smile… that would be enough.

Astrid didn’t know how much time had passed when Ruff eventually found her. Her tears had run out by the time her maidservant helped her back to her feet and placed the broken toy onto her desk. She murmured words of reprimand and worry, but Astrid didn’t pay close enough attention to understand them. She just felt exhausted and all she wanted was to curl up in her bed again. But apparently, Rachel had other plans.

Instead of leading her back to her bedroom, she brought Astrid to the main room and made her sit down in one of the comfortable seats near the floor-length windows. Confused, Astrid looked at the table in front of her, set with tea and sweet pastries, then at Ruff who gave her a stern look.

“You, Milady, are going to eat something. No argument.” Ruff let herself fall into another seat opposite of her and, reaching for a pastry for herself, made a show of watching her intently.

Sighing, Astrid complied. She knew Ruff well enough to know that she wouldn’t leave her in peace now. More out of habit than real appetite, Astrid nibbled at her pastry and tried to clear her head. Her small break down just now had at least one merit; she now knew that trying to stay away from Hiccup wasn’t an option. She simply couldn’t do that, had to be around him, had to at least see him. Again, she cursed herself for not going to the stables when she’d had the chance, but by now, it was too late. The trial had already started, so Daniel and the others would be back by now. And going alone would draw too much attention. She would have to accept that she wouldn’t get another chance until the next day.

Mechanically, she drank her tea and ate her pastries, listening only with half an ear to Ruff as she chatted on about the plan for the upcoming days; how annoyed Dagur had to be that his accolade now would take place after the group accolade for the lesser noblemen, and all the preparations for the Midwinter festivities. On and on she babbled, until the door to her chambers opened and Tuff came in. He carried a big basket full of laundry which he placed on the ground near the door with an exhausted sigh.

“Seriously, why do people make me carry around this stuff?” he whined, theatrically rubbing his back. “That’s not my job. I even had to take a break at the kitchens to strengthen myself with a bit of last night’s cold meat before I could go on. Honestly, in the future, you can go and get these yourself again.”

“What, when you were downstairs to deliver that message anyway?” Ruff countered dryly, rolling her eyes, and easily picked up the basket to bring it over into the dressing room. “Aren’t you supposed to be a strong man? Is carrying such a light basket already too much for you?” she reproached, and Astrid relaxed slightly, gratefully distracted by her servants’ usual bickering.

“Hey, I already had hard work to do before,” Tuff complained. “You should have seen the courtroom, I honestly haven’t seen it that packed ever before. Every last seat was taken and every available space was filled with standing attendees. I swear, every nobleman or important commoner is there, even that new friend of yours,” – he nodded to Astrid – “Eret’s squire, what was his name?”

“Hiccup?” Astrid asked, eye suddenly wide and heart pounding. Hiccup was here?

“Right, Hiccup. Even he was there, even though I hardly recognised him without his usual stable boy attire. Guess this trial is pretty important, considering what a fuss they’re making about it.”

Astrid lowered her gaze to the tabletop in front of her, leaving Tuff to his endless complaining without listening anymore. Hiccup as here, at the castle. Only a few minutes’ walk away. Maybe
she could see him today after all. Even exchanging a simple look across a crowded room was better than nothing.

Fighting down the hopeful smile that would give away way more than she wanted to, she looked up again. “If that trial is that important,” she began thoughtfully, interrupting the siblings arguing about yet another trifle. “Then maybe I should attend to it after all.”

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Getting her presentable took surprisingly little time. No amount of astonishingly sensible reasoning that the trial already was in full swing, that it even might be over by now, was able to deter her from her plan. If there was even the slightest chance of seeing Hiccup today after all, then she would take it.

Without having to wash dust off her skin and brush straw out of her hair, she was ready in only fifteen minutes, hair braided into a simple yet elegant style and dressed in a similarly elegant but simple gown. She had to be presentable, but for once wasn’t obliged to be the stunning centre of attention.

Tuff complained about having to walk the entire way once more, and was even more indignant when his sister pressed the tray with the dirty tableware into his hands to bring back to the kitchens. But he had no other choice than to follow Astrid as she hurried down the corridors. Her yearning to see Hiccup made her want to run as fast as she could, always hoping that she wouldn’t miss him. How long had it been since Ruff had first come to get her ready for the trial? Two hours? Three? Maybe longer? She didn’t know.

All Gods above, please don’t let me be too late, she prayed, heart racing in anticipation. On and on she walked as quickly as was possible without actually running, only slowing to urge Tuff on.

“Come on, or I’ll be too late.”

“You’ll be too late anyway,” Tuff grumbled indignantly from behind her. “They started hours ago, what do you hope to achieve here?”

“Just making an appearance, or… maybe I can read my testimony myself after all, you never know how long such a trial might take,” she responded hastily, cringing inwardly at the prospect of actually doing that. She honestly hoped to be too late for that part.

Behind her, Tuff grumbled incoherently, but she momentarily forgot him as suddenly the shadowy outline of a person appeared at the end of the corridor. And as she recognised him, her heart gave a painful stutter and then drop to her stomach.

Chapter End Notes

So... a shorter chapter, because I honestly can't manage more these days __. and a bit weird, too. I'm not sure I could express everything I wanted here, but I eventually gave up... Sorry.
Whatever Has Happened – The Truth Will Free My Soul

Chapter Notes

First things first... Athinofvikings persuaded me to do NaNoWriMo with him this year. That means that I'll be on another scheduled hiatus again in November. I can't say yet at which part of the story that leaves us, but I'll do my best to not let it be a horrible cliffhanger. ;)

This week's title is from 'Somewhere' by Within Temptation. This song holds a very special meaning to me, surely one of my top3 all-time-favs, and I'm really happy to finally be able to use it in some way.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Once Hiccup had made his decision to accompany his friends to the trial, they’d all objected directly.

Dagur had been visibly surprised and asked why he’d suddenly changed his mind, when he hadn’t wanted to be a part of official meetings before. But Hiccup already had an excuse at hand – he had to go up to the castle anyway to repair Trample’s bridle, and if he was there, it wasn’t much of a deal to make an appearance at the trial either, especially if it seemed to be that important.

Daniel had reassured him that his presence wasn’t needed. Certainly, having his support as Eret’s squire – however minor it would be – would still be something, especially in the aftermath of the execution of Dagur’s potential squire, and... Hiccup had just raised an eyebrow and let Daniel talk, until he’d convinced himself with his own reasoning.

Eret had pointed out that he still didn’t need to do this, that it wasn’t worth the risk. But Hiccup had reminded him of his own words – that it was highly unlikely that anyone would recognise him, especially when everyone’s attention was on the trial anyway.

So, in the end, his friends had accepted his decision. And now, Hiccup stood in the packed courtroom – wearing a borrowed tabard in House Jag’r’s deep red with the rampant black horse embroidered on his chest, with a few well-made accoutrements, including a finely tooled and ornate leather belt and polished black leather riding boots to show he was more than a servant. He felt ridiculous, dressed up like this, but compared to those around him he didn’t stand out at all.

As part of the House Jag’r retinue, he had one of the best spots in the room in the audience – directly behind Eret and his father in their full formal outfits. Following his duties as a squire, Hiccup had helped Eret dress, and his cousin was entirely the knight he was: silver-chased chainmail, immaculate red and black tabard with the rampant horse across the back and chest, polished helm under his arm, shield across his back, and the ornate sword hanging from his side in the fancy scabbard that had been gifted to him by the King’s own hands at his accolade.

Next to him stood his father. When the Grand Duke had emerged from his chambers earlier, Hiccup could only stare at the sight, swallowing. He was wearing full court dress, a robe of black damask with the emblem of his House picked out in subtle red and black across the back and breast. It was his judge’s robe. Even though he wouldn’t be presiding over the case or be involved as anything other than as a witness, it sent a very specific message. House Jag’r might not be
directly involved in this case, not standing with the King, the Crown Prince, and House Berserker on the main dais, but they were still here to represent the power of the Kingdom – three of the great-dukedoms unified as one seamless front. A bitter smirk tugged at Hiccup’s lips at that thought, but it got quickly wiped away as his gaze wandered through the crowded room.

At the centre of attention was the accused. The old man was seated before the Judge’s box in an unornamented and sturdy wooden chair from the dungeons. While the chair’s restraints dangled, unused, from its arms and legs, the pair of burly palace guards, dressed immaculately in the deep royal blue of House Hofferson, were clearly just waiting for their prisoner to give them an excuse. After all, his son had assaulted the princess, who was under their protection. Even if they didn’t care for Astrid personally – which Hiccup found unlikely – that sort of circumstance was a stain on their honour.

Hiccup found himself... agreeing with their anger, which surprised him somewhat. Usually, he considered himself to be a peaceable and amiable fellow, but this attack on Astrid hit him too, deeper and more personal than other things.

Involuntarily, his eyes shifted through the room, hoping despite his better knowledge to spot her in the crowd. But of course, she wasn’t there. If she were, she would probably sit not far from him in the first row anyway. But so far, nobody knew whether the Princess would attend the trial at all. Her detailed account of last night’s incident was needed to let everyone understand, but after the events of the morning, many doubted she would show up – or so speculation had it, culled from the gossip going on around Hiccup.

Inside, he was torn. He hoped she would come. All Gods above, he hoped for her to arrive any minute now, and found it difficult to pull his eyes away from the small door at the back, on the off chance that he might miss her. But... at the same time, he hoped she would stay away. He didn’t want her to go through the trauma of a public testimony. As much as he missed her, he hoped she would forego an ordeal like that.

So he stood still, only shifting his weight in order to relieve his aching foot and leg, and waited silently, staring, only listening to the conversations around him with half an ear. But when the small door finally opened, it startled him nonetheless. In the time it took the person on the other side to step into the room, his stomach made a painful summersault, his heart pounding in anticipation – but only to drop again when only Astrid’s manservant entered. The lanky man, Timothy, glanced around, and then moved swiftly and practically unnoticed through the crowd until he reached the high lords on their dais. Hiccup observed how he handed Daniel a sealed piece of paper, how the Prince nodded grimly and dismissed the other man with a friendly clap on the shoulder. Timothy left again, and only minutes later, the room quieted as the bailiff pounded the butt of his spear on a metal plate set in the ground and spoke.

“All rise! This court is called to order. Due to the severity and nature of the charges against the accused, Count Gunter Ravenledge, the King has recused Himself as the judge, and the Order of Frigga has opted for the Grimnir Protocol.”

Hiccup swallowed as the doors opened and the masked and hooded judge entered in her black robe. The Grimnir – named for Odin as attested in one of the old sagas, a masked god – was instituted in treason trials, so that the judge could rule fairly, without fear of backlash from the Crown. As such, the judge was anonymous and unnamed... but nonetheless sat with the full confidence of the Order of Frigga. As far as Hiccup could recall, this was only the sixth or seventh time the Grimnir had been invoked since the founding of the kingdom.

The judge, her bearing strong and confident, approached the bench and took her seat, and the
bailiff again pounded the spearbutt on the plate. “This court is now in session. My Lord Prince, please name the charges that the Crown brings against this man.”

Daniel approached the accuser’s stand, and his voice carried through the room, strong and clear.

“The Royal House of Hofferson accuses Count Gunter Ravenledge of conspiracy to commit high treason against the Crown—”

Even knowing it was coming, the crowd still murmured in surprise, and Hiccup stiffened.

Conspiracy meant that it was pre-planned.

“– of attempting obstruction of justice for high treason, for incitement of the same—”

That would be from his attempt to get Dagur to intervene, Hiccup noted, slightly numbly. Both of which were capital offences. As Daniel had said, he’d be going to the noose. But the crowd was murmuring in shock.

“– for attempting to pervert the course of justice—”

Just based on Dagur’s statement earlier alone, that was undeniable, Hiccup reflected. The Count had tried to prevent his son from being justly punished as according to the law. By itself, that charge wasn’t a capital offence, but combined with the others... the count might not get the noose after all. He’d get something worse. Hiccup swallowed as Daniel continued in his iron-hard tone.

“– and multiple charges of conspiracy to commit rape, multiple charges of conspiracy to conceal rape, multiple charges to obstruct justice for rape, multiple charges of malfeasance in office, and multiple charges of rape.”

Hiccup’s eyes turned into slits at that last bit of the list of charges. With gritted teeth and his clenched fists at his sides trembling, he stared at the accused, rage boiling hot in his veins. As a count, the man had had the trust of his people as well as the trust of the Crown. How dare he betray that trust and act that vile? Weren’t noblemen supposed to be better than that? Wasn’t that part of what their grandfathers had fought for?

Around him, the crowd erupted into shocked babbling that mirrored Hiccup’s own anger, and after a few chaotic seconds, the bailiff pounded his spearbutt on the plate again, calling for order.

Taking a deep breath, Hiccup forced himself to calm down. This was an official trial, and his anger, no matter how just, wouldn’t help him to get through it. Trying to think of something else, he glanced at Daniel, standing so poised before this crowd. Only two days before, they had cheerfully discussed the effects of catapults on different walls and how to best tear down specific types of construction, demonstrating it with slices of bread and tossed grapes over dinner. But right now, Hiccup was reminded of something he’d efficiently pushed aside in his mind. Daniel was more than simply a friend. In that moment, as he stood before the crowd, he was every inch the stern leader and general that his blood and rank called him to be, as his father, the King, stood off to the side, watching. First and foremost, Daniel was the future King of Volantis and would always act as such when needed.

The courtroom silenced, and the judge spoke, her voice muffled by the mask. “These are serious charges. How does the defendant plead?”

“Not guilty by reasons of duress and provocation, Your Honor,” the count’s advocate – another masked and hooded figure wearing the badge of Frigga, who Hiccup hadn’t noticed entering the room – replied. Hiccup wouldn’t want to be in their shoes, given the glare that Daniel gave them,
but that was the reason for the masks. No doubt the jurist didn’t want to be there either, but they were oathsworn to represent their charge to the best of their ability. “The inciting incident was due to the impending unjust execution of the Count’s son, without trial. Any father would attempt to save his child from a miscarriage of justice.”

There was a murmur through the room, and not all of it was against the Count. Despite the accusation of him being a rapist, a father protecting – or avenging – his son was still something that resonated with the people, as Odin had done for Baldur. Even Loki had his sympathizers, based on what was done to his children.

The judge nodded. “The plea is heard and recorded. Prince Hofferson, how does the Crown support these charges?”

Daniel gripped the sides of the accuser’s stand. “Last night, during the welcoming reception of House Berserk, Harold Ravenledge, the son of Count Ravenledge, attempted rape upon the person of the Princess Royal, Astrid Hofferson, an act of high treason. This was after having been warned twice previously about the consequences of uninvited physical contact with the Princess, and after having been previously spared the loss of a hand specifically by a plea from the Princess for mercy. His assault upon the princess’ person was savage, and he was prevented from completing his rape only by the return of myself, Sir Eret, and Lord Dagur from dealing with another incident elsewhere in the chamber. He was caught in the act, with his belt undone and held in his hands, and the Princess restrained.” He motioned towards the Count. “Touching her again was a violation of the law against contact alone. The attempted rape is high treason against the Crown, and to that, I was a witness, as were Sir Eret and Lord Dagur.” He made another motion. “Furthermore, here is a piece of evidence of the ferocity of the assault.”

A servant brought forth a dress in blue and gold, and Hiccup’s face drained of all blood. With wide eyes, he stared at the damaged dress, at the bodice that was torn to the waist, and his mind went red with protective anger. The fabric was thick and wouldn’t have torn easily, surely not by accident or just from pushing her around. No, a tear like that needed two free hands, a clear intent… and a restrained victim. What in Hel’s misbegotten name had happened to her?

Hiccup heard the rest of Daniel’s opening statement with only half an ear. Harold had confessed before a panel of witnesses from the Orders of Frigga and Odin of what he had tried to do to Astrid... and of what he had done to other women back in County Ravenledge – him and his father, who, in addition to covering up his son’s crimes through bribes, threats and at least one murder, had apparently participated as well. Frequently.

“...and while these crimes are not directly relevant to the case at hand,” Daniel finished, “after Lord Ravenledge’s confession, it was felt that leaving them without justice would be a blight in the eyes of the Gods, so we have brought these charges on behalf of those victims whose own justice was perverted, against the one whose office was used for such malfeasance. Furthermore, they established a pattern that is directly relevant to the case at hand. But for the case of treason, yes, the Princess was overwhelmed by the execution of her assailant this morning and will not be attending this trial personally.” This information took a load off Hiccup’s mind; better not to see her now if that meant she could be spared all this. “But her notarised testimony will be read to the assembled court shortly. As will be Lord Ravenledge’s own testimony which he admitted to last night, and how he had been taught by the man before us to commit such deeds.”

With that, Prince Daniel bowed and stepped away from the accuser’s stand. A woman, wearing the cloak and badge of the Order of Frigga, stepped forward, and Hiccup cocked his head at her appearance. She was surprisingly young, barely more than a girl. She was slender, pretty, and her long blond hair was bound into several braids that were wrapped around her head in an intricate
pattern. Not what he had expected for a trial like this. Expectantly, she glanced up at the dais where the high Lords stood, and after Daniel gave her a nod, she took a deep breath before turning toward the judge.

“Earlier today, the temple of our Mother Frigga received a request by the Princess Royal Herself,” the woman declared in a high but firm voice. “The request to bear witness to her testimony, to validate the truth of her words, and to repeat her words in her stead if needed. Our wise Fyrir Gothi chose me for this task. By the blessing of our Mother, I confirm that the words I will read to you were spoken in truth.”

All eyes turned toward the assembled members of Frigga’s Order, the Fyrir Gothi herself, along with two other gythias. They all nodded, confirming the truth of their Sister’s words.

What followed was probably one of the worst half-hours of Hiccup’s entire life. It was a detailed description of what had happened, from the moment she first met the man to the moment the guards had escorted him away. How she’d treated him as friendly as she would have everyone else. How he had misinterpreted her friendliness and had sought closer contact, despite already having been warned. How he hadn’t stopped his advances despite her explicitly telling him to, ordering it even.

Hiccup understood that the elderly Fyrir had chosen well in assigning this task to this woman. Her youthful appearance, coupled with her confident voice and the bright hair made sure that nobody forgot whose words she was reading. And despite the fact that her face had the wrong form, that she spoke with a slight southern accent, and that her hair was more silvery than golden, Hiccup had to admit that it worked. He could practically see Astrid standing there instead of the gythia, heard her voice speaking her words. And it was horrible.

The main reason for Hiccup to come to the castle had been to covertly look for Astrid, but he’d also wanted to find answers. He’d wanted to learn what had happened. But now, he heard more than he ever wanted. It was a meticulous and sober description of how that man had attacked her in that alcove, of what he’d said and done, how she’d tried to fight him, and of how and where he’d touched her – and Hiccup could barely stand it. Toward the end, the account got blurry as it reached a part where she apparently hadn’t gotten enough air to notice everything anymore, and Hiccup’s vision blurred likewise.

Hiccup couldn’t help it – he was glad that this man was already dead and that his father, who was just as guilty, would be punished appropriately. He couldn’t remember to ever have felt such murderous hatred for another human being, but knowing that the Gods’ justice would strike them let him focus on other things. Because far more pressing than his rage over these men was the soul-deep yearning for Astrid. By the end of the gythia’s speech, Hiccup wanted nothing more than to get away from this room, to take her in his arms and hold her tight. He’d heard enough, more than enough.

But he couldn’t leave, not without drawing too much attention.

Around him, the trial continued in a blur. More witnesses spoke and a stern-faced member of Freyr’s order read Harold’s own testimony, but Hiccup didn’t want to hear more.

He didn’t want to hear the detailed descriptions of these men’s doings, of how they’d apparently seen little difference between the deer of the forest, given to them to hunt, and the woman of the village. More than one person in the viewers’ gallery retched during this testimony, and Hiccup, too, had to swallow bile. Part of the whole purpose of the Ástir was to keep such things from happening in giving an outlet to men’s desires before they curdled upon themselves. But father and son had apparently seen the Astrír as ‘not sporting enough’. And to think that Astrid had been
assaulted by a predator like that…

‘The truth will free your soul’ people said, but right now, Hiccup would have gladly lived with knowing less.

After Dagur, too, had given his account on the Count’s frantic attempt to spare his son the noose – which drew nothing but angry hissing from the gallery this time – Daniel returned to the stand. “As you can see, Your Honor, the Count would use his power and status to enable his child to prey upon others, following his own example. This was not an attempt to save his child from a ‘miscarriage of justice’, but a continuance of a prior pattern of such behaviour, to once again save his co-conspirator from the application of actual justice. This time, however, it was not a village girl whose father could be intimidated into silence, a district magistrate corrupted into conspiracy, or a protective brother killed, but an attempt to pervert a higher court than his own. In attempting to incite Lord Berserker into obstructing the Crown’s Justice, he attempted incitement to commit treason... and the claim that he was attempting to do so because he was under duress and provoked falls flat when one considers that this was just the latest — and last — time he would attempt to shield his son, only sixteen and already a rapist of nearly two dozen women.”

The judge nodded and looked at the Count. “Count Ravenledge.”

“Yes, Your Honor?” the Count replied. His expression was stony, but Hiccup could swear that he could detect a hint of fear under it.

“Do you have a defence against the Prince’s statements?”

“I do, Your Honor,” the Count said.

The judge leaned forward. “Know that the Goddess will whisper to me if you lie in answering my questions.”

The Count nodded and, after conferring with his advocate, began to speak to the judge, but Hiccup wasn’t listening anymore. The blood rushing through his ears drowned out every other sound and his eyes just stared unseeingly at the floor. His mind was too full to take in more, full of grief for what had happened to Astrid, but also full of guilt. Surely, if he’d been there, he could have prevented all this from happening, could have saved her. As another squire, he could have stayed with her and this Harold. He would never have left her side. And if that man had dared to try anything, Hiccup could have stopped him. He never would have let her or that alcove out of his sight, Harold would never have gotten the chance to attack her. Hiccup would have–

The pounding of the spear-butt against the plate pulled him out of his pondering, and he looked up to see that the courtroom had all stood. The judge was preparing to deliver her verdict, and Hiccup forced himself to focus on her again.

“It is the decision of this Court, as informed by the Wisdom of the Lady Frigga, in whose name we dispense justice, that the accused, Count Gunter Ravenledge, is guilty of conspiracy to commit high treason against the Crown, guilty of attempting obstruction of justice for high treason, guilty of incitement of the same, and guilty of attempting to pervert the course of justice, as born out by witness testimony. For the charges of conspiracy to commit rape, of conspiracy to conceal rape, of obstruction of justice for rape, of malfeasance in office, and of rape itself, there is only the word of the son – however divinely supported – against the word of the father – however divinely repudiated – and we do not pronounce judgement on those charges yet.”

The room murmured in surprise at that differentiation, but the judge was not finished and quick in explaining.
“Thus, in accordance with the Law, Count Gunter Ravenledge is immediately stripped of his title as Count Ravenledge. Gunter Erwinsson will be taken from these chambers and held in close confinement by the Crown while an investigatory expedition will be dispatched to County Ravenledge with all haste, to find corroborating witnesses and evidence to the testimony of Harold Guntersson, seeking corroboration for the names and places mentioned in the course of this trial. Upon their return with additional support for the secondary charges, the Gods willing, the Court pronounces the following sentence for Gunter Erwinsson, rapist, perverter of justice, and traitor to the Realm: He will be sealed in an iron gibbet and taken to the city square of Vola. There, he will be hung in full exposure of the elements of the Jotunn and denied all food and water until such time as he expires, and his form shall be left in place for Odin’s ravens, denied the embrace of earth and pyre. Thus We pronounce judgement.”

The Count – the former count screamed denial as the guards promptly and ungently grabbed him and pulled him from the courtroom. As the doors swung shut behind them, the room broke out in whispers – satisfied ones. Those cut off a moment later as the bailiff once again pounded his spearbutt against the plate. “Court is adjourned!”

The whispers came back, louder now, as the judge and the advocate left first, followed by the King and Prince, but Hiccup stood unmoving amidst the crowd, empty eye staring into nothing. In his mind, he kept hearing the words of Astrid’s testimony and kept seeing the torn dress as the rest of the room started to slowly file out. The man who had done that was dead, he reminded himself. And the man who had taught that man how to do that would suffer a horrible lingering death.

With a shuddering sigh, Hiccup’s anger burned out. The Gods’ representatives had spoken and justice would occur. There was nothing left to do, nothing he could do to avenge what had happened to her. Now, all he could do, what he had to do, was to find her and, if he could, comfort her.

“Hey, Hiccup. Are you coming?”

Hiccup jumped as Eret’s hand touched his shoulder, and he blinked a few times to clear his mind. Looking up, he gazed into the faces of Eret and Dagur, both of whom looked worn out and tired. He could sympathize there. A lot.

“Hiccup?” Eret tried again when he didn’t answer.

“Mmmh?” Hiccup couldn’t speak yet. It was all too much. What he’d learned, what he could have saved her from, all mixed with the burning longing to see her.

“Are you okay?” Eret asked, a concerned frown on his face.

Hiccup swallowed to buy some time and then shrugged. “Yeah, just… ‘s been a lot.”

Sighing, Eret nodded. “I know what you mean. I mean, we were there, but... hearing it detailed like this... Damn, if only we had interfered sooner. We knew she was acting weird. We should have paid more attention, should have…” He trailed off, and Hiccup averted his face to hide his emotions.

Why didn’t you? He wanted to inquire, to yell, to demand an answer. Why hadn’t they paid more attention, hadn’t kept a closer eye on her, had kept her safe? Oh, but he understood why. Because nobody had expected a brash assault like this to happen at a formal reception. And because, usually, Astrid was quite well able to defend herself. He still didn’t understand why she hadn’t rebuffed that man more firmly.
“So... are you coming?” Dagur asked, his usual cheerfulness dampened noticeably. Upon Hiccup’s confused look, he added, “The trial’s dismissed, and Uncle Osmond is gathering us in his office.” He took a step towards the door and motioned for Hiccup to follow.

More out of reflex than anything else, Hiccup limped after them. The hallways were brimming with people, all gushing and gossiping about the judgement, but when they recognised the High Lords, they quickly made way for them. And not having to constantly dodge people gave Hiccup’s thoughts time to drift off again.

He had to get away from Eret and the others. What had been merely an intense hope before, now had become a certainty. He had to find Astrid, no matter what. He just had to see her, to know how she was, if there was anything he could do for her… Thinking about how to excuse himself, Hiccup followed Dagur and Eret into the King’s ornate office – and swallowed nervously.

King Osmond, Prince Daniel, and the two Grand Dukes were already present, deep in discussion. Aside from them, only two other persons were present – a slender dark-haired girl about Hiccup’s age and an older woman around the King’s age, blond and plump. They were clearly servants, offering food and drinks, and Hiccup was momentarily reminded of which group he belonged to.

Biting his lip, Hiccup forced that thought out of his mind. He might be Eret’s servant, but he had the chance to rise higher. He had to concentrate on that, on proving himself worthy of Astrid instead of beating himself down. He was born to be among these men, and he would do whatever it took to regain that place.

Following Eret, Hiccup noticed how Dagur likewise stared at the two servants, surprise clear on his face. He made an unconscious step toward them, but was stopped by a hand on his shoulder directly. “Don’t,” Eret said, so low only Dagur and Hiccup could hear him. “Not now, trust me.”

Dagur threw him a bewildered look, and at first, Hiccup thought he would reject the advice. But then the red-head nodded, and they walked over to their fathers in the more informal part of the room. Hiccup followed them, and was greeted with a nod and a small smile by Grand Duke Eret as the two older men turned to talk to their sons. Hiccup returned the greeting, and then took his place behind Eret as they started to discuss the trial’s outcome.

“...did great, son,” he suddenly heard the King say. He and Daniel stood a couple of steps away from the others at the impressive formal desk.

Hiccup knew he shouldn’t listen in on them. But their voices carried in the small room, and as their conversation went on, he couldn’t turn a deaf ear on them either.

“I knew you could lead a trial like this yourself by now.”

“Thank you,” Daniel grunted in agreement, but didn’t sound happy. When Hiccup chanced a glance at him, his arms were crossed in front of him, face set in the same firm expression as before. “With all these matters officially settled now, the gythias and prestrs can further question him for the more… delicate information. I hope to get answers in a couple of days there.”

The King nodded. “I have no doubts that my trust in you was justified. In this matter, and in the other one as well. It was the right decision to let the gythia read Astrid’s testimony.”

Daniel’s brow furrowed, and he cast his gaze to the ground. “I’m glad we agree then.”

The King sighed. “Well, forcing her to watch obviously was the wrong decision. I should have listened to you then already. I thought witnessing her assailant get punished would help her, and
not…” he shook his head, looking weirdly *ordinary*, despite his adorned robes and the heavy
crown on his head. Just a father who was concerned for his child.

“You owe her an apology,” Daniel said, quietly but determinately.

“I owe her more than just that,” King Osmond murmured. “I’ll talk to her tomorrow, when she’s
calmed down.”

Daniel nodded grimly. He started to reply, but at that moment, Eret turned and addressed Hiccup
directly, forcing him to shift his attention.

“Heh, Hiccup. So, now that the... *official* part is over with...” He sighed. “Look. I know that this is
a lot, and you’re not comfortable with such crowds. There will be some further discussions now,
but that’s nothing you need to attend to. I’m pretty sure we all could do with a long ride tomorrow
after this, so why don’t you take Trample’s bridle over to the tack shop and start working on it? So
that it’s ready for use again?”

Hiccup’s heart made a leap at the prospect of leaving. Of being able to walk through the castle on
his own while most of its occupants would be busy with the aftermath of the trial. This chance was
almost too good to be true. Sending a silent prayer of thanks to the Gods, Hiccup bowed his head,
efficiently hiding his face. “That’s a good idea, Milord. I’ll go right away if I may?”

“Of course,” Eret agreed, chuckling sheepishly. “And since you need to first pick up the bridle
anyway... could you drop my sword and helmet at my room? I don’t need them today anymore
either, and I *really* don’t want to carry them around all night if it’s not necessary. One of the
servants can return the shield to father’s chambers later, but as you’re going to my room anyway...”

Hiccup’s eyes lit up with a twinkle of amusement. Maybe it hadn’t been the Gods’ blessing which
had granted him this chance after all, but his master’s laziness instead. “Of course, Sir Eret,” he
said, bowing appropriately. Eret groaned in half-fake annoyance, and dismissed Hiccup with a lazy
wave of his hand before anyone could comment further.

Leaving the office with Eret’s helm and sword in hand, Hiccup took a moment to think about how
to go on. He would go looking for Astrid now, that much he knew. He simply *had* to see her; he
wouldn’t return back to the stables without at least *trying*. But *where* should he look for her? He
didn’t know where her rooms were, and he couldn’t exactly ask anyone either. All he knew was
that the room Eret still occupied was in the west wing of the castle, not too far from the Prince’s
chambers. Astrid’s rooms would be somewhere around there too... right?

Yes, that would be the best point to start. He had to go there anyway – to drop the sword and
helmet, to pick up the damaged bridle, and to get his own clothes back – so he had a valid excuse if
someone asked why he was wandering around in that part of the castle. He could even build in a
small detour around there, claiming to have gotten lost on his way.

*Odin, Frigga, and Freya*, he prayed silently as he set off. *Please, guide my steps. Lead my way, so
that I can see her.*

With his heart beating in his throat, he walked down the dimly lit corridors and up some stairs,
generally ignoring the pain in his leg as he pondered. Even if he found her rooms, he had no idea
how to get inside without anyone noticing. From what Astrid had told him about her life, at least
one of her servants was around her practically all the time. And they surely wouldn’t let him talk to
her just like that. All he could hope for was some lucky coincidence. So far, the Gods hadn’t failed
him.
And they didn’t today, either.

No sooner had he reached the residential wing of the castle, than he heard footsteps coming through the hallways in his direction. Then there was a voice – a familiar voice. She was here… Struggling to keep his composure, he took a deep breath and then rounded the next corner.

Astrid was walking down the corridor in his direction. Even with the hallway only being dimly lit, their eyes met in an instant, and his heart made an almost painful leap at her sight. Thank the Gods, she was really here. Despite everything that had happened today, he felt as if everything would be alright so long as he could hold her in his arms, could talk to her, be with her.

However, the surely dopey smile on his face got wiped away as he noticed the look of panic on her face. Then another figure stepped past her, her warder, and there as no way the man hadn’t spotted him too.

“Hey you,” Timothy called. “What are you doing here?”

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Chapter End Notes

So, yes... more suspense and still no proper Hiccstrid... But we'll get there next week, I promise ;)

This was was a difficult part, and I can't thank Athingofvikings enough for the help here! It gave me headache and tears, and not the good kind, so I'm just really glad it's over and done now. From now on, things will be easier... hopefully.

So, thoughts about this chapter? What did you think of the trial? We tried hard to get in all the relevant (and a few hidden) details, but still keep Hiccup's POV, his emotions, and his reactions in the foreground, so I hope that worked... And now, Hiccup and Astrid finally meet again... How will they react? So many questions...
**Do You Feel The Same When I’m Away From You**

**Chapter Notes**

So, this chapter was waaaay easier on me. Glad to know writing can still be like this too :)

This week's chapter's title (and the next two, I guess) comes from Walking The Wire by Imagine Dragons. I'm pretty sure that song might come up at a later point again...

^^

“Hey, you! What are you doing here?”

Hiccup faltered in his steps as Timothy came hurrying toward him, a tray of clinging tableware in his hands. Up until that moment, his gaze had been glued to Astrid’s panic-filled eyes, but as her servant quickly approached him, he hastily flicked his eyes away from her, heart sinking into his stomach. What he was doing here? He was looking for the Princess. And if anyone found out, he would pay with his life.

But then he remembered that he also had a legitimate reason to be here. As calmly as he could manage, given his nerves, Hiccup limped onwards and only paused when Timothy reached him. “I… I’m on my way to Sir Eret’s room,” he explained, only stammering a little. “I’m to bring these,” – he held up the ornate helmet and sword – “back to where they belong.” Astrid had reached them as well, coming to a halt behind her warder, and Hiccup had to fight every instinct to keep his gaze from shifting toward her.

“That’s... great, but not what I meant,” Tuff said, giving him a confused look. “I meant, why are you here? Aren’t you supposed to be at the trial?”

“Oh, that,” Hiccup shrugged, relieved. “Uhm… it’s already over.”

With a theatrical groan, Timothy let his head fall back, and turned toward Astrid. He moved with too much momentum though, and, with a high-pitched clink!, a spoon fell off his tray. “Oh, Loki…” he muttered, carefully crouching down to pick it up without losing more of his load.

Hiccup didn’t hesitate; his eyes met Astrid’s in an instant, unwilling to waste even one heartbeat of being unobserved today. She looked pale, panic clearly written all over her face, and lightly shook her head at him. Confused, he frowned, questioningly cocking his head, but before she could do more, her warder stood up again. Gritting his teeth, Hiccup returned his focus to Tuff. He had to find a way to talk to her.

“How dare you pick on me, you evil trickster-spoon,” Tuff grumbled as he checked his tray’s load for security before turning toward Astrid. “See? I told you you’d be too late. So what now? Do you still want to go down there? Talk to anyone, or see what all the fuss was about? Or do you want to go back to your rooms? I mean, you could also accompany me to the kitchen first, so I don’t have to make the same trip twice?” he added hopefully.
“No, I don’t need to go to the trial if it’s over now,” she said in a weak voice, not looking at anyone. “I think, I…”

“I could stay and watch over her here until you return from your duties, Mister Timothy,” Hiccup offered without thinking twice as Astrid trailed off. “And I can fill the Princess in on what happened at the trial while we wait for your return.”

Astrid’s eyes were wide in shock as he glanced at her, slightly shaking her head. The moment the words left his lips he realised that this hadn’t been his best idea. Now, however, it was too late to take it back. And he didn’t want to take it back anyway.

Timothy frowned, thoughtful, and then shrugged. “That doesn’t sound like a half bad idea,” he nodded, then glanced at Astrid, whose expression quickly turned neutral. “That is, so long as you’re fine with that? I mean, I know he’s with you all day at the stables, and Daniel and Eret apparently don’t mind, but…” He trailed off, clearly waiting for her verdict.

Biting her lip, Astrid averted her eyes. There was a torn gleam in them, reason warring with longing. Oh please, Hiccup prayed inwardly. Please! Just a few minutes...

After a seemingly endless moment, she nodded. “It’s okay, Tuff,” she said in a low voice. “I… I trust him. Go, and bring those to the kitchens, and we’ll wait here.”

Timothy nodded, gave Hiccup an almost comical warning look, and then hurried down the corridor where Hiccup had come from. Hiccup watched him go until he was safely around the corner and out of sight. Before he could say anything, however, Astrid grabbed his arm and pulled him to the side, into a shallow niche at one of the large windows where they were at least partially hidden.

“Hiccup, what are you doing here?” she demanded in a harsh, fear-filled whisper. “You’re not supposed to be here. It’s too risky.” Hiccup glanced at Eret’s sword and helmet in his hands, but she vehemently shook her head. “Not those excuses. Why are you here?” She sounded frantic.

Exhaling slowly, Hiccup leaned the sword against the wall and placed his hand over hers on his arm. The direct contact, skin on skin, noticeably soothed the sense of anxiety he’d been carrying all day, and he watched her relax as well, the tension flowing out of her back and shoulders. Once again he realised how much they needed each other, just like they needed air to breathe. The reminder made him smile.

He placed the helmet onto the windowsill, and, taking her hand in both of his to idly play with her fingers, he said, “I heard what happened and came looking for you.” It was the simple truth, a sincere explanation as to why he was here, at the castle. He was here for her.

But Astrid became ashen white at his words, all of the blood leaving her face which made her freckles stand out like spatters of dried blood. Her eyes grew wide as she stared at him. Then she started to tremble, shaking her head, slowly at first and then faster. “No, no, no,” she whined, almost inaudibly low, frantically glancing up and down the corridor. ”No, this can’t be happening.”

“Astrid, what–” he tried to ask, reaching to cup her cheek to soothe her, but she made a hasty step away, panic clear in her eyes.

“You can’t be here. You mustn’t be here,” she urged, still eyeing the empty corridor. “Oh Gods, please not… Hiccup, you have to go back. Now! Please…”

He warily scrutinised her. He remembered all too well what he’d heard only an hour ago – what that man had done to her. It made sense that she didn’t want anyone to touch her after such an
experience, but that wasn’t what this was about. She had initiated the first contact, had reached for his arm to pull him along. And she wasn’t shying away from his touch either, not really. She might have retreated from him cradling her face and pulling her closer, but at the same time, her hand was clutching his desperately. No, she wasn’t afraid of him, and he hadn’t really expected that anyway. But then… what was it that upset her like this?

“Astrid,” he said determinedly, drawing her attention. “What’s going on? Why...?”

“I… I can’t tell you,” she said, voice higher than usual, frightened. Again, she threw fearful glances up and down the corridor, oddly reminding him of a scared deer, but when Hiccup followed her eyes, there was nothing.

“Of course you can tell me,” he whispered urgently, catching and holding her gaze like he would with a frightened animal. “You can tell me everything.”

As if his words caused part of her fear to simply melt away, her features softened, a pained but true smile creeping across her face. She made a hesitant step toward him, and this time didn’t resist as his hands curled around her waist to pull her closer. She even rested her head against his chest, sighing. “I know,” she breathed. “No secrets… But that’s not it. I can’t tell you, not now. Not here. Tuff will be back any moment,” she shook her head. “There’s no time to—”

“There’s never time,” he interrupted her sadly, a lump forming in his throat. It wasn’t an accusation, just a fact. There was never enough time for them. All they had were the stolen minutes in shadowy corners and hasty caresses when nobody was looking. And it just wasn’t enough.

For an endless minute, Astrid gazed up at him, shimmering eyes filled with a strange mixture of emotions. There was the same desperate longing he felt too, but also hope and panic, joy and pain, and a spark of something… wild. Her mind behind those beautiful eyes was clearly working through a lot, and he didn’t dare to interrupt her line of thoughts, even as, every now and then, her gaze fearfully flickered to the sides.

“If… if I promise to think about a way to get us more time…” she finally whispered, hesitantly. “Will you go back to the stables then? Promise me you’ll go back, please.”

Frowning, Hiccup took a deep breath and nodded. “As soon as I’m done with my duties,” he agreed, nodding at the helmet. He had no idea what was up with her, but him not staying here seemed to be important to her.

Exhaling with relief, her shoulders visibly relaxed. “Thanks,” she whispered, and this time she didn’t retreat as he curled one hand around her cheek, even leaned even more into his touch and laid her own hand over his.

He wanted to kiss her. Gods, how much he wanted to… But he knew that, if he kissed her now, even so much as placed a light peck on the corner of her mouth, he wouldn’t be able to hold back, to stop in time. And she was right, this was not the right place. Even if her warder wouldn’t be back for another five minutes, considering his task, there always could be other people coming through, guards or servants. So instead, he just pressed his forehead to hers, deeply inhaling the scent of mayweed on her hair to savour the moment – and, not entirely trusting himself around her, made a careful step backwards, away from her.

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Astrid didn’t want to let go of Hiccup. But when he stepped away from her, she let him. That little bit of contact alone already made her feel more at ease, even though her heart was still racing and
the subliminal panic still lingered in the back of her mind.

When she and Tuff had left her rooms, she'd been so eager to see Hiccup, had so hoped not to arrive too late at the trial, even though she'd known that the chances of still meeting him had been slim. She’d been prepared to share nothing but a few short and covert glances across a crowded room. But she’d not been prepared for his sudden appearance right in front of her.

Seeing his shadowy outline at the end of the corridor, how he’d limped toward her… the sight had been terrifyingly similar to her nightmare. And his words…

*I heard what happened and came looking for you.*

The same words he’d said in her dream. The last words he’d spoken before his dream-death. And even though the setting was completely different, she hadn’t been able to shake off the lingering fear of a repetition.

With his promise, her panic calmed to something approaching reasonableness, albeit slowly. He shouldn’t be here; the risk of anyone spotting them was too great. And yet she couldn’t deny that being here with him – feeling his arms around her, his hands on her skin, and the comfort in his eyes – felt good. Right. She wanted these moments to never end...

Letting go of Hiccup’s hand, letting him retreat, was harder than she’d anticipated. If not for those images lingering in her mind, she wouldn’t have cared either way, would have pulled him into the kiss they both craved. But the images were there and thankfully kept her from making an irrevocable mistake.

Shivering, Astrid wrapped her arms around herself and made a further step away from him, widening the distance between them to an acceptable degree. If Tuff or anyone else spotted them now, they would only see the friends they were supposed to be and nothing more. *Friends* might still not be something they could be openly, but at least it didn’t need to stay an adamant secret either.

But without his touch, she felt forlorn. She was more at ease now, not as anxious as she’d been all day, but it still hadn’t been enough. Resigning to this safe distance regardless, she gave him a sheepish smile, forcing a weak copy of her usual calm mask onto her face. She knew he could see right through that one anyway. “So, what happened at that trial?” she asked formally. “What did I miss?”

Hiccup’s eyes clouded, and he clearly struggled with what to say. A part of her wanted to simply stop him, didn’t want to hear about it. But she had to – if only to keep up the charade for when Tuff returned. After taking a shuddering breath, Hiccup composed himself again, equally playing his part. “The former Count Ravenledge was found guilty for... most of the charges,” he explained, averting his eyes, which had an angry gleam in them. “He’s been stripped of his rank and titles, and while there will be further investigations on the charges that couldn’t be decided yet, they will only make a difference on the method of his execution. It’s…” he shrugged, frowning, but didn’t continue.

“Is that… all that happened?” Astrid asked, puzzled.

Hiccup glanced up at her again, a pained look in his eyes, and shook his head. “They… read your testimony,” he murmured. “And that of… of this Harold, too. Showed your dress… I--” His voice became weaker with every word until it broke. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry that I wasn’t there. I *should* have been there, should have kept you safe, should have--”
“No!” she interrupted him urgently. “If you’d been there, if you’d interfered... who knows what would have happened.” Again, the images of her nightmare played through her mind, and she shuddered. “You would have only endangered yourself.” It was meant as a reassurance, that she was okay, that his safety was more important to her than anything else. Which was the truth. No matter how horrible Harold’s attack had been, the idea of losing Hiccup had been worse. And now that he was here, that she could see that he was okay… It made her feel better already.

She gave him a small but honest smile, but Hiccup wasn’t convinced. “I’m so sorry, Astrid,” he whispered, the sorrow in his eyes almost more than she could bear.

“Don’t be,” she replied equally low, and made a hesitant step toward him. She lifted one hand to place it onto his chest, over his heart. She could feel it beating within, felt his warmth like sunshine on her soul. “What happened, it... it doesn’t matter. All that matters is you, that you’re–”

A flicker of movement in the corner of her eye caught her attention, making her break off mid-sentence. She flinched, hastily letting her hand drop – and accidentally nudged against Eret’s sword where it leaned against the wall. With a loud clang, it toppled to the ground between them, and both she and Hiccup hastily stepped away from it, away from each other.

“You really should be more careful with your Master’s belongings,” Tuff teased, voice light as he casually jogged over to them, making a lazy good luck gesture as he came closer. “That’s for hoping that there won’t be too many scratches for you to polish out, man.”

Grunting, Hiccup crouched down to pick up the fallen sword just as Tuff reached them. “I think it’s all right,” he muttered, bending over the scabbard as if to inspect it for damage. Astrid couldn’t be sure, but to her it looked more as if he was actively hiding his face and the emotions on it.

Tuff threw him a pitying look as Hiccup lightly ran his hand over the intricately decorated metal, but then shrugged and turned toward Astrid. “Do you need more time or are you done here?”

For a second, her gaze flickered down to Hiccup. She definitely needed more time... Time to look at him, to let his warm smile comfort her. Time to talk to him, just to hear his voice. Time to feel him, his embrace and his kiss to chase away every lingering memory of Harold’s hands on her. But not now.

Her mask of a smile firmly in place, she nodded and said, “Yes, Hiccup told me what I missed at that trial. Nothing special, it seems; they did well without me being there. I think I want to go back now, rest some more. I’m feeling tired already again.” She cocked her head, nodding back toward her chambers.

“Sure,” Tuff replied, then turned to Hiccup who was still kneeling on the ground in front of her. “Hey, thanks for staying with her just now. See you, I guess.”

“You’re welcome,” Hiccup responded, finally looking up at Tuff with a sheepish smile. “I didn’t mind helping out. Good night, Mister Timothy. Milady.” He bowed awkwardly, just as Tuff turned to walk ahead, back to her rooms.

“Good night, Hiccup,” Astrid replied, smiling politely, and then followed Tuff before he might wonder why she lingered.

More time... Yes, they needed more time. Seeing him had been good, cathartic even – but not enough. And Astrid planned to make good on her promise to get them more time, she even had an idea already. But for that idea to work, Tuff mustn’t be even the slightest bit suspicious.
Still kneeling on the cold stone floor, Hiccup gazed after Astrid as she walked down the corridor, away from him. Watching her leave left a dull ache in his chest, but there was nothing he could do about it.

He’d wanted to find her and he’d accomplished that. But as always, there hadn’t been enough time. She wasn’t okay, despite what she’d said. He saw through her well enough. And yet, he couldn’t really make rhyme or reason to her behaviour. She’d been afraid, but not of him. So what was it that upset her this much?

He wanted to follow her. He wanted to find out where her rooms were and to sneak in there once her servants were asleep. Foolish and risky as that was, it might be the only way to actually ever talk to her. And for a few endless seconds, he actually considered doing exactly that.

But he didn’t. She’d been adamant about him leaving; it had seemed to be so important to her. Hiccup was quite ready to throw caution into the wind if he could spend more time with her, but he also respected her wishes. And... he trusted her; she’d promised to find a way, and he wanted to believed that she could. So he would keep his promise too. He would be good, would return to the stables and wait. Hopefully, she’d at least come to the stables tomorrow again, because he wasn’t sure how well he would do with another day without seeing her.

Locking all thoughts about her into a corner of his mind for now, Hiccup fought himself back up on his feet, suppressing a pained groan as his leg twinged somewhat fiercely. He dearly needed to sit down, to rest and massage the stiffening muscles. But first, he had duties to attend to.

Concentrating on not stumbling on his weakened leg instead of letting the memory of their entangled fingers distract him, he limped the rest of the way to Eret’s room. After lightening a small oil lantern near the entrance, he slumped down onto a low bench standing to the side. Groaning, he stretched and rubbed his leg. It had been a long time since it had played him up this badly, but all the tense anxiety of this long day and standing still for so long had apparently taken its toll.

He spent a few minutes kneading the cramping muscles, looking forward to giving them a thorough massage before going to bed later. Once the pain lessened to a dull and manageable ache, Hiccup stood up again and reached for Eret’s scabbard. Clattering down onto the stone floor had left a couple of shallow scrapes on the metal, nothing serious but it still needed some polishing. As he carefully buffed out and mended the superficial damage, he contemplated the scabbard as a beautiful piece of artistic craftsmanship. Carved into the solid surface of the metal was the picture of a rampant horse and a swan in flight, a lake between some shallow hills in the background. The scenery was delicately gilded in places and was decorated with countless stones in red and blue, gemstones no doubt, to further underline the close friendship between the Houses Hofferson and Jag’r.

A beautiful piece indeed, and Hiccup was looking forward to, hopefully, owning a similar one himself one day. One where the swan flew next to a dragon, and where emeralds accompanied the rubies instead of the sapphires on this one. The image brought a serene smile onto his face. One day, he would be worthy of her, of being with her openly, and would hopefully be able to proudly reclaim his father’s name, if not his title. He’d do whatever it took to get there.

Once the scrapes were mended, Hiccup quickly changed into his usual attire of a simple tunic and trousers, grabbed his warm cloak and the damaged bridle, and made his way through the empty hallway and out a side exit of the castle. But when he entered the large stable complex, he was
momentarily thrown off guard by what he found. Of course, spending the last weeks at the much smaller outer stables threw off his expectations, but even though he'd worked for months at House Jag'r's main stat farm, the sheer size of these royal stables baffled him.

In front of him lay a seemingly endless corridor with occupied stalls on either side, and with other corridors branching off to the left and right, leading to even more stalls. The place was quite busy, which surprised Hiccup at first. But then he remembered that despite it being dark night outside, it actually wasn't that late. The empty hallways up in the castle had led him to believe it had to be later, but of course, those had only been empty because most occupants were still busy discussing the trial.

Searching for a stable master or at least a higher-ranked groom, Hiccup slowly walked into the busy hall, looking around carefully. One or two grooms he recognised from his time in Eastervale, but they hurried away quickly, busy carrying food and water towards the stalls. So he wandered on on his own, always looking for someone who might be in charge here and who could tell him where he could mend the Prince's bridle.

As he walked on, his eyes wandered curiously over the animals in their stalls. There were all manner of breeds here; many of the big Jag'r horses, of which he even recognised quite a few of the individuals, but also a considerable number of the more graceful thoroughbreds that were more popular in the south, and a few of the northern heavy horses, along with other rarer breeds. Hiccup had just reached a section that housed what looked like cart ponies, when a familiar voice suddenly called his name.

"Hiccup? Is that you?" The sturdy man that came walking toward him as he turned had a wide grin on his tattooed face. His trademark black hair was untidily cropped short, which gave his friendly demeanour an additional playful touch.

"Lavo," Hiccup greeted the man with a relieved smile. "Finally a familiar face. These stables are madness, how do you even cope here?"

Lavo of House Jag'r laughed. "Oh, it's not as bad as it looks, really. But I heard you're banned to the outcast's stables, and compared to those... well, I see your point. But how do you cope? I remember the one winter I had to spend there watching over a handful of beasts too hot-blooded to be held here during the busy Midwinter days. It was horrible. I thought I'd die of boredom."

Hiccup's lips twitched as he tried to imagine lively and sociable Lavo locked up with barely any contact at all for more than an hour, let alone a couple of weeks. "It's really not that bad," Hiccup replied, his smile turning warmer as he thought about how his days usually went by. "You know, I don't mind being on my own. And then, I also accompany Eret occasionally too, carrying his equipment when he's training at the garrison, and such."

"Right," Lavo nodded, hitting his forehead with his hand. "I heard about that, but wasn't sure whether I should believe it. You really agreed to become his squire? Damn, and here I'd hoped to have you and your talents under my command once we're back home. Ah, well. I guess I'll have to look for another replacement for old Master Lotho then. But tell me, is working for our cousin really as horrible as I imagine?"

Chuckling, Hiccup shook his head. "Depends on whether you consider scrambling for anything to do because your stubborn master refuses to accept having a servant a chore. Because then yes, it's horrible." Lavo laughed, his warm eyes sparkling with honest humour. "Seriously though, so far I am still more groom than squire." The statement brought back the memories of how he should have acted as Eret's squire yesterday, but Hiccup quickly pushed that thought aside. He wouldn't think about that, about her, not now. "I do barely anything else than tending to the lords’ stallions,
Markor, and my Cassie. With riding out nearly every day, that's quite enough to kill my time."

Again, Lavo nodded as if suddenly remembering something. He really was quite ignorant of anything that didn't happen in and around his immediate life. "Right. Eret and the Prince frequently go for a ride these days, don't they? When I was stationed out there, they were both only boys, surely not allowed even to go near those horses, much less to ride them. Oh, but tell me. Does the Princess come there too? Usually, she spends more time here, and I was so looking forward to seeing her. I've heard she became even more beautiful since last year, but I've only caught a glimpse of her two or three weeks ago or so. You said you tend to Markor too, so have you seen her yet?"

So much for not thinking about her... Hiccup couldn't help the dreamy smile on his face, conjured up by the memory of her standing in the glowing evening sunlight, of that comforting warmth radiating through him whenever she was near. "Yes, I've met her... She really is beautiful," he agreed, swallowing down any comment about how she was so much more than just beautiful; Smart, witty and funny, kind and strong and...

"Uh oh... I know that sort of smile," Lavo interrupted his daydreaming, grinning widely. "But she's pretty much out of your reach, especially after... well, you've heard about it... Anyway, she's well out of all our league, so you better not let anyone else see that kind of dopey smile."

Ducking his head, Hiccup quickly schooled his expression. Lavo was right, nobody could know about the depth of his feelings for her. Not yet. The thought stung a little, but he fought it down quickly. They would get there. With the Gods' blessing on their connection, they would get there, he had no doubts about that. All he needed was to be patient until then.

"Ah, it's okay to admire a beautiful lady, lad," Lavo said cheerfully, laying one arm around his shoulders in a fatherly gesture. "And aren't we all a little in love with our Princess?" He gave a small wink. "But don't let that distract you, you hear me? As Eret's squire, I expect you to take care of him. Thor forbids that something happens to him and I end up becoming head of House Jag'r after all." He shuddered, and Hiccup knew it was genuine.

Lavo was Eret's third cousin, his grandfather having been one of Eret the Elder's younger cousins. But by right of heritage, and with the lack of any other living male heirs, Lavo was the next in line if Eret was not able to assume his father's title. That was because all of the male Jag'r blood-kin, like Hiccup, had been born to other Houses; the daughters of House Jag'r had married outside their House, and therefore legally didn't belong to the House anymore, despite their blood ties. According to Eret, their grandfather had a favoured rant on the topic, and it was one of the reasons why he was so controlling and obsessed with his descendants' marriages. But even he agreed with everyone else: Lavo would be a horrible choice as the Head of the House. His love for their horses and practical work made him a perfect Master of the Horse, but without any interest in political or economic topics, it was better for everyone if he stayed in that position.

"I'll do my best," Hiccup promised with a fond smile. "But now, could you tell me where the tack workshop is around here? I need to mend this bridle, exchange a bit, and all, but the outer stables don't have the tools or parts I need."

Lavo took the bridle and inspected it with practised eyes. "Yes, I see the problem. That ring needs replacing. Come along, I'll show you the way." The older man turned on his heel and beckoned Hiccup to follow him along endless stalls and around a couple of corners. "Here we are," he declared, stopping in front of a wooden door. "I'd ask if you need any help, but I know you don't. But still, if you need anything or can't find something just tell one of the boys here to get me. See you around, Hiccup." With these words, Lavo waved him goodbye.
With a smile, Hiccup watched as the broad man went to check on some of the grooms' work, then entered the workshop attached to the elaborate tack room. It was neatly stacked, all tools and spares orderly sorted. Two grooms were working on the counters, both looking up as he entered. One had come with House Jag'r and even though Hiccup didn't really know the boy, he gave him a friendly nod as a greeting before returning his focus to his work at hand again.

Quickly, Hiccup found what he needed, a fine knife to cut open the sewn leather, a spare ring to replace the broken one, a handful of sturdy needles and yarn to sew the leather together again. He worked in silence, glad to be able to sit and enjoying the calm routine of the handy work that occupied his mind just enough to not be boring. However, it wasn't enough to keep his thoughts from wandering, and it didn't take long until they turned to what seemed like the only thing that mattered anymore.

Seeing Astrid earlier had somewhat calmed down his anxiety. She'd been up and about, hadn't been hurt or injured, had still acted reasonably normal, all in all. Of course, her apparent fear had been odd. But that too was something they could talk about once they had the time.

Chewing on his lip, Hiccup paused in his work, needle still halfway sticking inside the darkened leather. Once they had time... Yes, she'd wanted to get them time, but Hiccup couldn't see how she would pull that off. But maybe this was it. Maybe this was their trial, the test they had to pass in order to be together. They had this connection, so vibrant and alive that it was impossible to ignore, but that didn't mean things would be easy. Maybe remaining in this brittle state of not enough, of not being able to talk about anything, important and ordinary things alike, was what they had to do. Maybe they had to wait until he'd proven himself, until they could be together openly.

With a sigh, he let his gaze wander aimlessly through the room. It seemed like an impossible task. Not being with her all day, not seeing her, kissing her, talking to her, not... not touching her like he longed to... it made two years sound like an eternity. But if that was what was asked of them... then he could do it. The prospect was daunting, but all in all, it was a small price to pay. Because she was worth the wait.

Tired, but with a serene smile on his lips, Hiccup continued with his work. No matter how long they had to wait, in the end, they would be together. He knew that, trusted in the Gods’ decision to bind them. Repairing the bridle took him over an hour, but once he was done, he cleaned up his workspace as he was used to, and, bidding Lavo goodbye as he passed through noticeably emptier corridors, finally made his way back to the outer stables. The cold night wind bit into his exhausted body, even through the thick cloak, and even after the rest just now, his leg was rapidly starting to act up again. He really couldn't wait to finally lie down, sleep, and let this day pass.

Once back at the stables, he quickly went through his usual evening tasks, feeding and tending to the horses, before he finally could go to bed himself. He unrolled the thick blanket Eret had given him to use as an underlay for his improvised bed – which beat the smelly horse blankets he’d been using for the purpose – and was just done laying out his bedding, when he heard the noises. Steps on the stones outside, the rustling of fabric, and then someone working on the mechanism to open the door.

A thief? But who would be so stupid as to try and steal the famous and feared Jag'r horses? Reflexively, Hiccup reached for his hunting knife he kept in his belongings and carefully neared the door.

It opened and a figure clad in a worn-out cloak burst inside. Before he knew what happened, slim arms wrapped around his chest, fingers digging into his back with almost painful desperation. Hiccup dropped the knife and it landed with a dull clang on the ground as his arms instinctively
closed around her slender shoulders.

“What—” he gasped, but he didn't get the chance to continue, arms tightening around her as the familiar mayweed perfume wafted into his nose.

“I did it!” Astrid choked, laughing giddily. “I snuck away, and nobody stopped me. I-I really did it.” Then she buried her face against his chest, and broke down in a mixture of hysterical laughter and sobbing.
Stunned, Hiccup could do nothing but hold her. Astrid was shaking and trembling, her tears and laughter all muffled against his tunic. Over and over she kept mumbling, “I did it. Oh, Gods, I really did it, I did it,” while clutching at him as if he was her lifeline.

Absently, Hiccup stroked her back and tried to wrap his head around the fact that Astrid was really here. She was here, in his arms, free for him to hold her. His arms tightened around her, almost crushing her to his chest. She was really here…

Eventually, her hysterical crying turned into only occasional low sobs and a lot of cuddling against his chest, the tension leaving both their bodies to s certain degree. Astrid retreated slightly, just enough to smile up at him through glassy eyes. ”I really did it.”

Hiccup, who still could hardly believe it, shook his head, dazed. “But… how?”

“I snuck away,” she repeated in a throaty voice. “I told Ruff that I was tired and wanted to go to bed early, and when she eventually stopped checking on me, I snuck away. I got this dress and cloak from my hidden stash so people would see just a serving girl, and just… I just left. Just like that.” She chuckled again, her knuckles standing out white from how tightly she was clutching his shirt.

Hiccup pulled back and glanced over her clothes. In the dim light of a single lantern, he recognised the cloak she was wearing as the one she’d worn at their first meeting, but beneath she was dressed in a thin brown and white dress, cords at her front to easily tie them herself. It was a simple dress which looked like it belonged to one of the kitchen cooks.

“And all the time it took me to get out and away from the castle… all the time I thought someone might recognise me, stop me… but they didn't. Nobody looked even twice and… and…” she broke off, her voice thick with tears now as she burrowed into his chest once more.

Hiccup wrapped his arms tightly around her, comforting her, but he didn't know what to say. This had been her plan? Sneaking away to… to… spend the night with him? His mind was reeling, overwhelmed. Not in his wildest dreams had he ever dared to consider…

“Won't you… say anything?” she finally asked, mumbling almost incoherently into the fabric of his tunic. She sounded incredibly vulnerable.

Bending down, he nuzzled into her hair until he'd found his voice again. “I…” he began stupidly, but wasn’t sure what to say. He wanted to tell her how… grateful he was to her for doing this, for
taking such a risk, just so they would get some time together. But at the same time, he wanted to reprimand her for taking such a risk. Stumbling through the cold night, alone, after what she’d been through. And if anyone had recognised her, she’d surely be in trouble now; she would have to answer to her father at the very least, and might even get punished in some way.

Still struggling to come up with the right words, he inhaled deeply; the familiar mayweed scent helped to somewhat get him grounded again. But when his chin touched her forehead, he noticed how cold it was. Frowning, he realised that she was still shivering, and that, apparently, that wasn’t because she was upset. Or that wasn’t the only reason, at least.

“You’re cold,” he stated, concerned. Of course, it was a cold winter night and even his thick clothes and cloak hadn’t been enough to keep the chill at bay. In that thin one-layer dress and that flimsy summer-cloak, she would be freezing. Astrid gave him an incredulous look, but he didn’t waste time and pulled her after him to his makeshift bed. Methodically, he wrapped his warm blanket around her and then placed her onto his lap, cradling her in his arms, rubbing her back and arms to further warm her up. The stable had a small hearth for the coldest of winter nights, but generally the body heat of the horses was enough to keep the small building... well, not warm, but enough to keep the chill outside. But that wasn’t going to be enough for Astrid’s chilled flesh. She let him work her over without resistance, but stayed somewhat tense, not melting against him like she usually would. But Hiccup hadn’t forgotten her question.

“I can’t believe you’re really here,” he mumbled into her hair, still overwhelmed, even as he tried to warm her very frigid skin with his hands; her arms were bare, and the skin was like ice. “And I’m just… Frigga, I thought we wouldn’t get the chance to really talk again until we’re married,” he added, chuckling shakily. “I thought we’d have to wait and be patient and… and now you’re here.” He pulled her tighter, and felt how she fully relaxed now. Further rubbing her cool limbs, he pondered for a moment. “I just… It’s too cold for this. At least for the hike out here in clothes like this. I should have snuck into your rooms instead, and–”

“No!”

Her shriek of objection made him flinch. She looked up at him again, her eyes once more filled with panic. “No, you can’t do that. Ever. Promise me. Promise me you’ll never do something so stupid.”


“Because… because if someone finds me sneaking away, they’ll stop me. I’ll get scolded and they’ll take away these… borrowed clothes. But they’ll never learn where I was going. But if you came to my rooms? If anyone found you there, or even just saw you sneaking around?” She sobbed audibly, a noise that tore at something deep within him. “I can’t lose you, Hiccup,” she wailed. “I can’t! Promise me that I won’t lose you.”

Hiccup gazed at her, anxiety nagging at his very soul. What in Odin’s name had happened that had upset her this much? He already knew what had happened, but Harold’s assault didn’t explain this. How she clung to him with shaking hands, burrowing into his embrace as if he was all that kept her together.

“Oh, Astrid…,” he murmured reassuringly. “You will always have me. No matter what, okay?” She didn’t seem entirely convinced though, so he added in a lighter tone, “The Gods want us to be together, remember? So long as we’re not getting too reckless… What can go wrong?”

A light frown crossed her face, but all in all, she visibly relaxed. “You’re right,” she agreed. “It’s just…” Instead of continuing, she reached up to caress his face. Her fingers glided over his
eyebrows, his nose and lips, along his jaw, eyes filling with sorrow and fear again.

Unable to watch her misery any longer, Hiccup caught her hand, carded his fingers through hers, and asked in a low but firm voice, “Astrid, what is it? Why are you so afraid?”

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Surreal…

That was the word that best described how Astrid felt. From sneaking out of her rooms in the clothes she’d borrowed from Heather, to stumbling through the chill night, the stars sparkling overhead, to now sitting on Hiccup’s lap, cradled in his wonderful and warm embrace, everything felt surreal.

She knew that she really shouldn’t be here. If anyone found her here with Hiccup, then that was it. Then she’d brought what she so desperately feared upon him herself.

And yet, she felt like this was exactly where she was supposed to be, close enough that she could feel his heart beating beneath his tunic. She loved how he nuzzled into her hair, always so careful not to disturb it, but unable to hold back nonetheless. Yes, this was where she should be, where she felt safe and secure.

The guilt over putting him in danger nagged at her, but at the same time, reason was able to keep it in check. Because what she’d said earlier was true. She doubted that anyone who could have spotted her would have sneaked past her instead of simply stopping her right away. No, now that she’d made it here, they were fairly safe for now.

And this was the only way anyway. ‘Being around him all day without getting careless and risk getting caught by their friends wasn’t feasible.’ Well, then she had to be around him when none of their friends were there to catch them. Because not being around him wasn’t an option.

His embrace, his warmth, his gentleness, how he took care of her, this was what she needed, what she couldn’t live without.

“I’m afraid of losing you,” she replied simply, fingers tightening around his as if that alone would keep that from happening. She looked up at him, at his warm green eyes that were filled with confusion and concern. He didn’t understand, couldn’t understand. He hadn’t seen her dream, hadn’t seen him die, hadn’t seen that real dead body that had looked so similar to him.

So she told him.

In a low voice that regularly trembled or got choked by tears, she told him about her nightmare. And about Harold. How she’d wanted to deter anyion away from Hiccup and how that had made everything worse.

She told him about the attack, even though he had to know about that already after he’d listened to her testimony. It was cathartic in a way to tell him, to drag these horrible memories out of her mind one more time only to let Hiccup’s soothing embrace and his lips against her temple take the edge off of them. What Harold had done had hurt, in more than one way, and remembering how his hand on her body had felt made her sick. But here, surrounded by Hiccup’s warmth, she could forget.

Then she told him about how Harold died. She told him about her guilt, her fears of a repetition of that dreadful death, and of how seeing Harold’s corpse had been too much for her. That just thinking about losing Hiccup, like this or in any other way… It would kill her too.
After she’d finished, he was quiet for a while. His one hand was still entwined with hers, had never broken the contact, while the other was constantly caressing her back, her arm, her neck, or her cheek. Feeling him like this gave her strength, the strength to cope with her fears, and she wondered how, even for a moment, she’d imagined she could stay away from him.

“I think… I think I felt it,” he finally murmured. When she looked up, there was pain in his eyes, pain for her. Swallowing, he pressed their intertwined hands against his chest. “Early this morning, I woke up and… that had to have been when you had that nightmare… and later I felt again something, around the time of the execution. Something like a burst of… of…” he trailed off, shaking his head, unable to phrase it. “It was horrible. I knew it had something to do with you, but had no idea what happened… That’s why I had to come looking for you, you know? To know whether you were okay. I’m sorry that I scared you even more.”

“It’s okay,” she said, smiling weakly. Yes, his sudden appearance at the castle had scared her. But nothing bad had happened and she couldn’t really begrudge him being worried anyway. “Nothing happened, and… and I guess I was overreacting anyway. I just can’t lose you. I don’t want to have yet another death on my conscience, but to think that you could…” No, she couldn’t say it, didn’t want to say it. Hiccup was all right, he was safe. And she would do anything to keep him that way.

But apparently, Hiccup’s thoughts had gone down another road. “What do you mean, ‘yet another death on your conscience’? You’re not responsible for what this… this monster did.”

Astrid ducked her head, hiding against his chest. She didn’t want to talk about this, Hel, not even to think about it. But he had the right to know… “Maybe not,” she murmured. “But it’s becoming a repetitive pattern.” Laughing weakly, she shook her head. “But maybe Thuggory was right… Getting close to me is dangerous, and now a second man died because of me, and… and you…”

“Astrid?” He sounded worried.

Letting out a deep sigh, she cuddled closer against his chest, drawing strength from his closeness. “Last year, during the Spring Festival,” she began quietly. “Another man died because of me.” She waited for his reaction, a shocked gasp or his arms loosening around her, pushing her away from him. But nothing happened. If anything, his hold on her grew even tighter.

“What happened?” he asked when she didn’t go on, couldn’t go on. Once again, the memories boiled up inside her, mixed with what had happened recently, and only Hiccup’s warm voice was what kept her from falling apart again. “What did that man do?”

Drawing in another hiccupy breath, she started to speak. And she told him everything.

“It was the first day of the Spring Festival,” she said carefully. “It’s always been one of my favourite times of the year; farmers bringing in their first harvest of fresh fruits and vegetables and flowers, craftsmen showing what they’d worked on during the winter, and travelling people of all kinds showing their skills.” She gave a small smile. “And the dancing and the singing and the music… I love it all. Or… I used to love it…” She trailed off, remembering the young maidens dancing around the maypole, and wanting but not being allowed to join them… she swallowed against a lump in her throat and continued.

“But last year the Festival was late. Because of the long winter, you know? Usually Daniel and I went together to inaugurate the festival. Sometimes Father came, too, when his duties allowed it. But because of the lateness, Daniel was already neck-deep in preparing for the summer campaigning… So I went alone. Well, not alone. I had Tuff with me, but he and some guards were it. And it was… fantastic. That they finally would let me do something, all by myself. Not just standing to the side and looking pretty, but actually… saying and doing things. As If they would
accept that I’m not a child anymore, would trust me.”

She turned slightly and looked Hiccup in the face, to see his reaction. He simply nodded, his expression one of love, concern and support. She drew on that to have the strength to go on. “I mean, aside from Tuff and the guards, there were other higher lords and ladies too; mostly Father’s direct vassals and the like. But still. I… I felt free and… and finally like more than just a puppet. Like a real person. I got to give the blessings, award the ribbons to the victors of the contests…” she smiled slightly and ducked her head at the memory, “even draw the first mug of ale of the season for the victor and give it to him with my own two hands.” She gave an amused scoff. “I spilt a little... well, a lot. But he didn’t mind.”

Hiccup gave a little chuckle. Astrid smiled with him, but it quickly died down again. “When the official part was done, I… wanted to keep that feeling for a little bit longer. I made Tuff buy a cloak for me, fine light-green silk, suitable for a lady, but not a colour I’d usually wear. And when he started escorting me back to the castle… I slipped away. With the unfamiliar cloak covering my dress and hair, he had trouble finding me in the crowd, and eventually he lost track of me.”

Astrid trembled, and Hiccup’s arms around her tightened further, as if he could guess what would come next.

“It was amazing,” she continued in a hollow voice. “That feeling of freedom, of being able to walk where I wanted, overhearing random conversations of people who didn’t pay me any mind as I stood only a step or three away from them. I could look at the displayed goods without the merchant rushing toward me and shoving their most expensive pieces at me. I remember it all... I stood next to a group of women who’d just bought a phial of a new perfume, laughing amongst themselves as they liberally tested it on each other. But then...“ Slowly, she shook her head, forehead grinding against Hiccup’s chest and hands clenched tightly into his tunic. “The one thing I don’t remember is how he grabbed me. But suddenly, everything was different.

From one second to the other, there were cool shadows instead of the warm sunlight, the wide open plaza replaced by a narrow alley. I still had the scent of that perfume in my nose, still heard the women’s laughter, but it mixed with the mouldy smell of rotting water and the sound of that man’s deep voice. ‘Hello, lady. Fancy seeing you here,’ he said. I can still hear it in my head, clear as if he’s right here.” A shiver ran down her back as the rough baritone rang once again through her mind.

However, Hiccup's closeness made even these memories bearable. The way he held her, cradled her, his mouth and nose against her hair, his breath on her skin a constant reassurance. It made her feel safe like nothing else ever did before.

“What happened then?” he asked quietly when she didn't continue, basking in the moment of distraction. A question like this could have sounded invasive, but instead it made her feel even better. Because he cared.

“I tried to scream,” she finally went on, surprised herself by how… how easy it was to talk about it all. “I could see the people at the end of the alley, so I just had to make myself noticed, right? But he wouldn't let me; he had one hand over my mouth and… and I think I was too shocked to fight back for real. At first at least… And then it's all a blur.” Reflexively, she wrapped one arm around her waist and the other around her chest, as if to retrospectively ward off the pain.

“I… I remember his hands on me,” she continued in a low voice. “He held me so tight, was so much stronger than me. His fingers left bruises everywhere: on my arms, my waist and hips, my breasts...” – those especially had lasted for almost two weeks – “He pushed my skirts up and… and... It all happened so fast... Later I learned that Tuff only needed a couple of minutes to reach
the alley after I got dragged in. He’d finally spotted me just moments before and just needed to
cross the plaza… But to me, it felt so much longer."

For a few minutes, they were both quiet. Astrid had thought that telling him what happened,
reliving it all, would be worse. But she still felt so safe in his arms, like nothing of those events
could reach her here. Their bubble of closeness reflected everything.

“So… that’s why you flinch when someone touches you…” he finally said. It wasn’t a question,
and that confused her.

How could he know how she’d reacted to every small contact in the weeks after the festival? How
could he know how she’d shied away from everyone, every small contact, hadn’t been able to
attend a dance or go to any public event at all for a while?

Apparently, her confusion was clearly written across her face. “I was wondering… No matter
whether it’s me taking you into my arms, or Eret compelling you to dance with him at his accolade,
or either Eret or Tuff or Daniel helping you up or down Markor’s back… I noticed that you flinch
practically every time. And I know it’s not that you’re afraid of any of us, so…”

“I did?” She hadn’t even noticed… but apparently, Hiccup had watched her more closely. He
nodded.

Closing her eyes, she leaned her head against his shoulder. She hadn’t even been aware of how
she’d still reacted that way, and to those she trusted no less. “Yeah, it turned into kind of a reflex,”
she finally admitted. “I was so afraid when he caught me, and it hurt, and…” she trailed off,
chasing away those memories by deeply inhaling Hiccup’s musky scent of leather and fresh hay
and Hiccup. It was all she needed to get grounded again.

“Did he… rape you?” Hiccup asked after a pause, voice low and careful.

The question made her frown. That’s what he wanted to know? Would it make a difference to him?
If she wasn’t a virgin anymore? If he couldn’t be sure whether a child born after their wedding
night would truly be his? If she had to live enclosed within Frigga’s Order before their wedding to
make sure that she wasn’t carrying another man’s child already?

But no, of course that wasn’t it. Hiccup gave her worried expression only one scrutinizing look, and
understood. With a sad smile, he raised his hand to cup her face, thumb gently caressing her cheek,
and murmured, “Just so I understand what you’re going through.”

Leaning into his touch, she sighed, “No, he didn’t. Maybe he would have if he’d had enough time,
or maybe he just meant to scare me.” They’d never learned why that man had attacked her, and she
knew that Daniel was still mad, mostly at himself, for how rash he’d decided back then. “He
only… rutted against me like… like some randy animal. I remember his obnoxious grunts and…
something hot pushing against my rear and back. And the sensation of… of something warm
oozing down my leg…” Again, she shuddered as the memory alone almost made her gag. Amidst
the chaos that had followed, she hadn’t gotten the chance to clean up. She hadn’t dared to tell
anyone, had been too embarrassed to say anything. All day, she’d felt the man’s semen on her leg,
even after he’d been long dead.

“But he didn’t get the chance to… do more,” she went on, efficiently tearing her thoughts away
from those memories. “Tuff interrupted whatever else he might have done, and the guards took him
into their custody.” He’d fought like a beast, and they’d clubbed him halfway into unconsciousness
in their rage at what he’d done. “They informed Daniel and my father, and they both… snapped. It
took barely more than an hour before a crowd was gathered around Odin’s Tree at the garrison
and…” She trailed off, gulping. All this was long over.

Hiccup slowly shook his head, thoughtful. “But none of that was your fault,” he said determinately. “That man attacked you. He did that on his own accord, and punishing him was the right thing to do. You’re not to blame for anyone else’s actions.”

Oh, how often had she gone through that same line of thinking in her own head... “But I shouldn’t have been there in the first place,” she whispered. “I should have gone back to the castle as Tuff had intended. Or I at least should have foregone the disguise, and taken a guard. Then nothing would have happened. He wouldn’t have attacked me and wouldn’t have died.”

“Maybe,” Hiccup growled. “But I’m sure you weren’t his first. If it hadn’t been you, then he might have picked another girl. One that wasn’t protected by guards and a warder that could have interrupted him. No, believe me. If I’ve learned one thing about men like that today, then it’s that, if they so easily see rape as a valid option, then they’ve probably done it before. That man deserved to be punished.”

Astrid ducked her head, not answering. She’d thought the same before, but hearing him saying it out loud made it more real. Yes, she probably hadn’t been his first...

But still...

“I don’t think anyone deserves the punishment he got,” she said quietly, barely more than a whisper. Upon Hiccup’s questioning look, she added, "The executioner made a… mistake. The rope didn’t break his neck, and he died a slow and horrible death; it surely took more than ten minutes.” Once again, it all played out in her mind, the twisting and jerking, the cheering of the crowd, the agonizing minutes until it was finally over.

Probably remembering what she’d told him about her dream, Hiccup gulped. “But you said it yourself, it was a mistake. Sometimes, mistakes happen, it was just unfort–”

“Except it wasn’t,” she interrupted him. She huddled closer against his chest as tears threatened to well up again. “I don’t think it was a mistake. Daniel acted so weirdly, and… I think they did it that way on purpose. To punish him further, because it was me he attacked. Maybe his execution was justified, but not like this…. Not because of me.” A lump was forming in her throat; it was a familiar one, but with a new force behind it. “And the same goes for Harold, too. I mean, what he did was… was… But he was right. He lost everything because of me–”

“Nonsense,” Hiccup tried to interrupt her, but she wasn’t listening.

“–If I hadn’t tried to be friendly–”

“Astrid.”

“–hadn’t encouraged him to talk to me–”

“Astrid, stop it!”

“–maybe he wouldn’t–”

His lips on hers caught her by surprise. They’d kissed so often during the last weeks, but never like this. The force with which he pressed his mouth to hers almost hurt; his intention to keep her from talking very clear. Weirdly detached she thought that she ought to be mad at him… but that wasn’t possible.
With a low whine, Astrid all but melted against him as all of her built-up tension and anxiety dissolved. Her mind went blank, and all she could still think about, all she felt, was him. His hand curling around her waist and back. His lips moving with hers as the bruising pressure eased into softer sliding. His warmth beneath her hands as she clung to him, pulling him closer.

Even though the kiss had started hard, almost painful even, it quickly turned into heated clutching and desperate gasps once the ice was broken. Gods, she needed him so much, it was ridiculous. Shifting, she turned in his lap to kiss him deeper, drawing a low groan from the back of his throat as she ran her tongue along his. He retreated to look at her, his eyes filled with a fire that found its match in hers, then leaned in to kiss her again.

Astrid was aware of the fact that they were completely alone. There was nobody in a room next door who would wonder what they were doing, nobody who could walk in on them. They had hours before she had to leave, hours to get lost in each other. The thought made her chuckle against Hiccup’s lips, the familiar fluttering heat beginning to build in her belly, and she put even more energy into their kiss, tried to get closer still, wanted more.

At first, Hiccup seemed ready to oblige. His eager hands roamed up her back and over her sides, holding her tight as he nipped at her lips, his tongue delving into her mouth. But when she shifted again, trying to adjust their positions, he gasped and pulled back.

He was panting, eyes dark and dazed as he gazed at her. For a moment, Astrid thought she saw a flicker of sorrow in them, but it was gone in the next, replaced by a warm if sheepish smile. He pulled her back against his chest, nuzzling into her hair while his hand kept wandering up and down her back, though slower now, calming.

Astrid complied, if somewhat puzzled. She would have liked to keep kissing him some more, now that they had the chance. Why had he stopped? Bewildered and slightly dazed, she leaned against his chest, trying to catch her breath and to understand.

“Don’t think like that,” he murmured, confusing her even more. “Maybe you’re right and they would still be running around without you, alive and free.”

Ah… So that was his reason. They weren’t done talking. Right…

“But believe me when I say that it’s better this way. Harold was a monster for what he did to others and tried to do to you, and it’s a blessing that he’s not able to do it again. I wish you’d been spared, but, please, don’t feel guilty for his death. He deserved it, and I have no doubts that the other man wasn’t much better.”

Astrid pressed her eyes shut, face hidden against this chest, as she contemplated his words. She didn’t like death. Her mother had died giving birth to her, because of her. She’d been there when her step-mother had died after her struggles and had seen the corpse of her stillborn baby brother, had been to countless mourning ceremonies for good men that hadn’t come back from Westhill. Logically, she knew that death was a necessary part of life, but she didn’t want to think of it as something good, especially when it was so unnecessary and pointless.

And yet… Maybe Hiccup was right. Maybe it was better this way. If their deaths had kept Harold and that other man from raping and killing even one other girl… She was torn inside, but here in Hiccup’s arms, with his reassuring voice phrasing these reasonable thoughts she’d heard so many times before… she started to accept it.

“Okay,” she murmured, then pushed herself up to look him in the eyes, a weak smile playing around her lips. “I’ll try not to feel guilty. Let’s… let’s just hope nobody else has to die because of
Seeing her like this hurt.

Hiccup had come to know Astrid as strong and full of life. But these events, these two men had broken something inside her, and not just by assaulting her the way they had. Her small smile that had given him so much hope only seconds ago vanished at her last words, and as her eyes dropped to where her hand rested over his heart, he could guess why.

Slowly, he reached for her hand and cradled it in his until she looked up at him again. “I promise to be careful,” he murmured with sincerity. “Nothing will happen to me, everything will be fine. You’ll see, in a few years, we’ll be laughing about how much we’re worrying now.”

“Promise?”

“Promise! We’re meant to be together, remember?”

Her features softened with a slightly strained smile, and he couldn’t help but kiss her once more. This time, however, he was careful not to get carried away again. No matter how much he wanted her, they couldn’t go too far. And without any other circumstances that could keep them on track, Hiccup had to be the responsible one. So he kept the kiss light and soft, playful and loving. It wasn’t easy with her fidgeting in his lap and unknowingly making his blood boil, but that was a road they couldn’t go, not yet. And especially not directly after what happened with Harold. And when she became more and more eager, and temptation harder and harder to resist, he retreated, beating down his desire with the reminder that, eventually, they would be together like this.

But he would need at least some outlet, and soon, or he would go insane.

Maybe sensing how inappropriate the tension between them had suddenly become, Astrid climbed off his lap to sit by his side. She draped the blanket around them both, and Hiccup couldn’t help but smile at how cutely she cuddled to his side.

“So, what now?” she asked, voice lighter and happier than before.

“What do you mean?”

She shrugged. “I... uh... borrowed a key to one of the castle’s sally ports,” she said, patting a pocket in her cloak. “I can slip back inside without too much problem, or just use one of the wicket gates by the main doors; if I time it right, I’ll just look like a servant girl coming back in from an early errand.”

Hiccup nodded. “And if you’re carrying say, a covered basket, you might as well be invisible. That works.”

She beamed at him. “So... I need to be back before Ruff comes to wake me, but that still gives us most of the night. Time for us.”

“Sounds good,” he replied, wincing as shifting into another position to let her cuddle against him more comfortably made his leg twinge again. “Is there something specific you have in mind?” A dangerous question maybe, given how eager she’d kissed him just now. But if she suggested something along that line, they could set a few rules right away. He couldn’t bring it up himself, that went against everything he’d been taught, but if she started...
However, she didn’t. “I don’t know,” she yawned, making herself comfortable against his chest. “What were you doing when I came here? It looked like you were about to battle Grendel at the door to the mead hall.”

That comment made Hiccup chuckle. “I was doing my job!” he declared in mock indignation. “Defending these precious horses from a horse thief, you know?”

“Oh…” The slight blush on the small part of her cheek he could see from this angle was endearing. “Right…” Her blush turned into a smirk as she quickly veered into another direction, “Although I pity the thief that tried to steal Chomp.”

They both paused at the image and gave exaggerated cringes in unison that made them both laugh. Then, still chuckling, she leaned back against his chest and said softly, “And now that you’ve made sure your charges are safe?”

“Well, I had no further plan. I was about to go to sleep,” he said with a shrug. “Maybe give my leg a rubdown; it’s been a difficult day…”

At that, she sat up and gave him a questioning look. “What is with your leg anyway? I meant to ask, but…” Biting her lip she averted her eyes, clearly torn between curiosity and caution. Hiccup couldn’t help but smile at that sight, his heart threatening to flow over. She was so wonderful, sweet, probing for whatever she wanted to know but never pushing him too hard.

“I can show you,” he offered, quietly. “It’s not pretty, but…” But, Hel, she would see it one day anyway, right? When she nodded, he sat up and, momentarily nervous, rolled up his left trouser leg with trembling fingers.

Beneath, the skin wasn’t as smooth as it used to be. An angry red gash ran from his ankle over his calf almost up to his knee, the tissue around it gnarled and knotted, the skin patchy with old burns in varying degrees. Just looking at the badly healed wound made a lump form in his throat as old memories resurfaced – but tonight, with her at his side, it was almost bearable.

“Oh Gods,” Astrid breathed, eyes round as she looked at his ugly scar. Slowly, she reached out, but stopped mid-way and turned toward him again. “May I?”

Hiccup nodded mutely, and observed her as she completed the movement. He couldn’t deny that it felt good as she carefully ran her fingers over the marred flesh. Her soft fingertips left a prickling trail on his skin, even in those places where he was numb and usually didn’t feel anything anymore – or that was what it felt like, at least. She never failed to affect him, no matter what she did, and it never failed to amaze him. There was no hesitation as she touched the knotted scar, no hint of disgust on her face as she examined the different areas. Finally, her hand still resting lightly on his leg, she looked up again.

“What happened?”

The question didn’t come unexpected, and yet, Hiccup wasn’t prepared to answer it. “It was a dragon,” he finally whispered, staring at the weird landscape of flesh that once had been a normal leg. In his mind, he saw it all again, the noises and chaos all around, the wild beast circling him. How he’d barely managed to raise his weapon before it attacked. The heat of its fire, and the burning pain of its claw. “We fought… and I didn’t win,” he added, out loud but still nothing but a whisper. In the end, that was really all that was to it, wasn’t it? That, and the sense of shame and loss that always accompanied those memories. But his flimsy explanation seemed to be enough for her.
“Does it still hurt?”

Hiccup shook his head. “Not really. By now, the wound beneath is completely healed. All that hurts are the twisted muscles, and only when I strained them too much without giving them a pause every now and then. Today was a long and bad day, in every sense, and—” he broke off as she suddenly crawled up his body.

“Not that,” she murmured, sorrow clouding her beautiful eyes. “I mean, yeah, that too, but”—she laid her hand over his heart—“does it still hurt here?”

He couldn’t answer as the lump in his throat grew. All he could do was nod before he reached for her hand, seeking her strength and comfort.

“I wish I could help you,” she whispered urgently, her forehead pressed to his.

Gasping out something like a laugh, Hiccup wrapped his arms around her waist, taking her into a light embrace. “You already do,” he reassured her. “Simply by existing.”

Deep inside him, a part of him felt bad that he hadn’t told her the whole story. She’d told her story, after all. But burdening her with his old problems now in addition to everything she’d been through during the last two days… that seemed wrong and selfish. He could tell her another time, the story of his dead family wasn’t running anywhere.

For a while, they simply stayed in their close embrace, basking in their closeness, before Astrid retreated with another adorably sheepish smile.

“So, what do you do to lessen the pain?” she asked more practically, and Hiccup was grateful for the change of topic.

He sat up straight and reached down to show her what he usually did to loosen the stiff and cramped muscles. “Nothing special,” he explained. “Just a light massage for the muscles, that’s all. At the edges of the gash, there are a few more sensitive spots, and the burns are a little tender sometimes too, but that’s all there is to it.” While he spoke, he kept massaging the leg and already felt how the hurting muscles started to relax.

Astrid watched him for a minute, then asked, “May I?”

Hesitantly, Hiccup nodded and leaned back against a straw bale. Like before, her hands on his leg felt good, incredible even. And the fact that she wasn’t just lightly caressing his leg, but deftly kneaded the tense muscles with both hands didn’t lessen the sensation either. Not in the slightest! He had to suppress a possibly inappropriate groan as she found an especially sensitive spot, and even though his leg relaxed just fine beneath her touch, he had to fight hard so that other parts of his body didn’t stiffen instead. He really couldn’t help it, but her touch—her bare skin on his on another place than his face, neck, or hands—thrummed with persistence through his entire body. He leaned back, eyes closed, and focused on her hands on his lower leg, vehemently pushing aside every other sensation.

Once she was done, she crawled back to his side, and he welcomed her in his embrace. He missed her touch already, but at the same time was glad to be able think about more innocent things again. How effortlessly they fitted together for example, practically and figuratively. There was no awkwardness between them, and he rather liked that fact. A lot.

“Thanks,” he murmured sleepily, and turned his head to place a light kiss onto her hair. “That was way better than when I do it.”
“You’re welcome,” she chuckled. “And I’m glad to hear that all the hours I spend watching Master Mulch at the physician’s chambers weren’t for nothing. Because, of course, I’m not allowed to treat an actual patient...”

“You watch the physician at work?” he asked, curiously. So far, that hadn’t come up, and it reminded him of how little he still knew about her life in general. But hopefully, that would change if they stole themselves more time from now on.

“Yes, I do every now and then. It’s... interesting. I mean, I know I won’t ever be allowed to become a healer. Joining Freya’s Order has never been an option for a valuable resource such as me, after all,” she scoffed. “But it’s at least something they let me do since cooking and sword fighting apparently aren’t ‘appropriate for a princess’. Something more useful than practising light conversation or learning how to stitch a pretty pattern into a tea cloth.”

“Definitely more useful,” Hiccup agreed lightly, nodding at his leg which made her smile. Once again, he contemplated how well she would have fit into his old life, where healing skills were definitely valued higher than being able to stitch pretty patterns. The thought made a new wave of sorrow wash over him. That life was lost, not only to him but to her as well. Sighing, he pushed those thoughts aside and concentrated on the moment instead, on enjoying their embrace and her smile as they kept chatting lightly.

Hiccup lost track of how long they lay there on his simple bed, their conversation eventually fading into tired cuddling after the long day. It would be so easy to drift off into slumber right now, but he fought to keep himself awake. At some point, Astrid had to return to the castle after all; he didn’t even want to think about what might happen if Eret and Daniel found them like this in the morning.

“I need to go back,” she murmured as if she’d read his thoughts.

“I know,” Hiccup nodded, sighing. Still a little dozily, they helped each other back up on their feet. Then he watched in curious confusion as she began to anxiously shake out her skirt.

“Could you... help me?” she asked after a minute of futile checking. “To make sure that there’s no straw somewhere that could give away where I was.” There it was again, the hint of fear in her voice.

Hiccup nodded, and crouched down beside her, making sure the simple skirt was as clean as it could be, then continued to inspect her hair too. The simple night-plait made it easy to spot and remove a few stray bits of straw. “I think you’re good to go,” he finally declared, wishing she could stay regardless. But when she picked up her cloak, another thought occurred to him. “Here, you could pull this over,” he said, holding out one of his spare tunics to her. “It’s got to be even colder now, and beneath your cloak, nobody should see you wearing it.”

Only hesitantly she accepted the offered piece of clothes, showing another endearing blush after she’d pulled it on. “Thanks. Next time, I’ll put on something warmer,” she murmured, arms wrapped tightly around herself and his tunic. Hiccup had to admit that he rather liked the sight of her wearing it. Just like the thought of a ‘next time’.

“Will you be okay walking back to the castle in the dark?” he asked, in equal parts needing to think about other things, being worried for her, and being unwilling to part.

“Yes, I’ll be fine. I know my way around here,” she commented with a grin, but then sobered up again directly. “Besides, if anyone should spot me, you being with me would kind of defeat the purpose, don’t you think?”
Hiccup sighed. “You don’t need to worry for me all the time,” he added more lightly, tugging a stray strand of her hair back into its place. “Everything will work out, you’ll see. Don’t drive yourself insane thinking about what could go wrong. Because it won’t. We have the Gods’ own blessing, so what can go wrong?”

Astrid turned her head to look away, briefly, frowning and biting her lip. “Right…”

He wasn’t sure how or why his words had upset her. To him, the knowledge about this divine support was a source of hope and confidence. Not wanting to let their time end on this weirdly tense note, he took her into his arms once more. His hands wrapped around her waist practically on reflex, fitting around her perfectly, and she melted into his embrace and his kiss with a content sigh.

“Well I see you tomorrow?” he asked after their lips parted, unwilling to let her go just yet. “Eret and the others mentioned they’d want to go on a longer ride to get this day out of their heads. Will you come too?”

She cocked her head, thinking for a moment, and then nodded. “Yes, I’ll come along. Staying away today didn’t do me any good, and… well, I think it will be easier now, you know? Keeping our distance with the others around.”

Hiccup agreed. With the memories of their shared night hours and the prospect of a ‘next time’, it would be much easier to treat her simply as a friend during the day. He walked her to the door, and caressed her cheek with his thumb after a last goodbye kiss.

“Be safe.”

Chapter End Notes

*peeks out from under her rock* Is it safe to come out again?

FYI: The worst angst is over for now(!), things will calm down a bit again, but also other... problems might arise.
Hiccup couldn’t stop smiling.

When the horses woke him at their usual early hour, he rose by rote to give them their food, but once he was done, he stumbled back to his makeshift bed, in the hope of maybe getting some more sleep. And he did it all with an irrepressible smile on his lips.

She was okay. Of course, she still had to work through the aftermath of Harold’s attack, but all in all, she was okay. He didn’t need to worry about her.

In addition, spending those cathartic hours with Astrid last night had been… well, *cathartic*. He’d needed that, had needed being with her without any pressure, without hurrying, without looking out to who might discover them, without being cautious about what they did or said. He hadn’t even known how tense they’d both been during the previous weeks, not until they’d finally been able to relax last night.

And then, there was the prospect of spending even *more* time with her like that. Unburdened and light-hearted, talking and cuddling and kissing, as if it was the most natural thing to do. Which it was. Hiccup was very looking forward to the next time she would be able to sneak away.

So, yes, all in all, he couldn’t stop smiling, even as he fell back asleep, the memories of their shared hours still whirling around in his mind.

. o O o .

“Hoy, look at the sleepyhead. Although, that seems to be the motto of the day.”

Groaning, Hiccup rolled over onto his other side, throwing one arm over his eyes to keep the light from piercing through his eyelids. He was sleeping, dammit, why had these people be so godsdammed loud?

A moment later, he bolted up straight, staring somewhat shocked at the brightly lit interior of the stables – and at three grinning faces.

“What… how late is it?” Hiccup mumbled, rubbing his face, and gladly accepted Eret’s outstretched hand to get back up on his feet. Gods, when had he become so careless? If he’d ever slept that long and deeply at the times some bandits had tried to rob him, he’d be dead by now. Casually, he noticed that his foot barely hurt at all anymore from when Markor had nearly broken it yesterday. That was something at least.

“Late enough that, although we overslept a bit too, we’re already here and even had breakfast,” Dagur grinned teasingly from where he was leaning sideways against the stall’s entrance.
“Almost noon,” Daniel said more coherently. He, too, looked tired.

“Are you okay, Hiccup? I can’t remember you ever sleeping through half the day.” Eret gave him a concerned look as he helped to pack Hiccup’s blanket away for the day. The question made Hiccup pause as the memories let a wave of serene warmth wash through him. Only pure luck had it that he was facing the wall as a huge grin spread across his face, before he schooled his expression again.

“Yes, I’m fine,” he replied, turning with only a small smile playing around his lips. “Yesterday had been a… a tough day. A long day, with getting to bed late, and... But I managed to repair the bridle at least,” he added hastily as he was in danger of blurting out just why he’d been up so long.

Daniel nodded, an understanding half-smile on his tired face. “Yes, we’re all a bit shaken by yesterday’s events, I guess. We’ve been up half the night, discussing the trial and how to proceed…” he shook his head as if to get rid of those thoughts. “But enough of that. The bridle is ready to use again, you say? That’s good. We brought some food and wanted to spend a day outside. Ride around Lake Vola, stop for a late lunch in the forest. Just get away for a bit.” Shrugging, he ran his fingers through his light hair that looked like it had gotten this treatment regularly lately. Then he added, “So, what do you say, will you come, too?”

As if he could turn down such an invitation… “Gladly,” he replied, even as a sliver of anxiety rose inside him. His gaze wandered through the room, over Eret and Dagur who stood at Squish’s stall, talking quietly, and to the still open and blatantly unoccupied entrance door. Brows furrowed, he contemplated whether it was safe to ask after Astrid’s obvious absence. She’d said she would come here today, and even though that wasn’t something he could tell her brother, he could still ask… right?

“The Princess is still not feeling well enough to leave her rooms?” he asked artlessly, trying to remember what information he was supposed to have about her.

“I… don’t know,” Daniel sighed, and rubbed his neck. “All I know is that she was too tired to attend breakfast, or that’s what Timothy told us at least. So I didn’t even ask her. I guess another day’s rest would be better for her anyway.”

Hiccup nodded, hiding any other visible reaction. He knew that she’d wanted to come, but couldn’t very well say so. “I see…”

. o O o .

Astrid woke to the unfamiliar sensation of warm sunlight on her face. Blinking, she turned away from the brightness, and with a content sigh, she snuggled deeper into her warm bed sheets.

Last night, she’d made it back into her rooms without even the slightest interruption. She still could hardly believe how easy and effortless sneaking away had been. The night guard had watched her intently as she'd neared the side door at what felt like the middle of the night, and for a short moment, she'd become nervous. But when she'd produced the fitting key without letting it slip through her trembling fingers, he hadn't even given her a second glance anymore. By now, the borrowed dress, her worn-out cloak, and Hiccup’s tunic were safely hidden again. She’d contemplated taking the tunic to her bed, just to cuddle with it, but that would have been foolish. Rachel was bound to find it when she made the bed. No, she would have to be content with simply knowing that it was near.

A dreamy smile spread across her face, fingers idly brushing over her chest, as she called forth the memories of the wonderful hours she and Hiccup had shared. Being so close to him without
needing to be careful… it had been wonderful. The last weeks of stolen minutes had been… exciting. There was no point in denying that. But last night had been the first time she hadn’t felt any fear while being with him, and that beat every bit of anxiety-filled excitement by far.

She was still basking in her memories when a familiar knock sounded from the door. A second later, Ruff poked her head inside, a relieved expression on her face. “Ah, you’re finally awake, good,” she commented and fully entered the bedroom, carrying one of Astrid’s more casual dresses over her arm. “The King is here and wants to talk to you, so you better hurry.”

“Father’s here?” Astrid asked, bewildered, as she got up. Her father never came to her rooms. If he wanted to talk to her for whatever reason, he usually sent for her to meet him in his office or wherever he saw fit. Her heartbeat quickened as Rachel removed her nightgown and helped her into the dress. Had anyone noticed something last night after all? That she hadn’t been in her bed maybe? Or had the night guard recognised her? Did anyone know she’d spent the night with Hiccup? Braiding her hair seemed to take an eternity; she dreaded learning what her father wanted to talk about, but not knowing was even worse.

Once Ruff declared her presentable, Astrid all but flew out of her bedchamber and into her sitting room. Her father sat at the decorative tea table in one corner, but stood up as she entered.

“Astrid,” he greeted her, relief clear on his face as he took in her appearance. The sight somewhat calmed her; he didn’t seem to be here to reprimand her.

“Good morning, Father,” she replied with a perfect curtsey. “You wanted to see me?”

He gave her a long, scrutinising look that started to make her feel uncomfortable, but eventually, he nodded. “Yes, I… Come, sit down with me, my dear.”

He beckoned her over and Astrid followed obediently, if hesitantly. She still couldn’t make any rhyme or reason to why he was here, but then, keeping his composure at any time and not let others see what was on his mind was something the King was used to. Once they’d sat down, Rachel brought a tray with tea – imported at great expense from the kingdoms to the east – and then left again. Taking a cup and adding honey, Astrid drank the hot brew gratefully, equally to calm her nerves and to have something to do while she waited for her father to start. He took a cup of his own, added honey as well – although less than she had added – and sipped.

“How are you feeling, child?” he finally asked.

Astrid almost choked on her tea, even though the question was harmless, all things considered. How she felt? Wonderful. Fantastic. Brilliant. But she couldn’t very well say so.

“I’m all right, thank you,” she replied with a plain smile.

Again, he scrutinised her closely, but then nodded. “You look all right, too. I’m glad to see that you’ve recovered well.”

Right… Astrid mused. The last time he’d seen her must have been when Eret had carried her back to her rooms after she’d broken down at–

No!

Vehemently, she pushed the thought aside.

So, he was just here to check on her? Warm affection washed like a wave over her, and the smile on her face became truer. “Yes, I have. A good night’s rest can work wonders.” A good night
indeed…

Her father returned her smile, nodding. “That it obviously can.” He briefly averted his gaze and fidgeted slightly in his chair; an amusing sight considering who he was. But Astrid knew the difference between the King and her papa quite well. And right now, it was the later who sat across from her.

“I… I’m here to apologise,” he finally admitted. Astrid’s eyebrows furrowed, and she cocked her head in confusion, but he continued without giving her time to wonder. “I should have respected your wishes yesterday – to stay away from the execution, I mean.”

So, that’s why he was here… Astrid wrapped her arms around herself at the reminder, not able to ignore the pictures in her head this time. No matter how Hiccup’s words last night had changed her attitude toward what had happened, the images would still haunt her for a while.

“I’m really sorry, Astrid,” he went on. “I never thought it would affect you that much.”

“It’s… it’s okay,” she replied weakly. “Thank you for the apology, but I’m fine.”

But this time, her father shook his head. “I… I wish to make it up to you,” he stated. “But… I don’t know how.” Astrid gave him a deadpan look that made him shrug sheepishly. “Daughter dearest, I know you well enough to know you’re not someone that can be bribed or bought with cheap gifts – and besides, I can hardly give you anything that would suit your fancy more than the mount the Sirs Eret brought you.”

Astrid shrugged in wordless acknowledgement, not trusting her voice. Markor was… well, her father was right. The Astrid of a few months before, the one that had known and accepted that she was destined for a politically advantageous and likely loveless match, handed off from father to husband as a piece of a household… that Astrid had looked upon the hope of a House Jag’s horse as a small gasp of freedom, the promise of a few hours with the bars of her gilded cage widened a bit.

But that Astrid was gone.

Her father leaned over and patted her knee. “So… knowing that, and understanding each other...” he reached into his robes with his other hand and pulled out a small piece of parchment. Handing it to her, he said, “I had this drawn up, signed and witnessed before I came here. Just so you know I’m serious.”

Puzzled, she took it, and looked at the writing – and despite herself, her eyes widened.

Written in the flowing script of her father’s personal secretary, with her father’s crabbed signature and personal seal at the bottom, next to the witnessed signatures of the two Grand Dukes present in the city… was a promise of a royal boon. It was fresh; the ink still glistened slightly.

She sat, slightly numb, the parchment dropped to her lap, as he said, “I know it seems trite after what I just put you through, but this is the best I can do. Name your wish, and so long as it is within my power, I will do my best to fulfil it.”

Astrid’s eyes went wide. Hiccup! she almost blurted out. I want Hiccup.

But she stopped herself, just in time for reason to kick in. It wouldn’t be that easy. Even if her father was willing to accept her feelings for Hiccup, that didn’t mean that the King would let the only Princess of the House Royal marry a titleless squire. He couldn’t allow that; half of the greater noble houses would cry insult and possibly revolt – and she might as well put an assassin’s target on Hiccup’s back. No, blurtling out something she couldn’t take back wouldn’t be helpful right
now. Not at all.

Chewing her lips, she stared down into her half-empty teacup and tried to think. How could she use this to—

“You don’t have to decide now,” her father interrupted her frantic thoughts. When she looked up again, there was a genuine smile playing around his lips. “I just… I just want you to know that I’m truly sorry. And I hope you can eventually forgive me.” With those words, he stood up, nodded once to her, and left.

Slowly, Astrid drank the rest of her tea. Her outward appearance was calm, placid, but inside her, her mind was reeling.

This was it. This had to be it! There just had to be a way to use this.

But she couldn’t think about it, not now. She was too wound up by this turn of events. She had to get out, get a clear head. Talking to Hiccup would be good, but she knew that wasn’t possible, not yet. Daniel and the others would be around all the time once they got to the stables; trying to talk to Hiccup in private then would be too dangerous. Well, she would get her chance. And going for the long ride the men had planned for today was a good alternative for now. Riding free and fast, laughing into the wind, that was just what she needed now.

But shouldn’t Daniel have been here to pick her up long ago? Frowning, she glanced at the large window, at the sunlight pouring in. How late was it?

“Ruff?” she called, fighting to sound normal, and rose from her seat. Her maidservant came in, looking curious. “Have you heard anything from Daniel? We were supposed to go to the stables today.”

Ruff cocked her head and gave her a weird look. “No, I haven’t. But I guess they’re there already, considering how late it is. I mean, it’s close to noon, you slept pretty long.”

Cursing inwardly, Astrid chewed her lip before making a decision. “Where’s Tuff?”

“In our rooms, feeding his chicken,” Ruff explained, indicating toward the door that let to their part of Astrid’s elaborate chambers. “Why?”

“Because I want to go to the stables,” she said firmly. “So I need to change and since my brother apparently went without me, I need Tuff to escort me.”

Ruff’s eyes filled with disbelief. “Are you sure? Don’t you think another day to rest would be better? I mean, you nearly slept completely through the entire day now, don’t you think you should take it slowly?”

Astrid swallowed. She hadn’t slept through an entire day, had spent hours lying awake waiting for Ruff to go to bed and then even more hours in Hiccup’s arms. But she couldn’t very well say so.

“Yes, I am sure,” she simply replied, and walked past her maidservant to her dressing room.

While she waited for Ruff, who’d gone to inform her brother, to come and help her dress, Astrid’s eyes fell on her writing desk in a corner of the room. Or, more specifically, onto her music box, still standing where Ruff had placed it the day before. The sight gave her a sting. For so many years now, the tiny dancer and the music had been her companions, her comfort. But now, they were broken and lost to her.
However, it wasn’t in her to feel gloomy. Not with remembering how comforting Hiccup’s arms around her had felt last night. Maybe it was okay that the box was lost to her now. Maybe she didn’t need her old toy anymore to comfort her. She had Hiccup now, after all.

And yet, she didn’t want to simply discard of the box. Walking over to her desk, she picked the box up and placed it back into her ‘treasure chest’, a small gilded coffer with a lock. It had been another gift from uncle Oswald and contained her personal little treasures; a few pieces of rarely used jewelry, a couple of long white swan feathers, the arrowhead from the arrow with which she’d first hit the bullseye of the target, and a small woollen doll. That last one had been a gift from her mother, crocheted by her own hands in the months before her birth. The doll wore strange, foreign clothes; a brown skirt that barely reached to her knees, a red shirt with short sleeves, brown bracers covering her forearms instead of gloves, and on her shoulders was what looked as if it was supposed to be a pair of metal pauldrons. Astrid had always wondered about the clothes, but she’d never found an answer.

She placed the music box inside, but then remembered another treasure she now owned. Carefully, she took the precious parchment her father had given her and put it next to the remains of the music box. Maybe the parchment itself was more a formality than anything else, a way to keep the King from breaking the promise that her father had made in private. In general, Astrid didn’t believe this signed promise was necessary, but given that her wish would probably upset him... Yeah, it was good that she had it. But at the end of it, she’d have Hiccup, and that made it incredibly valuable. The thought brought a new smile to her lips, as she remembered once again how secure he made her feel, with his arms around her, his lips on hers, or simply with his scent of leather, hay, and wind in her nose. Oh, what would she give if he could be here right now…

But she at least had something of him here. Astrid perked her head up and listened to the voices of the twins that echoed through her rooms; Tuff’s complaining about having to hike again, and Ruff reprimanding him and offering him to swap for a day in case he wanted to clean the pile of Astrid’s dresses instead.

Reassured that she still had a couple of unobserved minutes, Astrid rushed to her secret stash of clothes, hidden behind one of the wardrobes and dug out Hiccup’s tunic. Giggling, she buried her face in the rough fabric and inhaled deeply before she returned to her treasure chest. The tunic would be safer there; Ruff knew about those hidden clothes after all, even if she usually pretended otherwise. Astrid folded the tunic and placed it beneath the music box and the parchment before closing the lid.

Before she locked the coffer again, however, another thought occurred to her. Quickly, she retrieved a necklace from that collection of unused jewellery, removed the pendant, and, after finally locking the coffer, attached the key to the chain and hung it around her neck. So far, her treasure chest mostly held items of personal value, but now, with the physical reminder of both her father’s promise and those hours she’d spend with Hiccup… Yes, it would be better to make sure that nobody but her had access.

The weight and the sensation of cool metal on her skin was unfamiliar, but not unpleasant, the key hanging just above that spot where she felt her connection to Hiccup anyway. It brought another dreamy smile to her lips, one that wouldn’t go away even as Ruff finally helped her change into one of her warm and sturdy riding dresses and rearranged her braids so they wouldn’t get tangled too much.

Once she was ready to go, she felt like she couldn’t go fast enough. Urging Tuff on to go faster felt like a déjà vu to Astrid. This time though, they weren’t hurrying through dimly lit corridors, but along the familiar path to the outer stables. Smiling contently, Astrid remembered how she’d
walked this way only hours before, but even in the dark of night, she hadn’t tripped even once. Now, in the full glare of the sun, a rare cloudless early winter day shining down brightly on them, it was even harder to understand why Tuff had to concentrate on avoiding roots and rocks so much. It was even comical, if one ignored how slow he was.

Taking a deep breath, Astrid kept herself from snapping at her warder. This was just how he was, had always had been, ever since she could remember, and probably always would be. A little odd, a little distracted, a little self-centred sometimes, but always loyal and reliable, always there when she needed him, always good for a joke or a prank, and never treating her with the deference most other servants used.

But then, why would he? He and Ruff had known her since the day of her birth, since their mother had become her wet nurse and later her nursemaid and her first governess. For a short while, Astrid had thought of them more as her siblings than of Daniel. There never really had been a conscious decision about them becoming her servants, it had just happened. They’d always cared for her in a way, this was only the natural expansion.

So, when Tuff grumbled about having to hike again, she didn’t reprimand him. Instead, she waited patiently, running her fingers over the hidden key beneath her dress and letting her gaze wander to the small lake at the edge of the forest where a couple of swans glided over the calm surface, as she tried to order her thoughts.

It all boiled down to one question, really. What would need to happen for Hiccup to be allowed to openly court her? What could she wish for?

She pursed her lips in thought and then nodded decisively. He would need to regain his title, whichever one it was, regaining his rank and influence. He’d once implied there was a way, but he’d never explained and she’d never asked. The pain in his eyes last night, when they’d talked about his leg, had been enough again to keep her from digging deeper into his past, even though she’d been dying to hear more about dragons. They were so rare around here; she’d only ever seen one flying high above in the sky a couple of times.

But that was not the point… She grimaced slightly at the thought of bringing up his past, knowing it would hurt him. But she couldn’t help and support him if she didn’t know.

Well, there weren’t that many options though, were there? Her current assumption was that he was one of the titleless nobles whose lands had been stolen out from under them in the title disputes. It would explain a lot; Eret the Elder’s outburst about Hiccup’s father being a failure – to protect their holding – and Hiccup’s reluctance to talk about it. And if that was the case... well, while her father would grumble a fair bit, getting Daniel to take the army on a detour to Hiccup’s demesne, kick out the usurper, and put Hiccup back where he belonged would be in her father’s power, so–

“Are you coming, or do you just want to stand here all day? Because in that case, I’ll go get a picnic.”

Astrid blinked at Tuff; he’d somehow passed her and now stood a small distance ahead. He had one eyebrow raised, arms crossed, and Astrid quickly hurried after him. “Yes, I was… just a little distracted.”

“Yeah, I saw you staring at those swans again,” Tuff commented dryly. “One could think you like these birds.”

Astrid snorted, but didn’t even bother to reply. Tuff knew very well how much she adored swans. They were beautiful and held a grace that seemed so effortless; something Astrid deeply envied
them, as she always considered appearing graceful and poised a demanding chore. But even more than that, she envied them their freedom. With their strong wings, they were able to fly wherever they wanted, and nobody would ever dare to stop them, because whoever dared to try would find himself attacked by a fierce opponent. Oh, what would she give to be like that too…

She walked the rest of the way in silence, the only sounds the songs of the birds and Tuff’s occasional low complaining. She was a bit nervous, both because she wasn’t sure how treating Hiccup just like a friend after last night would work and because she hoped Daniel and the others hadn’t yet left for their ride. But at least one of those worries dissolved the moment she crossed the last hill and the stables came in sight.

She spotted Eret and Dagur right away, the later already sitting in Squish’s saddle while the former was holding the reins to both the buckskin and his own black steed. They seemed to be chatting lightly, but Eret caught sight of her quickly and the relief on his face was visible even from this distance.

“Ho, Swanja,” he called out as she quickly crossed the remaining distance. “Didn’t expect to see you today. How are you feeling? You look… better.”

Astrid cooed calmingly before nearing Crusher and placing a hand on the stallion’s broad neck. “Thanks, I’m feeling better, too,” she reassured him. He, too, had last seen her after her breakdown, after all. “Except that I’m angry at you all for trying to leave me behind,” she added in a teasing voice that made both men grin.

“Glad to see you regained your wit already,” Eret teased, winking. But Astrid saw the honest relief on both his and Dagur’s face. They’d been truly worried for her.

“And you can be sure to see more of it later,” she replied. “But now, I need to get Markor ready, before you ride away from me after all.”

She left them standing and approached the stables, but didn’t make it inside. Before she knew it, two strong arms were around her, crushing her to a broad chest. Astrid froze, fearing how Eret and Dagur would react to such a greeting, how Daniel would react if he noticed. But then, she realised her mistake. Those weren’t Hiccup’s arms.

“Astrid!” Daniel exclaimed, squeezing her a little tighter and then retreated to look at her. “You’re up. I’m sorry, I didn’t think…” He took in her appearance and visibly relaxed as he found no traces of sorrow or anxiety in her features. Calmer, he added, “I thought you’d need more time. But I’m incredibly glad to see that I was wrong.” His eyes wandered past her to where Tuff audibly caught his breath as if he’d sprinted the whole way. “Thanks, Tuff. I’ll take over now.”

Tuff, waving his hands incoherently, wheezed, “’s fine. I’ll just… rest here for a minute. Oh, my back, I’m getting old. Seriously, why does it have to be this stable…”

Everyone chuckled at Tuff’s exaggerated complaining, used to it since their childhood and knowing that it was only halfway serious at best.

“We were about to get started,” Daniel turned his attention back to Astrid. “But getting Markor ready shouldn’t take that long. Heh, Hiccup? Can you help out here?”

The last words, he’d called back to the stable’s entrance, and Astrid turned her head just in time to spot Hiccup as he appeared in the door. His face noticeably lit up as he saw her, and although Astrid felt similarly, it also made her heart drop to her stomach. She tensed as Daniel turned to look at Hiccup too, who managed to school his expression just in time to not draw attention.
However, what *drew* Daniel’s attention was her reaction. He barely glanced at Hiccup before his eyes were back on Astrid, scrutinising her as she forced herself to relax again. His eyebrows furrowed and his eyes visibly clouded with worries. A second later, his shoulders straightened and he turned toward Hiccup after all. “Hiccup, can you take over holding Squish and Crusher? So that Eret can help to get Markor ready.”

“Of course, Milord,” Hiccup replied dutifully. With sure strides, he walked toward Eret, but paused as he walked past them. “It... It’s good to see you up and well, Milady.”

“Thanks, Hiccup,” she replied with no other visible reaction than a polite smile. Not working with Hiccup was a bit disappointing, but with Daniel watching her so closely, it was probably for the better. And feeling the key on her skin and remembering how Hiccup’s warm lips had moved with hers last night was enough to keep her in a good mood anyway.

Chapter End Notes

So, yes, shorter chapter... but hopefully still interesting enough?

And I forget, but... did anyone notice the variation of the original starter scene a few chapters back? Funny how things change sometimes...^^
We're Walking The Wire

Chapter Notes

So, another relatively short one. I'm not sure this chapter ended up quite as I wanted it, but I think it's close. Probably... whatever... Hope you like it :)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It felt like flying.

The speed. The wind blowing into her face and tearing at her hair and dress. The sense of freedom.

Astrid couldn’t help the giddy laughter that bubbled up inside her and was ripped away from her mouth by the wind as it emerged. Riding like this, fast and without restraints, was amazing.

“Faster, boy!” she spurred Markor on as she heard the sound of galloping hooves far too close behind her. “They won’t get us.” She pressed her calves tighter to the gelding’s flanks, urging him to go faster as they reached a straighter part of the path that wound along Lake Vola’s shores. A few minutes later, she raised her fist in a cry of joy as they were the first to reach the agreed-upon goal – the crossroad from where the path split into several directions.

Catching her breath, she patted Markor’s neck and turned to look at where the men were fast approaching. Eret was the first, closely followed by Daniel and Hiccup who went head to head, and with Dagur being the last by far.

“I still say that’s cheating,” he complained when he finally reached them. “Astrid is far lighter than the rest of us; of course her horse is the fastest. It has less weight to carry.”

“You do know that your stallions are bigger and stronger to make up for that, right?” Astrid retorted cheerfully, gladly winding him up a bit more.

“Besides, by that logic Hiccup would be right behind her, as skinny as he is,” Eret threw in, the rush of their race painting a wide grin on his tattooed face.

Hiccup snorted. “I’m glad that Cassie is able to keep up with all your high-strung horses at all,” he replied, patting his mare affectionately. The motion made butterflies rise in Astrid’s stomach as she remembered all too well how gentle his touch could be. She was glad that the cool air and the race had made her face all red anyway, so nobody would notice her blush.

“You’re all just mean,” Dagur pouted, but joined in on the general laughter a moment later.

“Alright, to nobody’s surprise Astrid is the winner. As usual,” Daniel declared, eyes glinting. “And no, Dagur, you can’t call for a rematch, not again.” He guided Trample past them toward a narrow path that let into the nearby forest. “From here on, the path isn’t suitable for high speed anymore. I want to go to our meadow; it’s been ages since we’ve been there.”

Astrid felt a wide grin tug at her lips and saw the same expressions on Dagur’s and Eret’s faces. Their meadow was truly nothing more than that, a small meadow surrounded by miles and miles of the royal forest. And it wasn’t really their meadow either. Many a hunter or traveller used it occasionally to make camp, as Astrid’s grandfather had loosened the laws and restrictions on what
had been the old king’s private hunting preserve, allowing peasantry a limited right to hunt, gather and harvest from the massive forest under supervision from the wardens. But it was a place they’d often been to when they’d been younger, when Dagur, Eret, and Snotlout had spent their summers in the castle, when life in general had been simpler. She wondered if they’d arrive and find it occupied or not; in the past, that had meant getting to share venison or rabbit and some interesting stories with her father’s subjects.

“As the leafless branches closed above them, Astrid couldn’t help but relax somehow. The forest around them felt like a comfortable blanket in a way. The scent of earth and trees, the sounds of birds chirping, of small animals in the brushwood, and the murmuring of a distant stream. It was perfect. Peaceful. A part of her missed the rush of speed from before, but Daniel was right. This was not a good path for racing anymore; with roots and other tripping hazards of all kinds possibly lurking everywhere. Nobody wanted to lose their horse because of a broken leg, after all.

It took them over an hour of unhurried riding before they reached their goal. The meadow at the end of the winding path was even smaller than she remembered, but even though she hadn't been here in years, Astrid immediately felt a soothing sense of familiarity. There was the stream she’d heard earlier, now visible at the treeline, the stone circle in the middle that could be used as a firepit, and the bigger rocks placed around it to sit on. It was a place out of a simpler life, a life where she hadn't needed to be a noble lady all the time, much less the First Lady of the Kingdom.

On that rock there, she’d once clapped along as a trio of travelling minstrels who had been camping here had sung and played music; for all that their clothes had made them of the lower sorts, travelling to entertain the peasants, they had cheered her twelve-year-old-self immensely. For a short moment, she even mourned not having brought her bow and arrows as those memories conjured up others; of sneaking around trees and hunting down a rabbit or two to roast over the fire. She missed how the forests could provide everything one really needed. But then, with their saddlebacks packed with food, it really wasn't necessary to hunt today. And hunting just for sports had never been appealing to her.

“Oh, wow. This place really hasn't changed a bit,” Dagur noted. “Except that it used to be greener and warmer.”

“You know, that could be because it usually was at least late spring when we came here,” Eret countered dryly. Despite their words there were fond smiles all around.

“Right. Let's see if we can start a fire,” Daniel said as he dismounted, beaming at the campsite; it was one of his favourite places, Astrid knew. “We might not need it for the food, but it certainly would help against the cold.”

They all followed his example, dismounting and taking a moment to let their legs get used to solid ground again.

“Woodpile’s empty,” Dagur noted as he stretched out his legs.

“Of course it is,” Eret replied. “The wardens wouldn’t let good firewood sit out to rot over the
winter."

Astrid ignored their banter and was about to take off Markor’s bridle and secure him to a tree, when Hiccup approached her.

“May I tend to your horse for you, Milady?” he asked after having stopped a few feet away from her – a safe distance.

“Of course. Thank you, Hiccup,” she accepted his offer – it was only appropriate, after all. Just seeing him, his warm smile, made her heart beat faster, and as always him using this form of address – that meant so much more coming from him – made her tingle all over. But at the same time, it was for once easy not to react. They would get their time, this night or maybe the next, depending on when she got the chance to again sneak away. She’d been right, treating him normal was much easier with that thought in the back of her mind.

She handed Hiccup the reins and then turned to walk over to the small stone circle, inspecting the fireplace with practised eyes. It obviously had been used occasionally, but the last time hadn’t been in weeks, as the coals were cold and the depression covered in dirt and windblown leaves. Carefully tugging her thick skirt beneath her knees, she knelt down and began to clean the place, sorting smaller twigs and dried leaves on piles for the fire later.

“Some lessons stick, I guess?” sounded Daniel’s voice to her, and she looked at where he stood a step beside her.

Astrid shrugged, wiping her forehead with the sleeve of her dress. “I guess so. Odin knows I’ve prepared enough firepits by now – you wouldn’t let me do much else, after all.”

Her brother looked a little sheepishly at that. “Well, making my baby-sister gather heavy firewood when we had enough strong arms around... didn’t seem like the logical choice,” he defended his past self.

Rolling her eyes, she snorted “You know I could have done it anyway, right?”

“Yeah…” he admitted reluctantly, then tried another approach. “But on the other hand, Dagur can’t light a fire to save his life – and I have witnesses to the literal truth of that statement.”

“And neither can you,” came her deadpan retort. If he’d brought up this excuse to save his dignity, he’d failed. Because this, too, was the simple truth. With all the skills and talents her brother was blessed with, starting or taking care of a fire wasn’t one of them.

“Aaand that’s my cue,” he laughed. He turned, presumably to beckon Dagur and Eret over for their usual tour through the woods for firewood; normally it was to restock the woodpile, but today they’d need it for the fire in the first place. It might have been years, but the routine still stuck. So it somewhat surprised Astrid when she caught Daniel pausing from the corner of her eye, before he called, “Hoy, Eret, Dagur? Think you can get enough wood on your own?”

Astrid looked up, surprised, and saw Dagur and Eret share an equally puzzled look. “Sure,” came Eret’s reply a few seconds later. “Afraid you might sprain your royal ankle?”

“Haha, funny,” Daniel grumbled with no real anger. “No, I’m going to keep Astrid company.”

Eret and Dagur shared another knowing look, and Astrid noticed Eret fleetingly glance at where Hiccup was still busy tending to the horses. She suppressed a sigh. Apparently, she would have to live with Daniel being in his overprotective big brother mode for a while now. But he meant it well, she knew that, even if the thought of needing protection from Hiccup of all people was
hilarious. But then, it probably was better not to be left alone with him anyway, not when they
didn’t know when the others would return.


Dagur cackled, “Bring it!” and then followed Eret out of sight into the trees.

Suppressing an impish grin, Astrid gazed after them. She was sure that these two wouldn’t mind
being alone in the forest. Not at all. Their loud bantering was audible for a little while longer,
making those staying behind chuckle; even Hiccup’s laughter was audible from where he tended to
Squish right now. Glancing in his direction, Astrid saw him shaking his head in amusement, but
she also caught a telling smirk playing around his lips. It made her wonder whether he, too, knew.

“Okay, what is it about these firepits now?” Daniel drew her attention, critically looking down at
the stone circle. “Maybe I’ll learn how to build a fire eventually…”

Chuckling, Astrid showed him how to clean out the firepit from the autumn leaves that had blown
in, and how to make a shallow depression by brushing dust and ashes to the sides so the fire would
be protected from the wind. Then she made him help her gather dry leaves, bark, grass, and sticks
to use as tinder.

All the while, she was aware of Hiccup working close by, watching them occasionally, and
eventually, he came to help too. But again, he kept a safe distance and she did the same, working
all by themselves instead of as close as possible – as they probably would have done only a couple
of days ago. Once more, she marvelled at how simple it suddenly was.

And it was fun. By the time a low fire was burning, her hands and knees were dirty with soil and
grass stains, but she had a serene smile on her lips, feeling accomplished and free. Dreamily, she
gazed into the dancing flames, watching as they slowly grew, lapping at the bigger twigs. Once
Eret and Dagur came back, the fire would be ready for the bigger logs and provide a comfortable
space to rest and relax in.

The touch came unexpectedly.

With a yelp, Astrid flinched as a broad hand landed on her shoulder. Out of nowhere, she thought
she heard shrill laughter, smelled a wave of perfume, and the flash of memory made her tremble
before her mind registered the voice.

“Hey, here’s a blanket in case you–” Daniel broke off at her reaction. His hand vanished from her
shoulder, and before she’d caught herself again he was crouching in front of her. Carefully, he took
her hands in his, a calming gesture. His eyes locked on hers, momentarily wide with fear, as she
fought down the sense of panic. It was just Daniel. Nobody was attacking her. She was safe.

“Thanks,” she breathed, unwinding her hands from his to reach for the blanket he’d dropped into
the grass beside her. Gratefully, she wrapped it around her trembling shoulders, even though she
knew perfectly well that the sudden chill she felt wasn’t caused by the cool wind around them.

“I’m sorry, Astrid,” Daniel murmured, sorrow and concern in his eyes. He looked as if he wanted
to say more, but Astrid waved him off.

She wanted to smile and tell him that she was fine, but her brother deserved better than that. “I
know,” she whispered instead. “I’ll be all right. I’m just a little… jumpy, I guess.” she tried a weak
twitch of her lips, one that wasn’t intending to hide how she felt or to placate him. They both knew
better after all.
A little while later, the five of them sat gathered around the now brightly bristling campfire and enjoyed their well-earned meal of cheese, cold meat, sweet bread, and watered wine. Having forgone regular meals today, the long ride out here – and in Eret’s and Dagur’s case having hiked the forest, no matter how cheerful they’d been upon their return – had made them all ravenously hungry, and for several minutes, nothing could be heard but content chewing and gulping.

“Ah, being among friends like this is fantastic,” Dagur eventually commented, stretching elaborately, and then leant back against the wide stone he and Eret shared. “No doubts, no second thoughts, no need to constantly watch out for hidden insults or knives…” His voice had its usual joking swing, but there was also a more serious note in it that made him sound a little melancholically.

Absently, Astrid pondered whether to reach for another piece of bread, but deciding against it. “Now, that sounds pretty dreadful,” she teased, trying to lighten his mood. “As if you don’t have any friends at all.”

Dagur snorted. “As a matter of fact, you don’t have friends in the south. Not really. You’ve just seen how traitorous ‘loyal vassals’ can be, now imagine trying to find friends among such people. Granted, not everyone is that bad, but still…” He trailed off, kicking a pebble into the fire before Eret placed a comforting hand on his shoulder. “Anyway, it’s no fun at all,” he eventually continued, throwing Eret a grateful glance. “With the prospering farms and the flourishing trade with the Southern Nations, many noblemen of lower rank are gaining influence and wealth beyond their titles. The same goes for some merchants, even, and a fair few of those are marrying into the nobility.”

Eret nodded. “Without that much wealth around, rivalry isn’t that much of a problem in Eastervale, not to mention the Northern Wilderness. That’s the difference, I guess. People are… content with what they have. And the people in Westhill definitely have other problems.”

“Exactly. But around Southshore, you can’t make a single step without getting reminded of just how wealthy everyone around is; it’s all a display of silk, jewels, silver, gold... You can’t have a meal without it being doused in the most expensive imported spices, some of the latest fashions need expensive dyes, and let’s not even get started on the tea and this new imported drink, this coffee... although that last one’s Dad’s fault,” Dagur groused. “He likes it and that sets the fashion. But everyone seems to be keen on claiming as much of that wealth – and the power that comes with it – as they can. They all want to climb as high as possible, until–” He broke off, biting his lip and shaking his head.

Not for the first time, Astrid considered how much more she actually learned about the Kingdom when she was away from her governesses. To her annoyance, she wouldn’t be able to avoid them tomorrow though, as she was to at least spend one day per week being tutored. However, she didn’t expect to learn anything other than maybe another poem or possibly how to stitch a new pattern. Hearing about the Kingdom’s politics and problems was so much more interesting, even though she didn’t understand every bit.

“Well, then I hope this Lord Gregson your father choose as new Count Ravenledge proves to be the right choice,” Daniel continued, sighing. “The Gods know these people deserve a worthy leader after all they’ve been through.”

This, however, made Dagur grin. “Ulf Gregson? There’s no need to worry about him, trust me. He’s a decent man. In his case, we actually know him and don’t need to rely on second- or even third-hand reports. He might not be the most diligent man under Odin’s reign, but he’s
At that, Hiccup perked his head up. “So, you’ve already chosen a successor for County Ravenledge?” he asked curiously, actually participating in the conversation for the first time, and Astrid gladly used this chance to look at him without it seeming suspicious. He looked curious, but she thought she also noticed a slight tension in his features.

“At that, you weren’t there anymore when we talked this through,” Daniel said, turning his attention to Hiccup as well. “We talked on it last night.”

“At length,” Dagur groused.

“Aye, but better to do it right than fast, brother,” Daniel said. “The longer the office is vacant, the more trouble it’ll attract – some people would do anything for a title, much less a prime one like Ravenledge – we owe it to the people there to not rush through a decision on who will rule them for the rest of his life like it was a choice of salad before the roast.”

“I see,” Hiccup nodded, frowning slightly as he returned his attention to his meal.

“I agree with Dagur,” Eret mumbled past a mouthful of bread, swallowed, and added, “I think Lord Gregson is a good choice. I mean, I would have had another suggestion… But in the end, it’s probably better to give the county to a native Southerner. And I’ve met the man a couple of times when visiting Southshore and I agree with Dag. He’s as honest a soul as they come. It just baffled me how long it actually took to decide on him. I mean, wasn’t he the first suggestion anyway? Why it took three hours to decide then is beyond me. Honestly, we could have slept so much longer instead…”

At that Dagur barked a laugh. “Politics, eh? Isn’t it a wonderful thing? But believe me, three hours is nothing. Just wait until you have to handle taxes. That can take days of barely any sleep at all.”

“Try to see it as training,” Daniel chuckled. “There will be lots of nights coming where we’ll stay up that long.” He raised a hand and started counting off on his fingers. “The common accolade tomorrow. Dagur’s accolade the day after. Midwinter. That trip to the tavern we wanted to make before I leave… Lots of nights to stay up late.”

Groaning, Eret dropped his head. “And lots of reasons to dress up too. Now, I’m twice as glad that we made this trip today. At least we have the tavern to look forward to.” He shuddered exaggeratedly, which made everyone laugh before a comfortable silence fell over the meadow.

Leaning back against the rock, Astrid gazed up at the darkening sky. Sparks of the fire occasionally rose up into the upcoming night, like fireflies, letting her mind wander. She agreed with Eret; she was incredibly glad that they’d made this trip today, that she’d decided to join the men, and that she’d made it to the stables in time to join them. Because, no matter how special this day was, compared to her usual life, the… normalcy of it all was incredibly comfortable to her.

She would gladly enjoy it all for a little while longer, just to add it to the memories from younger days. One of those hunting trips their father had taken them on when they’d been younger, or an exploration trip like those she and her brothers had made occasionally. Just being out in the forest for a couple of days, breathing freely. And preferably with only Hiccup to keep her company… A soft smile tugged at her lips at that image. Oh, what would she give for such an opportunity... But there was no way for her to do that, and such thoughts could only put him in danger.

But still...
She laid back on the stone, not worried about the decorousness of the action, and watched the clouds go by.

“We should go back,” Daniel stated after a while, reasonably yet reluctantly. “It’s getting late, and we’d better reach the road again before it gets too dark.”

Dagur grumbled, but Hiccup’s calm comment about how the horses needed at least some light to make it through the woods quickly had him up on his feet and packing up their things alongside the rest of them. Within minutes, they were ready to go.

The way back to the castle took longer than the ride out, as they went without racing each other, with everyone growing tired and the sun dimming. They all might have slept long this morning, but that didn’t mean they’d slept much. Regretfully, she accepted that she probably would need to actually stay in bed tonight.

“I kinda wish we could simply sack out here too,” Eret mumbled after they’d reached the stables and quickly tended to the horses. “Just rolling out a blanket and sleeping in the straw, without having to walk the whole way back…” His eye had a dreamy shimmer, one that Astrid could sympathise with all too well. She wanted to stay here, too...

“I don’t know.” Dagur eyed the straw critically. “Isn’t that… a bit scratchy and all?”

“Not once you put a blanket over it,” Hiccup commented, making a show of making his bed and lying down, a cheeky grin playing around his lips. “Ah, yes. Don't think I'll get up today again.”

Eret threw him a mockingly dark glare, but then chuckled and shook his head. “You really are the lucky one tonight. Until tomorrow, Hiccup. And don’t forget, we have sword training at the garrison.”

“Yeah, I'll be there,” he yawned exaggeratedly.

Daniel chuckled. “Right then. Good night, Hiccup. See you tomorrow, hopefully after a good night's rest, for once.”

“A night's rest indeed sounds good,” Astrid agreed, throwing Hiccup a quick glance. “Good night, Hiccup.”

“Good night, Milady.”

Astrid turned and followed Eret out of the stables, Daniel and Dagur right behind her. She felt a little sad at the prospect of not spending this night with Hiccup again. But the short shared glance just now had been enough communication on that point; they both couldn't afford to spend yet another night awake, especially not when Hiccup had to be up and at the garrison in time to fulfil his duties as Eret's squire.

They would have to wait for a better chance, but that was all right. This day had been wonderful, but equally important to her was how interacting with Hiccup had worked out. They’d been walking a thin line between their desire to be close to each other and the demanded caution. But now that this new possibility had presented itself to them... Now, it seemed manageable, easy even.

For the moment, at least.
Chapter End Notes

As I said, relatively short... And I told you, it would become a little calmer, right? Ah, but there are so many things in here... :/ And I can't say anything... xD
Born To Be Yours

Chapter Notes

First of all a friendly reminder that I’m going to participate in this year’s NaNoWriMo, so there won’t be any updates in November… presumably. As far as I can tell so far, this won’t leave us at a horrible cliffhanger.

This chapter’s title comes, for once, from another song. it’s not ‘Walking The Wire’ like the last… 4? chapters, but ‘Born To Be Yours’ also by Imagine Dragons. As I said, there are going to be many titles from their lyrics… ^^ They just fit so wonderfully.

Further, I also said that this second part is about development. We’ve reached a part now that’s important to me and I also think it’s important for the characters. I do hope that it won’t become too boring for you, but, well… It’s going to happen this way.

Also… another friendly reminder that this is an E-rating… eventually ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Her hands in his hair were maddening.

Hiccup couldn't help the deep groan rumbling through his throat as her fingernails scraped over his scalp, her mouth robbing him of his breath and every coherent thought. She was so close, perched across his lap, her chest aligned with his. And yet she wasn’t close enough.

During the last few weeks, their stolen minutes, there always had been the need for caution, for holding back in order not to reveal anything. But here and now, hidden in the stables at night, she was kissing him with a fervour that mirrored his own desire, and it simply wasn't in him not to respond to her. His hands were roaming around her waist and up her back, holding her tight, feeling her, hungry for every bit of contact he could get.

And it still wasn’t enough.

Gods, how would they make it through months of separation, when only this one day had again been almost more than they could bear?

But he didn’t want to think about that, not now. Now, she was here, in his arms, making these alluring little noises as her tongue caressed the inside of his mouth, and he simply couldn't bring himself to stop her. He wanted her, there was no point in denying that. But it was so much more than the simple desire he’d felt before, the sort of need that called for a visit to the Ástir... No, not at all. She was special. He didn’t just want her, he wanted to know her, all of her. Her soul, her mind, her body. He already knew her soul, deeply woven into his, and he learned more about her mind with every day. But he also wanted to map her body with his hands and mouth, find every freckle and scar, memorise where she was ticklish, trace the small mounds of her spine with his fingers without the barrier of silk and linen... He wanted to taste her, wanted to feel her skin on skin, wanted to be one with her in every way possible.
The thought alone made him groan again, his fingers twitching to hold her tighter. She reacted by pulling herself even closer, her body rubbing against his in the most wonderful ways. Tearing his mouth away from hers, he let his lips glide down her pale neck, kissing, licking, and nibbling at her sensitive skin, listening to her low moans and gasps as he inhaled her potent scent of mayweed and sunshine. Gods, she smelled so good... Entirely on their own volition, his hands glided down her back and along her sides, feeling her lithe body beneath the simple fabric, before they wandered further still along her thighs, ready to reach beneath her skirt, to lift her up a bit, to get into a more comfortable position, and--

With a desperate moan, he lifted his hand back up to her arms. He had to stop this.

Now!

.o O o .

Astrid couldn’t get enough of him.

The night without him after their day on the meadow had been bearable; she’d been comfortably exhausted by spending the entire day outside, and the memories of the previous night along with the warm glow in her chest had been enough to keep a smile on her lips as she fell asleep.

Today, though, had been horribly long, but now, at least, it was over. Now, she was here, in his arms, feeling his hands, his warmth, this warm glow in her belly, and couldn’t be happier. Here, she felt as if the tension of the day simply peeled off of her, washed away by his presence and by his touch, by his tongue and his lips moving with hers. And she couldn’t get enough.

With her fingers buried in his thick soft locks, she pulled herself closer to him, to the warmth of his body and to the feeling of security he gave her. Nothing ever felt so right as kissing Hiccup like this, as letting their bodies and minds melt together. His hands on her thighs made her shiver, but in a good way, in a way that made her want more, even though she had no idea what more could be. There was no way she could think of how they could get closer, no way how their kiss could become deeper. All she knew was that these kisses weren’t enough.

But instead of more, Hiccup suddenly pulled away from her. His hands were on her arms now, holding her in place as he retreated. He was gasping for air, just like her, his eyes dilated and dark, almost black in the dim light of the single lantern. He gazed at her with a somehow pained expression before he leaned his forehead against hers, eyes pressed shut.

“Oh, Astrid,” he breathed, sounding weirdly agonised.

Astrid wasn’t sure what to do, couldn’t do anything except still clinging to him. Why had he stopped? She didn’t want to stop, wanted more of his lips, of his touch, of him. She enjoyed kissing him too much to stop just yet, and she’d thought... she’d thought he was enjoying it too.

Turning her head a little, she tried to reach his lips once again, but he moved away, obviously on purpose, and instead pulled her against his chest and into a comfortable embrace. With a sigh, she complied and snuggled against him. This was good too, resting her head on his shoulder and feeling his warm breath on her neck.

But it wasn’t quite what she wanted right now. She wanted... She didn’t even know what she wanted. Just more.

.o O o .
Odin, he really needed to get in control of himself!

Hiccup was vaguely aware of the irony – invoking Odin, god of berserkers, for self-control – but it seemed safer than calling Freya’s attention, given the circumstances. His mind was overflowing with thoughts about how good she smelled and how much he enjoyed the little noises she made, and he couldn’t afford thoughts like these right now. He couldn’t follow that road, he simply couldn’t. The rules were clear, and he wouldn’t break them; no matter how much he wanted to, no matter how much he thought she might want to.

“How was your day?” Hiccup asked after a short pause. His voice was deeper than usual, rougher; even he noticed that. The question felt oddly formal after their heated kisses, but truth be told there hadn’t been the chance to ask before. From the moment she’d entered the stables, their mouths had been too busy to talk.

“How was your day?” he murmured, tugging a loose strand of her hair back behind her ear. It was the only thing he could do, even though he would have loved to run his fingers through her long tresses, to feel their silky texture beneath his skin. Someday, he told himself.

She returned his smile and leaned into his hand. “This morning, I had a scheduled meeting with my governess,” she began. Hiccup nodded; he’d heard about that already at the fighting practice. “And I thought we’d spend the day in my sitting room, refining my embroidery and making polite small talk. Which, let me tell you, is a horribly boring waste of time. I mean, I don’t mind the embroidery, it’s just... I wish that I could get an actual tutor to teach me practical things. But we didn’t even do that much.”

He chuckled lightly, shaking his head at her attitude. “What did you do instead?”

“Urgh. It was enough to make me...,” she trailed off and scowled, wrinkling her nose. It looked cute. “We started like normal, doing etiquette lessons, but then Ruff came in – looking so sorry, which was so strange on her – and announced that ‘everything was ready’.”

“That almost sounds dangerous,” he teased.

“And rightly so,” she confirmed. Her words had a light tone in them, as if she was telling a joke, but her body language told something else. She was too tense. “When I asked what was up, my governess said, ‘Milady Astrid, I know that you enjoy spending time with the ducal heirs and the prince while they are here, but they are not the right sort of influence for a proper lady. So, we will be countering that today,’“ she imitated in a ridiculously high and formal voice.

But Hiccup didn’t feel like laughing, and instead, he frowned. “If she knows you as well as I think she should know you... How can she begrudge you doing what you like? That doesn’t seem right to me.”

“It’s her job,” she said, shrugging. “Literally. She has orders to help me become the ‘proper lady’ –
the pretty bauble – I’m supposed to be, and you have to admit, a day like yesterday isn’t helping there.”

“I guess so… But how did she plan to ‘counter their influence’?” Hiccup asked carefully.

A shudder ran down her spine. “She organised a... a high tea. The full formal meal, no less, with imported tea and fresh cakes, pastries, preserves... and made me the hostess!” Astrid cringed. “She just dropped two dozen noble ladies in my lap! So I had to shave my princess mask on my face and smile and nod as they chatted and babbled while I was just... screaming inside...” She trailed off and absentmindedly wrapped her arms around her torso. Her shivering grew stronger as she cast her eyes unseeingly at a spot behind him, clearly remembering earlier events.

“It was too loud. Too stuffy,” she murmured, her arms tightening around herself. “Everyone was talking, everyone gave me compliments, on my dress or my hair, or offered words of sympathy for what happened… But none of those words felt real. Nothing but trite platitudes, you know? And then, there was… there was too much laughter and perfume in the air, and I thought I couldn’t breathe...”

She broke off, trembling, and Hiccup gave in to the urge to pull her against his chest and into a soothing embrace. She made no sound, no surprised gasp or a whimper that might have shown the pain inside her. She just gave in, easily melting against him once more, and he held her until she stopped shaking.

Gods, how much he hated these monsters who had done this to her. She was so strong in will, and yet even the simplest things could make her cower and tremble. If only he could do anything to help her. If only he could be there for her, with her.

But he couldn’t. He had to remain in the background, for both their sakes. That wasn’t much of a problem – except in situations like this, when she was forced to accept what others decided for her, when she didn’t have the authority to decide for herself.

As Lady Haddock she wouldn’t have these problems, he thought bitterly, but quickly chased that thought away again. All the lamenting in the world wouldn’t do them any good, only time and luck would help. Especially now that his one hope for a quick resolution had dissolved into mist...

“It’s over… It’s okay...” he mumbled into her hair after she’d noticeably relaxed, a quiet timeless interval later.

She nodded against his chest. “I know,” she whispered, voice trembling and weak.

“But doesn’t your governess know better?” He couldn’t believe that someone who knew and cared for Astrid had put her through such an ordeal. How could they do that to her?

Astrid shrugged awkwardly in his embrace, then shifted to cuddle even closer. “I don’t think she thought it would be a problem. There were no men, after all,” she added, trying to sound lighter, jokingly even.

But Hiccup wasn’t buying it. “But it’s not just men… Doesn’t she know what happened, didn’t you tell her? I mean–”

“Nobody knows,” she interrupted him. “I told nobody what happened... or at least not as detailed as I told you.”

Hiccup tightened his arms around her as the painful realisation hit him. No matter how well protected she was or how many people around her cared for her, there was nobody she felt safe
enough with to share what really bothered and upset her. Nobody but him. That should make him feel better, but it didn’t. It meant she was incredibly lonely.

For a while, he was quiet and only rubbed her back soothingly. “I’m sorry you had to go through that,” he eventually said in a subdued voice.

Astrid shrugged. “Not your fault,” she mumbled. “But thanks. And I was just overreacting anyway, I think. I mean, I’ve lived through Countess Whitevale’s endless praises of her daughters before, right? The only threat there is offending her by accidentally falling asleep.” She chuckled; it sounded a bit forced to his ears, but he accepted it as her taking control over her emotions again. His strong and brave girl. He pressed his lips to her hair, once more cursing his fate that he couldn’t do more for her.

“So, what were you up to today?” she eventually asked, drawing random patterns onto his tunic-covered chest. The motion made warmth tingle in his belly.

“Nothing special,” he replied, trying to remember anything worth mentioning. “We just spent practically all day at the fighting ground. I conveniently forgot just how demanding and painful such a training can be. I got off easily, just a small cut on my hand, but Eret’s going to have a nice bruise on his upper arm tomorrow, and Dagur sprained his ankle.”

Astrid sat up again, reaching for his right arm. “You got a cut?” she asked, searching his hand without success.

“Just a small one,” he nodded, holding up his left hand instead. It was nothing serious, he’d just been careless, distracted to be precise, and now there was a thin red line crossing the back of his index and middle finger.

She took her time to inspect it nonetheless, eventually gave a satisfied nod, and placed two butterfly kisses onto his knuckles. “Against the pain,” she explained, a smile playing around her lips as she glanced up at him.

Hiccup stared at her for a moment, before he caught himself again. “Does that mean you’ll kiss me wherever I’m hurt?” he asked teasingly, unable to resist. He shouldn’t do this, shouldn’t tempt her, he really, really shouldn’t. His eyes flickered to her alluring lips, wanting to kiss her again, but knew that is was more… more prudent not to. He liked the idea of her kissing away all his pains too much. To distract himself, he added in a more joking tone, “Or did you do the same for Dagur’s ankle? I’m sure he was thrilled at that.”

“Muttonhead,” she snorted, shoving his hand back at him, but couldn’t suppress a giggle as she snuggled back against his chest. “Of course I didn’t; I don’t think he would appreciate my kiss anyway. Besides, he was far too busy grumbling about how unfair it is that all those lower-born boys would get knighted before him.”

He chuckled. “Yeah, that was his main line all day too. That, and how, if his ankle would still hurt tomorrow, he would make Eret carry him down the aisle since it was his fault he’d been hurt in the first place.”

“Oh, now that’s something I’d like to see,” she almost choked biting back her laughter, but then quickly that particular subject. “But yeah, he’d been complaining all the time. No matter how often Daniel explained that switching both events wouldn’t have worked with all those people who only came for the one night for the common accolade or how often Eret reminded him that Snot’s would still be after his, much after. I think he was set on pouting through the entire night.” She was shaking in his arms again, but this time from silent laughter. It felt good.
“But you didn’t stay all that long, right?” he asked, fingers lightly caressing her neck.

“Mmmhhh, no…” she hummed, obviously enjoying his touch. “I admit, I wasn’t exactly looking forward to the accolade, but all in all it wasn’t that bad. Boring, mostly, as it took over an hour to knight all the candidates and I had to stand at attention and smile without anything else to do. But I didn’t need to stay any longer afterwards; my father offered that I could leave right away – Tuff was even already there to escort me back. And I took that offer, of course. I mean, the sooner I went to bed the sooner I could get here.” She chuckled again, then caressed his chest with her fingertips. Her touch was so light this time, it was barely tangible, and yet it was enough to make his heart beat faster. Even after all these weeks, he could hardly believe how much even the simplest of motions from her affected him so much.

“But speaking of my father,” she began after a pause, sounding a lot more serious than before. She sat back up to look at him, and suddenly all playfulness was gone. “He… came to me, yesterday. To apologise and—” she took a deep breath—“and to promise me a favour. A royal boon.”

She gave him a meaningful look, but Hiccup just frowned. What was that supposed to mean? The King adored his daughter, that much he’d already seen from just the few times he’d seen them together. As if he wouldn’t grant her every wish anyway.

“I thought…” Biting her lips, she looked at him, intently but also with a strange caution. “I thought I could use it for you. To get your title back, you know? He said anything that’s within his power, and, well, sending our army to reinstate you in your title and retrieve your lands—”

As soon as he understood where she was going, a warm wave of affection washed through him. That’s what she’d been thinking about? All Gods above, how did he deserve such a wonderful soulmate?

But at the same time, he knew that her idea wouldn’t work. So he interrupted her with a hard kiss, one that mirrored all the desperation her offer had brought up. The reminder of his past, the sheer yearning for her idea to work, and the utter hopelessness of reality.

“That wouldn’t work,” he murmured, voice raspy and thick. “Thank you for the offer, really! But it’s not that easy.”

“But—”

“Believe me,” he interrupted her again. “I’ve spent enough time thinking about it. I’m not sure even the Royal Army, commanded by Daniel as its general and with all of the levies and standing retinues your father could muster would be able to achieve that. But even if they did…” He shook his head and, cupping her face with one hand, gave her an earnest look. “Even if I could reclaim my birthright that way… I… we wouldn’t be alive long enough to see the next full moon. This is not how Tribe Law works.”

There was a pained gleam in her eyes as his words sank in, the faintest shimmer of a tear, and Hiccup hated to have caused it. He wanted her to be happy and safe, wanted her to smile. If only he could do something for her.

“But… but there has to be a way,” she said, pleadingly, as if simply by demanding so it would come true.

A sad smile tugged at his lips as he once more thought about the missed chance from two days before. If he’d participated in that meeting after the trial after all, if he’d been there … Could he have applied for becoming the new Count Ravenledge? Would his noble blood and his upbringing
have been enough to be considered for that position? At the very least, Astrid’s boon could have been used for this purpose, even though he would have preferred to reach that position through his own means. But it was not to be. A new Count Ravenledge was already selected, and no boon in this world, nor any affection for his daughter would make the King break his vow to a good man. He couldn’t.

“I can’t think of one – or at least not one where this boon might come in handy,” he admitted. “But there will be a way. I promise.” His plan still stood, after all. Fulfilling his duties, staying close to Eret and Daniel, doing his best in fighting for the Kingdom of Volantis, and, hopefully, getting rewarded for his deeds. It would work. It had to work! “I have a plan. It will take a little time, but it will work in the end. I’ll do whatever it takes to be allowed to be with you; you have my word for that. And it’s the Gods’ Will, remember? We can’t fail.” As always, this thought was what gave him hope.

But somehow, it didn’t seem to work for Astrid the same way.

“Right,” she murmured, deflating somewhat with her shoulders slumping and her eyes dropping to her hand over his chest. “The Gods’ Will…”

. o O o .

The Gods’ Will…

Was that all?

Astrid had her arms wrapped around herself and stared out of one of the windows in her bedroom. Outside, the sky was quickly turning from orange and pink to light blue. A new day.

Last night, she and Hiccup hadn’t spent quite as much time together as they had during that first night. Just two, maybe three hours, with her having cut her visit short in favour of getting enough sleep so as not to draw attention. It had been enough to sate the incredible longing to be close to him, but it had also left her feeling… confused.

Yes, that was the right word. She was confused. As much as she’d regretted to leave him again, it had also been a relief somehow.

No, that wasn’t true. She hadn’t been relieved, would have liked to stay with him forever. Being with Hiccup was always better than being without him. And yet…

And yet, she’d needed a bit of space, of distance to clear her head. The Gods’ Will, was that all that was between them? So far, she hadn’t thought much about it, had just accepted and enjoyed the strong bond between them. Not being with him, staying away from him, it hurt, but the alleviation of seeing him again was worth everything. She wanted him, all of him, for the rest of her life, forever. His touches, and kisses, and smiles, and jokes. This tingling in her belly, and the warmth and comfort he radiated, his safety.

But why? Was it really just because the Gods wanted it that way?

Her hand landed on her chest, feeling for their connection. She could feel it thrumming soothingly deep in her chest, and she couldn't help the smile that spread across her face just from thinking about him. And yet she wished she could turn it off, just for a moment, just to know what she felt for him without it.

She felt so much… She felt happy just from seeing his face in her mind, she missed him practically at any moment, and there was a strange yearning somewhere deep inside her, a yearning for his
touches and kisses and more. But she had no experience of her own in these matters. She had nothing to compare these feelings to, whereas Hiccup possibly had been in love before. So when he kept bringing up this bond… could it be that it was all that connected them?

Astrid wasn't sure how to feel about this idea. On the one hand… it didn't really matter, did it? It didn't matter where those feelings came from, so long as she felt them so strong and vibrant and beautiful in her heart. What she felt was true, so it didn't make a difference where they came from.

But on the other hand… What was it that connected them at all except that bond? She’d been prepared for a loveless life with a husband of her father’s choosing. Now, she would do anything to be with Hiccup instead, but was it really that much of a difference? Was she destined for a life with a husband of the Gods’ choosing?

Did it even matter whether the Gods chose him for her?

Yes, confused was the right word...

She would have liked to have someone, anyone to talk about it, but she had no idea who she could ask. Surely not one of her brothers or her governess, and she didn’t know that the twins were versed in romantical matters, either. She could try to talk to Hiccup, but…

But what if he felt differently? Last night, he again had pushed her back when all she’d wanted to was to keep kissing him. Did that mean that he didn’t want more? Was that why he kept mentioning the bond? Because that was all that bound him to her? And what was more anyway?

Without her help, her eyes fluttered shut as she remembered how his hands had felt on her thighs, even through the fabric of her dress, of how he’d caressed her neck with his fingers, skin on skin.

Was that the more she wanted? His skin on hers? The initial idea made her cringe as memories of Harold and of that damp alley unbiddenly came to her mind. No, she didn’t want to be touched, not like that, not ever again.

And yet…

Hiccup was different, right? It wouldn’t feel the same with him, surely not. He was caring, warmth and safety.

If only he hadn’t stopped...

“Oh, stop it,” she chided herself after several minutes of more pondering, shaking her head at her own thoughts and rubbing her forehead as if to wipe them away. Those weren’t thoughts she should have, especially not now.

A knock sounded from the door and a moment later, Ruff poked her head inside. “Milady? Your brother is here,” she announced.

Without a word, Astrid followed her maidservant to where Daniel was waiting in her sitting room. And all the while her head was spinning with those confusing and troubling thoughts.

It was maddening.

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Chapter End Notes

Ahh, I love a bit of misunderstandings and insecurities… ^^
What a weird week... I'm sorry this update came so late, but it's a miracle to me how this chapter even came to pass at all amidst all this chaos... but here it is, and I hope you like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Today was always a fun day.

With the common accolade finished the night before, the latest batch of squires would start their formal training today, and as always, Astrid was looking very forward to it. Her job, after all, was to humble them a bit. Or maybe more than just a bit.

They were the usual mix of young noblemen being sent off to earn their knighthoods, and older peasants from the levies who had shown promise or proven themselves on the battlefield. And packing that many partially or untrained young men into the barracks always, always, always resulted in the same sort of high spirits and stupidities born from arrogance. Since they hoped to become knights one day, the same romanticized ideas like every year kept taking root: that they were the best of the best, that women were incapable of fighting, and that only the sword and shield were true fighting skills. Anything else wasn’t worthy of their attention – or at least, they wouldn’t admit so in front of their new peers, for fear of being thought a coward. It was a seductive line of thinking, spread like a rash or cough in their barracks by boasting and peer pressure, and contaminated even those who should already know better. So, for the last five years, since Eret had come down with the same disorder, it was her job to remind them that, oh, a girl with a hunting bow could still kill them quite dead. The whole spectacle was to temper their arrogance and remind them that a peasant with a billhook or hammer was still a lethal threat, but to Astrid it meant that she could show off a little, that, for this one event, she could drop her perfect princess persona – and with her father's approval no less. In most years, he even came to the garrison in some form of disguise just to watch.

“Nervous?” she teased Daniel as they sat in an elegant carriage, travelling over the road to the Garrison’s training grounds.

His eyes kept flickering from the window and the passing city outside to her and back again. But her words made him smirk. “Because of you and your bow? Certainly not,” he replied, leaning back on his bench. “That thing used to be attached to you for so long, sometimes I thought you were even communicating for it to do your bidding.”

His words made her chuckle; it really used to be that way. Gods, how she missed those days, when life was so easy, so simple. Her hand wandered to her chest; to Hiccup’s warm glow inside her and to the key beneath the fabric that symbolised how her life had changed. All those memories of her past she’d locked away, along with the secrets of the present and her hopes for the future.

Her future...

Odin could see it, as could his wife, Frigga. And what they saw would come to pass, and they’d shared that vision with both her and Hiccup. That fate, that vision from the Gods themselves was
immutable... or at least the prestrs and gythjas claimed it was. But there were tales of such prophecies being misinterpreted, or failing to come to pass entirely. But the gods were on their side... weren’t they?

She paused for a moment, and remembered a comment from Fyrir Mala when she’d been younger. The Gods didn’t grant such gifts for the boon of mortals, but for their own purposes. But what reason would Odin and Frigga have for tying her heart and her fate to Hiccup?

Astrid sighed at that thought. She probably would never get an answer to that question. But at least, given the subject of the vision, of a happy life at hearth and home, she was vaguely certain that the guiding hand on her thread of Fate was Frigga’s, not Odin’s. The goddess of motherhood, children, the hearth and home had set her designs on Astrid’s life for whatever reason, and, to be honest, while her earlier feeling of resentment at having a divine matchmaker instead of a royal one had mostly faded, she did have to admit that she had much more trust in Frigga’s insight into her happiness than her father’s.

Idly, she brushed over her chest, where the sense of Hiccup’s soul nestled, safe and warm.

Yes, much more trust indeed.

However, these questions kept bothering her. Why her? Was it because she was a princess? She slumped. Probably. Even the Gods were more interested in her title than for her...

But no... She shoved the thought away. If that were the case, they’d be meddling in Daniel’s life too, as the future king, and – as far as she could tell – they weren’t. No, there was something about her and her soulmate that had attracted the attention of the gods.

But there was no way of telling what that might be. All she could do was trust them and act appropriately, so that her foreseen Fate could actually come to pass. She grimaced. But how to act appropriately? She didn’t know, and this was all so... big!

She wished she had someone to talk to, someone to listen to her and give advice. A friend or confidante whom she could trust and knew about such matter, just someone!

But she couldn’t think of a single person who was that close to her. None of her brothers, obviously. They would know right away who she was talking about, and she couldn’t risk that – not with how over-protective and careful they’d all become. Ruffnut was a loyal friend, but Astrid didn’t know if her maidservant would be able to give her advice in romantic matters, and she, too, would easily be able to connect her questions to Hiccup anyway. There was nobody...

No, she would have to wait until tonight, until she could meet Hiccup in private again, and hopefully gather enough courage to bring up what concerned her. Maybe that would answer at least some of her questions. But for Freya’s sake, she hated being this emotional and confused.

The carriage passed the gate of the garrison, and with a sigh, she built up her Princess-mask. She mentally prepared herself to see Hiccup in only a few moments, his warm eyes and the lovely smile, and ignore him among the crowd of other people. He might not need the elementary training the other squires would receive during the next weeks, wouldn’t even spend any time at all with them since he still had to keep watch over the horses, but he had to be here for this first official day nonetheless.

But when the carriage stopped to drop her and Daniel in front of the fighting ground, Astrid froze. Her eyes had wandered around, taking in all those little details she’d expected. Eret, with his hand
raised in greeting. Dagur, standing to the side with a funny pout. Hiccup, managing to keep his face expressionless, even with that tantalising promise of warmth in his eyes. The dozens of new recruits waiting for their arrival with clear excitement, and the audience that had come to watch.

And Odin’s Tree, standing tall and intimidating next to the garrison, with the now-empty plaza beneath it.

“Astrid?”

Her eyes flickered to Daniel who was already standing next to the carriage. He was holding out one hand to help her down the two steps, and watched her with a worried expression.

Taking a deep breath, she fought down the rising panic. She’d effectively pushed aside the fact that coming to the garrison meant coming to Odin’s Tree again. But everything was fine. Nobody would die here today, least of all Hiccup. It was just this place that upset her, and nothing more. Just a silly place that held no meaning on its own. She could do this!

Slowly, she raised her hand to take Daniel’s, knowing that she would need his support so as not to stumble and make a fool of herself. But when she saw how heavily her hand was trembling, she paused, then slowly shook her head.

Once more, Daniel called her name, but it barely registered in her mind. The tea party yesterday with all those small upsetting things had been bad, but manageable. The accolade in the crowded room hadn’t been much of a problem either. And during the trip to the meadow and the hours with Hiccup last night, she’d barely even thought about those horrible moments at all. She’d thought she was in control again, that this, demonstrating the value of bow and arrow by shooting an apple off of Daniel’s head, would be easy. She’d done it so often already, this was just the same as always.

Except it wasn’t. Being here didn’t feel like all the other times she’d done this, not at all. She was not in control and if she tried her usual trick now, someone might die after all. Someone dear to her.

“I can’t…” she mumbled, eyes gliding over Daniel and once more toward the crowd, Hiccup in their midst, the tree in the distance. “I can’t do it. Not… not after…”

Brows furrowed, Daniel followed her gaze, nodded, and said, “Okay.” Just that and nothing else. He gave the coachman a curt wave. “Bring her back to the castle,” he ordered, and just like that, she was leaving again.

Astrid wasn’t sure what Daniel had seen for him to decide so quickly. The crowd of young men? Surely, those were intimidating to her in a way, though truth be told not enough so to make her flee. Or did he understand that it was the place itself, the Tree and the reminder? Either way, she was grateful for whatever had made him ask not a single question.

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By the time she’d returned to the castle, Astrid had calmed down again. Her hand, pressed to her chest where it felt best anyway, wasn’t trembling anymore, not at all, and her heartbeat had calmed down to a normal rate too. She’d overreacted – again. But going back to the garrison now seemed foolish to her, and there was no guarantee that she wouldn’t freeze again. Unbiddenly, the image of Harold’s lifeless body lying on the ground came to her mind, and she shuddered. No, going back there wasn’t sensible.
She was sitting on the carriage's bench, waiting for Tuff to pick her up after the coachman had sent for him, and unseeingly gazed out over the landscape of artificial ponds that decorated the plaza in front of the castle. The white stones framing the water shimmered in the light of the winter sun; it almost looked like the snow that had covered the fields two years ago, one of the rare winters when there’d been enough snow to cover the fields. It looked pretty, but Astrid couldn’t ignore how unnatural… how wrong it felt – especially compared to the natural lake near the stables.

Oh, how she would love to go there today… Spending another day just with the horses, her brothers, and Hiccup – simply enjoying their time. But those days were almost over. Daniel would leave soon, and while she planned to still join Eret and Dagur when they would go to the stables, she knew that it wouldn’t be the same, and certainly not as often as during the last weeks.

In a way, it was a blessing, really, that she’d found this way to spend more time with Hiccup. Just in time before the hours they could spend near to each other during the day would be cut short anyway. Sure, spending so much time with him alone now had raised other questions, what it was she felt and wanted, and whether he felt and wanted the same. But that was something they could work out, right? They just needed a little more time.

A few minutes later, Tuff came, his eyes quirked in confusion, but he didn’t say anything until the carriage had driven off. “You’re back way earlier than I’d thought,” he said by way of an apology for having made her wait. “That’s definitely a new record. So, did you hit Daniel this time?”

Astrid snorted. “I didn’t shoot at all.”

Tuff paused, giving her another puzzled look, but didn’t ask further when she just went on without another explanation. She didn’t feel like thinking about it again, much less talking about it.

“So, where now?” Tuff asked once he’d caught up with her at the top of the stairs.

Now, it was on Astrid to pause. Where, indeed? If she returned to her rooms, chances were high that her governess would hear about it and pester her with yet another lesson in etiquette. And going to the stables instead when there would be nobody to talk to felt pretty pointless. Then another idea occurred to her, and her mood brightened.

“I think, I’ll pay Fishlegs a visit. It feels like it’s been ages since the last time we talked.”

Half an hour later, Astrid was sitting on a narrow bench in the cozy room that was the cottage’s kitchen, living room, and workplace all in one, and watched her friend shuffle through vials and flasks scattered around on the table. Outside the open door, Tuff was playing around with some of the Ingermans’ hens; propriety required that he be present to escort her and not leave her alone in the presence of another man, but they’d long since relaxed on such matters here.

“Do you remember what this is?” Fishlegs asked, pointing at a glass vial filled with odd longish grains.

Astrid thought for a moment, then replied, “Those are caraway seeds, right? They can be used for the treatment of indigestion.”

“Correct.” Fishlegs seemed proud that she’d remembered it right, which amused her. But then, it truly was to his credit that she knew about the healing effect of several plants by now, not to mention other treatments and techniques he was allowed to share.

Coming here might have served the purpose of avoiding her governess and even more useless
lessons in whatever she deemed ladylike, but it was more than just that. Astrid truly enjoyed spending time with Fishlegs. He’d become pleasant company once he’d gotten past the awkwardness of being face-to-face with the Princess; in fact, as soon as he’d started to talk about his work, he’d seemed to have completely forgotten who he was talking to, and over the time, he’d become a true friend.

“And this one?” He now indicated toward a wooden box filled with what looked like dried kitchen waste.

“Easy. That’s moss, obviously. Gets used to soak up blood. You do remember that I’m a woman, right?” She rolled her eyes, faint amusement tugging at her lips.

A fierce blush spread over his already fairly red face at her words, but he quickly caught himself again. “Right... But it doesn’t just get used for moon blood. It also helps to prevent inflammation of wounds when applied in a dressing. This reminds me though; I should get this batch back to Master Mulch’s store.” He attempted to place the box onto a counter close to the door, but Astrid held up a pausing hand.

“Can I take it? My reserve is dwindling and… I might need it soon.” She squinched up her face, but there was no point in denying it. Even if she wouldn’t keep track of the days, her being this emotional today was a sure sign.

“Erm… sure, take it,” Fishlegs nodded. “I’ll tell Master Mulch that he doesn’t need to send a new box over to you then.” He put the box down again and returned to his working bench to pestle what looked like grey wood.

“And what’s that you’re doing there?” she asked, curiously eyeing the wooden curls he collected in a separate jar.

“Oh, that’s willow bark,” he explained, the excitement from teaching her something new clear in his voice. “It helps against fever and pains of all kinds. I’m preparing a concentrated extract for Master Mulch here, but one can also use it by simply chewing on the bark as it is.” He nodded at the grey wood – the bark – and Astrid reached for a piece to inspect and remember it. “It’s not equally effective that way of course, but biting on something also helps with intense pain, so it serves more than one purpose.”

Astrid nodded; she remembered all too well how she’d injured herself during one of her father’s hunting trips once. The pain as the wound had gotten treated had been horrible, and the strip of leather someone had shoved into her mouth to bite on had been a small blessing.

She couldn’t say for how long they sat together like this, talking about different plants and techniques to treat various ailments. It wasn’t quite as entertaining as spending her time at the stables, but it was a good alternative; the best she usually had available when none of her brothers were at the castle, and still quite enjoyable, with good company who didn’t treat her like she was a piece of fragile glass.

Fishlegs had just finished explaining how her ‘boring’ sewing skills would be of use if she ever had to stitch up a wound, when the door opened and his wife entered their home.

With her long jet-black hair and bright green eyes, Heather was the spitting image of her father – but whoever dared mention that had best be prepared for an icy glare. Without a word and only a tired wave in greeting, she trotted over to her comfortable armchair and slumped into it with a heavy sigh. In the back of Astrid’s mind, her governess’s voice chided her for letting a peasant woman have the more comfortable seat, while she, the royal, sat on a hard wooden bench, as usual.
And also as usual, Astrid ignored it. That was Heather’s chair, and Astrid had enough respect for her friends to not throw her royal weight around in their own home.

“Oh, hey, darling. They actually gave you a break?” Fishlegs asked, hurrying over to give her a kiss in greeting that visibly lightened her mood.

“Yeah, I can hardly believe it myself,” she sighed, leaning back into the chair as her husband went to their small kitchen corner and filled hot water from the pot dangling over the hearth into a smaller cup.

“I’m glad they did,” he commented absently, filling a thin gauze bag with dried leaves and hanging it into the water to steep. “They are working you way too hard these days. Oh, do you want tea too?” he asked, giving a curious look at Astrid.

Astrid cocked her head in light amusement. “Gladly,” she replied, and, not for the first time, thought how adorably in love Fishlegs still was. Not many would only offer her something to drink as an afterthought as they prepared one for their wives. But then, Heather wasn’t much better, judging by the loving look she threw him.

“Well, with all the guests in the castle, there are a lot of hungry mouths to fill,” she replied to his question, shrugging. “That’s just how it is. And with yet another feast this night, there’s a lot to do. I only have an hour or so until the dough for my pastries is done rising, then I need to get back. It’s complete madness.” Her words could have been a complaint, but there was a content smile on her tired face, and Astrid knew from experience that Heather wouldn’t want it any other way. Lazily sitting still wasn’t her style.

“That’s a shame,” Fishlegs pouted, glancing at where the willow bark extract was simmering in a pot on the stove. “This is almost done and I have to bring it over to Master Mulch. But maybe Astrid will keep you company?”

Astrid nodded, another amused smile tugging at her lips. Spending time here really was a blessing, another place where everyone conveniently seemed to forget who she was and just treated her like a normal person. Even if spending time with Heather alone was a rare occasion, since she practically always had something to do.

“I’ll probably need to leave to get ready before you return,” she announced as Fishlegs handed her a cup of herbal tea.

“I guess so. Knowing my master, he’ll probably have lots of other things to do for me once he gets hold of me,” he sighed, smiling, and quickly filled the willow bark extract into smaller flasks. “Unless you eat too much tonight and end up with a stomachache in one of our treating rooms.”

“I highly doubt that,” Astrid commented cheerily. She had another idea of where she wanted to end up tonight, after all. “See you around, Fishlegs.” He waved them goodbye, a box with the freshly filled flasks under his arm, then closed the door behind him.

“I really wish you’d all stop calling him that,” Heather grumbled into her tea, not meeting her eyes despite the criticism.

Astrid didn’t bother answering and just chuckled; she regularly forgot that Fishlegs wasn’t Justin’s real name. But except for Heather, everyone called him that. And she knew that he didn’t mind; he’d assured her many times.

“Have you already seen your father and brother?” Astrid asked instead after a short pause of
sipping her hot brew. Herbal tea wasn’t her favourite, but it was bearable.

Heather, however, snorted. “Yes, I have,” she commented bitterly. “My dear sire requested my presence after the trial the other day. As if I was nothing but a serving girl, and his no less.”

There was barely hidden anger in Heather’s voice, which somewhat surprised Astrid. “I thought you get along,” she asked, bewildered. At least that had been the case the last time Grand Duke Oswald had visited the castle.

“We do,” Heather agreed, then shook her head. “Or did. I don’t know. I’m grateful that he arranged for me to get work here, I really am. But it still feels like I owe him, like I’ll always be in his debt.” She shrugged and averted her gaze, her free arm defensively wrapped around herself.

Astrid frowned. She was pretty sure that the Grand Duke just wanted to help his daughter. “And have you talked to Dagur?”

Again, Heather shook her head. “No, I haven’t,” she declared, still sounding somewhat defensive. “Isn’t he with you and the others all the time anyway?”

“He didn’t come to the kitchens to visit you?” Astrid asked, baffled. She knew that Dagur cared deeply for his half-sister, despite their difference in status, and that he always took the time to look after her as best he could.

Said sister just shrugged though. “I don’t know, maybe he did,” she admitted. “But I’ve been busy, so he just snatched some food, joked with the other kitchen girls, and eventually left again.” She pointedly took another sip of her tea.

Astrid was confused. She and Heather weren’t that close, but she’d had the impression that the other woman got along relatively well with her family, despite her... unusual circumstances. Oswald’s marriage with Dagur’s mother had been a loveless arranged and temporary alliance, just valid until there was an heir to solidify the alliance between the Houses. But the Duke had found love elsewhere; while Heather’s mother was still officially a member of the Ástir, thanks to the agreement struck to keep the legalities as uncomplicated as possible, she only had a single client – Grand Duke Oswald. She even lived in the ducal palace at Southshore, and had practically raised Dagur along with Heather and her full siblings, who were the Duke’s acknowledged but illegitimate offspring by her. But Heather, alone of her siblings, had left the Temple – the Order of Freya in her case. That was... well, not uncommon, but a few people in the palace had occasionally made spiteful comments about her leaving “where she belonged” – not helped by the fact that the Grand Duke had pulled strings to support her and Fishlegs when they’d wed. But as far as Astrid knew, there had never been a problem with her family, aside from those vile gossipmongers. It was just... highly unusual for the child of an Ástir to know their paternal line, much less interact with them.

“Is everything okay?” Astrid asked carefully, not wanting to pry, but still wanting to offer an open ear if Heather wanted to talk.

“Of course,” Heather answered, too quickly to sound sincere. “Or... well, it’s just... Sometimes I wonder whether it was really a wise choice to accept my father’s help... I mean...” she trailed off, rubbing one hand up and down her upper arm.

“If you regret your decision to leave the Ástir? I thought–”

“No, no, that’s not it,” Heather threw in. “Gods, no. I mean, sure, I loved living in the temple and sometimes I miss being an Ástir, the variety... But I don’t regret having chosen Justin instead. He’s
everything I ever wanted.” She had a dreamy smile on her lips now, one that stood in direct contrast to how gloomy she’d been only moments before.

“What is it then?” Astrid asked further, trying to understand what was bothering her. “Don’t you want to work here anymore? Did something happen? Maybe I can—”

“No, none of that,” Heather interrupted her once more. “It’s… It doesn’t matter, really. Just forget that I said anything.” She gave her a smooth smile, one that clearly indicated that she didn’t want to talk about this anymore.

Frowning, Astrid accepted that. She would have liked to help, but if Heather didn’t want her help, well, then that was her problem.

For a few minutes, they sat quietly, sipping their tea and lost in their own thoughts. Something Heather had said earlier made Astrid thoughtful. How she’d talked about her husband and her dreamy smile. Astrid thought she could understand Heather’s feelings there all too well, but again, she wondered…

“Can I ask you something?” she finally broke the silence, giving Heather a cautious look. “How did you know that you... loved Justin, that he was the right one for you?” Maybe it was too personal a question, but maybe the former Ástir was exactly the right person to talk to. Heather’s feelings for Fishlegs had been strong enough for her to change the path life had given her, after all.

Heather though just cocked her head, and gave her a long look. There was a hint of fond amusement playing around her lips. With maddening slowness, she reached for her tea, drained the cup and placed it onto the cupboard next to her before she finally deigned to answer. “You’re asking how one knows they’re in love?”

Her question hit the mark directly, not cushioning anything. Biting her lip, Astrid dropped her gaze, remembering that serving Freya also included giving advice on personal matters. This probably wasn’t the first time Heather had this kind of conversation. Cursing herself for her carelessness, Astrid thought about waving her off or changing the subject – but decided against it. It would only look suspicious. No, the damage was done, and she could just as well go through with it now. Heather didn’t know enough about her life to know about Hiccup, after all.

She’d expected to see a teasing smirk on Heather’s lips, but when she looked up, there was only a comforting smile. “It’s not something you can easily describe or pinpoint,” she began, casting her eyes into the distance. “It’s not definite, not a solid set of emotions, but different for everyone. So I can only speak for myself.”

She stood up and went over to the spigot attached to the rooftop cistern to rinse her cup out; while the cottage might be humble in size, Fishlegs’ status as trainee healer and herbalist gardener – and the Duke’s quiet support – gave the young couple amenities that few others had. Taking the mesh bag out and setting it aside for re-use, she opened the cistern valve slightly and gave the cup a quick rinse before setting it aside to dry and closing the valve. Still standing, she said in a considering tone, “For me, it was… like a warm blanket. I mean, I’ve been with many men. But while I enjoyed them all, I found that I was always looking forward to the days Justin had made an appointment. I was counting the days until I would see him again, and apparently I was unbearably cheerful on the actual day – or that’s what I’ve been told. Just thinking about him made me happy.”

Another dreamy smile spread across her features, and Astrid couldn’t help but smile as well at the picture Heather’s words drew in her mind. “He made me feel good in an altogether different way, it wasn’t just hot fun, but also warm comfort, which sounds strange, I guess.”

With an almost apologetic expression, she looked up at Astrid. “I’m sorry, that isn’t a very helpful
comparison for you, right? I’ve heard others talk about it too. For some, it was the excitement, the heart-throb, or the differences that make them complete and whole.” She shrugged. “As I said, there is no one right way. They should make you feel good, which sounds incredibly weak, but it's what's important. Being with them, thinking about them, how they treat you, it should make you feel good, in whatever way you like. Safe and protected, warm and comfortable, giddy and happy, excited and elated. Everything's valid.”

Heather looked as if she wanted to say more, but in that moment, the door opened and Fishlegs came in once more.

“As expected, more errands to do,” he wheezed, glancing around until he spotted what he’d been looking for; a bottle of tinted glass in the back of one of his shelves.

“Now, who’s working too hard?” Heather teased with a fond smile at her husband’s breathlessness.

“Worth it though,” Fishlegs replied, crossed the distance between them, and took Heather into his arms for a loving kiss. His big hands wound around her slender waist, caressing her and making her giggle and hum as she snuggled into his embrace.

Gazing at her nearly empty cup to give them a little privacy, Astrid contemplated Heather’s words. ‘A warm blanket,’ she’d said. Her lips stretched into an involuntary smile as she thought of Hiccup's warmth, of his embrace, of the warm glow in her chest. Of his lips and his voice, of the way he’d looked at her earlier at the garrison. Was that it? Was all this love and not just the Gods’ Will? Another wave of warmth washed through her at that thought alone, making her heart beat faster.

“Yeah, that’s the look.”

Astrid looked up, startled by Heather’s direct words, and found her standing alone again and watching her with an amused expression.


“He already left again, obviously.” She cocked her head, pondering, then apparently made a decision. “I'm sorry if my explanation before sounded trite. I've never been good at these sorts of conversations. But in case you were wondering, that dreamy smile of yours just now very much looked like you're in love.” Now she smirked. “If I were somebody else, I'd be wondering whether it's my brother, that horse-crazy softy, or somebody else… But I already know the answers to some of those options, and I better not know the answer to the other.” Pointedly, she turned away, rummaging about in the cupboards, and Astrid highly appreciated the moment of privacy Heather gave her.

She was torn between a sudden rush of fear for Hiccup’s safety and the elation of the budding acceptance of what she felt. But truth be told, the fear stayed in the background for once. Heather might not be bound by a sacred oath to keep the content of their conversation to herself anymore, but Astrid was still sure that her feelings wouldn’t become a topic of gossip now. Heather wasn’t like that. So instead, she basked in the glow of joy for a while, in acknowledging that her feelings were true. She still didn’t know if it was the same for Hiccup, but she felt more confident now.

Standing up to follow Heather’s example and rinsing out her cup, her thoughts wandered further along the road they’d taken earlier. “May I ask you another question?” she asked, hesitantly, eyes glued to her fingers nervously fiddling with the cup. This was against the rules, she shouldn’t ask, really, really shouldn’t. But Heather most definitely was her only chance to get any answers. She more felt than saw Heather’s questioning look on her, so after taking a deep breath to gather her
courage, she blurted out, “How does it feel to- to make love?”

There was a moment of silence. Heather gave a surprised grunt, but didn’t answer right away. Instead, Astrid heard her shuffle, walking a few steps without going anywhere. “You shouldn’t ask that,” she finally said, something like cool distance in her voice. “I’ll happily answer this question – and any other – on the day of your wedding, in case you want me to be your supporter then, but until then–”

“I know,” Astrid interrupted her, voice low but still intent enough to make the other woman pause as she finally turned to look at Heather. “I know I’m not allowed to ask, to even think about… sex…” The last word was barely more than an inaudible gasp. “And I’m not… I mean…” Biting her lip, she averted her eyes, feeling the heat of a fierce blush on her cheeks. It wasn’t that she was thinking about actually having sex with Hiccup… was she? No, certainly not. That would be insane, risky, wrong, against all rules, and… and not… “I just want to know,” she finally murmured, remembering how Hiccup’s hands on her thighs had felt, how Heather had hummed as Fishlegs had held her just now. “It’s supposed to… feel good, right? It’s not always like…” Again, she broke off, unable to continue this time, shuddering as she felt the phantom touch of Harold’s hand on her body once again.

No more. She chided herself, pushing those sensations away. She didn’t want those memories to rule her. Instead, she conjured up how it had felt as Hiccup had caressed her neck last night; the light tingling that had run down her spine and into the tips of her fingers and toes. Having him touch her like that surely would be different… right?

Suddenly, a real hand landed on her upper arm, and she jumped, letting out a light shriek. Embarrassed over her stupid reaction, Astrid half expected to find amused pity when she looked up and into Heather’s eyes. But instead, there was just honest concern and a hint of sadness. “It is supposed to feel good,” she finally confirmed, quietly. “That much I can say. What you experienced were horrible crimes that had nothing to do with ‘making love’.” She slowly shook her head, seemingly struggling with some inner battle. “At the temple, we are protected against such things; if a man doesn’t behave himself, he will be removed, maybe even punished. So I can’t say I know how you feel. But what I know is that it all depends on your partner. If he wants you to feel good, if he makes an effort and not just seeks his own pleasure, if he’s been taught sufficiently… then yes, it should feel good. And if it’s someone you want to be together with, someone you feel comfortable and secure with…” She trailed off, another one of those dreamy smiles on her lips. A moment or three later, she shook her head, gaze focusing on Astrid again. “Anyway, what I mean is: You don’t need to be afraid of sex. It’s… it can be wonderful.”

Astrid swallowed, only able to hold Heather’s intense gaze for a brief moment before she had to look away. So, she’d been right after all. With Hiccup, it would be different. Comfortable and secure… That definitely applied to him.

“Thank you, Heather,” she breathed, turning to hide the hopeful smile on her lips. “That helped me a lot. But I need to go now, get ready for the accolade.” It was still a couple of hours until then, but knowing how much the southern nobility gave on appearances, she would have to look splendid tonight.

And in addition, she didn’t dare to stay with Heather any longer anyway. Her head was spinning with ideas and plans, trying to pin down what it was she wanted and how to approach Hiccup with that. Whether he even wanted any of that, with how he’d pushed her away before. But all that was not something she could ponder in Heather’s presence, not with her stern and calculating eyes watching her.
She was almost out of the door already, when Heather’s voice from behind her made her pause again.

“If I may give you a piece of advice though, your Highness,” she said, suddenly much more formal than before, “don’t make a mistake you might regret.”

Chapter End Notes

There it is... Better late than never, right?
“Odin, please, if you can hear my prayer, do something. *Anything!*”

Daniel’s lamentations made Astrid smirk, and she quickly lifted a napkin to dab her mouth in order to hide it. Eret and Dagur fared little better, both coughing to cover up their laughter, and Eret even slapped Dagur on the back as if he’d choked on something solid.

Around them, the feast for Dagur’s accolade was in full swing. In opposition to the smorgasbord in Eret’s honour, today a more formal meal was being served. There were beautifully arranged plates of meat, cheese, imported fruits, and pastries everywhere, with the guests sitting around tables of varying sizes all over the room, while servants bustled about, exchanging empty plates for fresh ones and filling orders for drinks. It was loud and frenetic, but to Astrid, it was a relief. No walking around, no bumping into other people, no need to avoid unwanted contact or company. Oh, sure, there would be mingling later, people leaving their tables to sit with others and have a chat. But Astrid planned to be long gone by then.

For now, she and her brothers sat around one end of the King’s High Table, separated from their fathers by a couple of empty chairs and from other tables by enough distance to keep other diners from easily overhearing them. It was a bearable setting for Astrid. Just like the night before, her father had offered her to leave once the formal part of the accolade was over, but today, she had refused. Her plan to sneak away to meet with Hiccup again still lingered in her mind, but this was Dagur’s big day, and she wanted to celebrate with him.

Even if, right now, *celebrating* meant Daniel was whining about how unfair the Gods and his Fate were.

“I mean,” Dagur said, still somewhat coughing and laughing, “you *are* the Crown Prince, right? You’re kinda important. Not to mention that you’re the one planning and deciding over these missions. Couldn’t you… I don’t know… just *change* those plans?”

“I only wish,” Daniel pouted. “But everything’s already been planned for *months*. I can order men
to move, but *logistics*... that’s another thing entirely. Troops have already begun securing the general area and basic materials are en route to Loki’s Teeth. *I wish* I could rearrange things and start with Redpeak instead, but I fear I won’t get away with such a sudden change of plan. My decisions still should be *sensible*. You know, so people accept my leadership, and all? And overriding all the preparations we’ve made so far just on a whim wouldn’t be sensible *at all.*

Astrid listened with a mixture of amusement and confusion, but when Daniel stopped his venting and returned his attention to his roast venison, she nudged Eret’s arm and asked, “What brought this up again? I thought he was done with this topic a month ago.”

Still grinning, Eret leant closer as if to whisper confidentially while still being so loud that there was no question whether Daniel would be able to hear him. “Oh, that’s Hiccup’s fault. During today’s training, he and Daniel ended up standing to the side and talking while Dag and I demonstrated stances to the lads. And *apparently,* Hiccup found yet another way to improve Redpeak in one of the books Daniel brought him from the library. Don’t ask me for any details, because I seriously didn’t understand a word when they were gushing about it over lunch. But now Daniel is *desperate* to get started with the improvements there instead of the repairs at the outposts around Loki’s Teeth.”

“And those improvements would be *so useful* come summer,” Daniel emphasised, pointing his fork at Eret as if that alone could prove his point. “A handful of men could easily hold that mountain path, and I’d have more spare men to send elsewhere. But the facts remain, I can’t change the plans anymore, not without a *damn* good reason. Besides, Uncle Spite has requested those repairs so often already, it’s about time we get them done. No, so long as no miracle occurs, Redpeak will have to wait until next year.” He sighed theatrically, which made everyone laugh again.

“Too bad being royal isn’t *really* about doing what you want all day, eh?” Dagur cackled, nudging Daniel in an attempt to cheer him up. It worked, to a degree at least, as Daniel snorted in agreement before stirring their conversation to a less frustrating topic.

Astrid fought to hide a grimace at Dagur’s words, but couldn’t keep her mind from wandering as the men began talking about this year’s recruits.

*Doing what you want…*

No, being royal really wasn’t about doing what she wanted, not at all. That was a lesson she’d learned very soon after she’d been supposed to start *behaving* like a royal. And these days, it was even worse. She didn’t even know anymore *what* she wanted.

Talking to Heather earlier had answered a few of her questions, though not all, and in addition, it had raised a couple new ones too. Some could only be answered once she and Hiccup were alone again, while others… Well, others, she had to answer for herself. Like the question *what it was she wanted!*

She wanted Hiccup and that foreseen future with him, *wanted* them *bad.* She would do nearly *anything* for that. But she still didn’t know what it was that was expected of her, what she would *have* to do.

Heather’s words kept whirling around in her head. ‘Don’t make a mistake you might regret.’ Astrid knew what she’d meant, and she wouldn’t… No, she *definitely* wouldn’t! Just like every young girl, she’d been taught what the changes of her body meant, how to cope with moon blood, and what it took to fall pregnant. *That* was a mistake she couldn’t risk. It would be a scandal, shaming not only her and Hiccup, but her father and Daniel as well. It would weaken the Crown, and that
was something she couldn’t risk. She might hate being the Royal Figurehead, but that didn’t mean that she would willingly risk for the Kingdom and its people to drown in chaos.

So, what was it she was supposed to do? Hiccup had said that he had a plan, had promised that everything would work out. And she trusted him. She just needed to wait; he’d said he’d need time, after all.

The thought made her grimace though. Just waiting, hoping for his plan to work, and behaving as she should – not ruining anything until then… That sounded like a prudent plan, even though the thought alone made her shudder. She didn’t want to behave, to just sit and wait and do nothing.

But maybe this was what she had to do. Following the rules… Maybe it would be better to stay away from him until everything was settled. The correct way would be to wait. She knew she couldn’t risk falling pregnant, couldn’t… couldn’t actually have sex with Hiccup. But it was more than just that; even their secret meetings, their kisses and caresses, all that was against all rules already. It was wrong.

But how could something be wrong when it felt so… so right?

The men around her burst out into laughter and Astrid hastily chimed in with a low chuckle. She had no idea what they were talking about, but she at least wanted to try to keep up appearances.

Appearances… Doing what was appropriate… The thought left a strangely bitter aftertaste in her mind. Right from the beginning, that sentiment hadn’t applied to her and Hiccup. It wasn’t propriety that had led to their first meeting, not at all. Sneaking away against her father’s explicit wish, wandering around without the supervision of her brother or warder, spending hours chatting with a stranger, and secretly meeting and kissing him in a dark room – no, none of that had been appropriate. The rules of proper decorum didn’t apply to them, never had, so what was the point in trying to follow them now?

Swallowing, Astrid gazed at her hands, tightly wrapped around her glass of wine. No, the rules of society couldn’t tell her what to do. Supposedly, those were Frigga’s own rules, but it clearly wasn’t what the Goddess wanted from her, or else she wouldn’t have led her into Hiccup’s arms that way in the first place. So what should she do?

Once again, Astrid felt for the key beneath her dress, for the warm glow lingering in her heart – and fought back a sudden gasp of quiet laughter. Maybe that was it, maybe the answer was much easier than she’d thought. By binding her and Hiccup with a soulbond, the Gods had made all this a matter of the heart. So maybe this was her answer after all. She would just follow her heart and do what felt right. Sure, there were still lines she wouldn’t cross, but aside from that she would stop pondering whether what she did was right or wrong.

Smiling, she sighed, feeling as if an invisible weight had been lifted off her shoulders. This was still not an answer to all of her questions, but it was a start. At least one question was easy to answer now. She would definitely try to sneak away again tonight.

A light nudge against her upper arm made her blink and look up. Once again, she’d drifted off into her own world, but quickly composed herself again when she noticed Eret’s concerned eyes on her.

“What is everything all right?” he asked, his tattooed chin pointing at her hand that still rested over her heart. “You’re doing that a lot lately; you’re not getting ill, are you?”

Hastily, Astrid dropped her hand and reached for her fork instead. Spearing a piece of venison, she tried to appear unperturbed. “Sure, I’m fine. Of course I am,” she replied cheerfully, chewed, then
threw him an easy smile. “Why wouldn’t I?”

He gave her a long, indecipherable look. Once she thought he wanted to say something, but then he shook his head, more to himself than to her. “Never mind,” he said, and turned his attention back to Daniel and Dagur.

Odin, she ought to pay more attention to who might be watching her. Gulping, Astrid followed his example, and turned her focus back on her brothers and their conversation. From the few comments she picked up, they were discussing tactics for sea battles right now, and she tried to concentrate in order to make an appropriate remark somewhere. It was not a subject she was particularly interested in though, and her mind was in danger of drifting off toward a certain pair of green eyes again, when she was saved by the arrival of an unusual visitor.

“Good evening, Prince Daniel, Princess Astrid,” a voice like liquid silk sounded from the side. “Sir Eret, Sir Dagur.”

They all turned toward the newcomer, and then quickly rose to greet her.

“Fyrir Mala!” Daniel spoke first, bowing deeply. Eret and Dagur followed his example as Astrid curtsied appropriately, all murmuring greetings as well. “Good evening to you too, fair lady.”

The woman nodded, her short blond hair swaying only slightly. Daniel offered her the chair next to him, the heavy fabric of her black-and-golden dress rustling as she sat down. Astrid and the others took their seats again too, clearly puzzled by the Fyrir’s appearance. As highest member of the Order of Freya, she had little to no dealings with any of them. Not like Fyrir Throk, who worked in close relation to Daniel all the time when it came to the skirmishes in the West, or the Fyrir’s Gothi and Alvin, who regularly had dealings with the castle.

They all sat quietly, slightly stunned, as Daniel waved over a servant with a tray of wine glasses, handing one to the Fyrir.

“Thank you, your Highness,” she said formally, and took a sip of the wine. Astrid wondered what had made her approach them, and, judging by their expressions, Daniel and the others were wondering the same. But before either of them could ask, the Fyrir placed her glass back on the table and looked up at them.

“My congratulations to you for your accolade, Sir Dagur,” she said in her melodic voice. “And of course, to you too, Sir Eret. I beg your apology for only delivering it now.”

Both Dagur and Eret murmured a confused “Thank you,” sharing a puzzled glance, as the Fyrir reached for her glass again. Astrid understood them all too well; while the Fyrir’s words were adequate for the occasion, it was clearly not the reason for why she was here.

Daniel tried his best to awkwardly engage her into their conversation, commenting on the feast and the weather, but that only highlighted how there seemed to be no purpose in her approaching them. “As much as I appreciate the honour of your presence, fair lady,” he finally said more directly, glancing over to the other end of the table where their father and the two Grand Dukes were chatting amiably. “May I ask… to what we owe this honour?”

Fyrir Mala smiled in her usual, mysterious way that always made Astrid think of a cat; as if she knew a secret, but wouldn’t share it with anyone. Though truth be told, that probably wasn’t so far off. “I came to deliver a message. One of my Ástir asked me if I could do so, and I did not see a problem in fulfilling her request.” She turned her head toward Eret. “Cami sends her regards, Sir Eret. She asked me to thank you for the safe journey, and to inform you that she is settled now.
She also wanted to extend an invitation to meet her on the day after tomorrow to you and… your friends?” Her voice perked up just a tiny bit at the end, turning her statement into a question.

Curious about what that could mean, Astrid turned to glance at Eret, and judging by the puzzled look on Daniel’s face, he was wondering too. But Eret had a huge grin on his face. “Thank you for delivering that message, Fyrir Mala,” he said, insinuating a bow. “I am glad to hear she settled in well. And as for the invitation—” he glanced at Dagur, who also wore a grin on his face, and at Daniel who shrugged and nodded slightly— “we accept it gladly.”

The Fyrir nodded, then turned to Daniel. “Will you be joining your friends, Milord? Or shall I inform Kaden that you are coming for a visit? She has no appointment for that day so far.”

“Ahm…” Daniel made, glancing at Eret and Dagur with a raised eyebrow. “I think I’d prefer Kaden’s company.”

Again, Fyrir Mala nodded as if she hadn’t expected anything else, then rose from her chair. “I will see you soon then, Milords. Milady.” She nodded to everyone in farewell, and then was gone just as quickly as she’d appeared.

“She’s an odd one,” Dagur murmured as soon as she was out of earshot. “Even for a woman. No offence,” he added, winking at Astrid, but then put on an overly dramatic expression. “But did I get that right, Daniel. You prefer some woman’s company over ours? I’m hurt!”

“Maybe there’s more, but he’s just not telling us,” Eret suggested, one eyebrow raised and with an insinuating grin.

Daniel groaned. “You’re horrible. No, there’s not more to tell. I just enjoy her company, okay?”

“Sure thing, we totally believe you,” Dagur teased.

“So, who is this Cami?” Daniel asked, turning to Eret and unsubtly changing the topic. “I don’t think I remember you ever talking about her? Is there something we ought to know?”

Astrid bit her lip, knowing that Daniel couldn’t be further off, but also glanced at Eret expectantly. She, too, was interested in his answer.

“Oh, no, not what you think,” Eret laughed. “She’s a good friend, but nothing more.”

Dagur snorted. “What, the daughter of one of the Stallari of Freya’s Order is ‘nothing’?”

Astrid’s eyebrows rose at that; the Stallari were the senior priests, directly under the Fyrir. And while internal Temple politics were complicated, as she knew somewhat from Heather occasionally telling small tales, that sort of family tie was nothing to sneer at. She glanced at the two Dukes’ sons and wondered for a moment if they were playing politics, or if history was going to repeat itself, or something else.

Daniel seemed to think that it was the first option. “Oh, look at you pair of social climbers!” he teased. “Which Stallari?”

“Eastervale’s. And it’s really not what you think! She spent the last couple of years learning to become a full Ástir. This year, she finished her education, and when the decision was made that she would move here to the capitol, I offered to organise for her to travel with our servants. I thought that would surely be much safer and more comfortable than making such a journey on her own. She’s also the one who smuggled Markor’s normal saddle for me.”
“I see. But are you telling me that you’ll only be chatting and drinking tea with her then?” Daniel asked, smirking. “I was wondering about the ‘bring your friends’ part. But in that case, I should tell Fyrir Mala to call off my appointment with Kaden so that I can join you after all.”

Dagur snorted in amusement, but if he wanted to say something, Eret beat him to it. “No, we definitely won’t be just chatting,” he chuckled. “But Cami is… well, she doesn’t mind me bringing friends. Dagur came along a couple of times when he came to visit Eastervale, and during the last few months, Hiccup met her occasionally too.” He shrugged. “She’s great.”

“Sounds like she’s going to be busy enough with you three then,” Daniel commented dryly. “So I’ll stick to my choice; I prefer a more intimate atmosphere with someone I know.”

Eret nodded, but when he answered, his words didn’t register in Astrid’s mind anymore. The mention of Hiccup had brought her thoughts about him back to the surface, and whatever bantering went back and forth between her brothers quickly faded into the background.

Of course, Hiccup had been with Ástirs, that was no surprise. It was custom, after all, that young men were brought to the Temple of Freya as soon as they ‘spilt their desire in their sleep’, although she had no clue what that meant. It wasn’t only to sate their desires though, but also to teach them the particulars about sex, so that they could ‘pass that knowledge on to their wives and their married life would be full of joy’. Or that was all she had ever learned. That she was not to ask any inappropriate questions and was to wait until she could ask them to her future husband.

She felt another smirk tug at her lips and quickly suppressed it. Oh, she could ask those questions to her future husband, alright. But the first and most important question was… what did she want to ask him? What did she want to know? What did she dare to ask?

Again, her hand wandered to her chest, not caring whether Eret or anyone else would notice. She just needed the support even that simple touch offered to cope with her thoughts. Astrid still wasn’t sure what she really wanted. Not actually having sex, that was for sure. But she wanted more than just the kisses they’d shared so far. And at the same time, she wasn’t even sure how much more she even could take, whatever it might be.

The thought of getting touched like that again still made her shudder. Despite her own assumption and Heather’s reassurance that… that it wouldn’t always be like what Harold had done, she was still nervous. What if she was broken, damaged beyond repair, could never stand a touch like that again? Would that change anything? And did Hiccup even want to touch her like that with how he was always pushing her back?

The questions kept whirling around in her mind, and it made her dizzy. But it also strengthened her resolve to sneak away and meet Hiccup tonight. She needed answers, and only he could provide them.

“I think I’d like to leave now,” she announced quietly as she noticed how the first guests started to leave their tables and meandered around. This was when she’d planned to leave anyway, and in the company of others, where she had to behave, she wouldn’t be any good for celebrating anyway.

“Of course,” Daniel nodded. He waved a servant over to send for Tuff, and then gave her a reassuring smile, the same expression she saw on Eret’s and Dagur’s faces too. They kept her company until Tuff arrived, warding off whoever wanted to approach them, and it made guilt rise inside her. They cared so much about her, tried everything to make her feel comfortable no matter how distressing the situation might be for her. It made lying to them so much harder. Sure, letting them assume that crowds of people bothered her wasn’t even a lie, but it also wasn’t the real reason why she wanted to leave. One day… One day in a far-away future, they would hopefully all laugh
about it together…

When Tuff came to escort her back, her relieved sigh wasn’t a lie at all though. She just wanted to get away, from the people, the laughter, the tension and the lump that was forming in her throat, and toward the safety of a certain pair of warm arms.

Once back in her chambers, she proclaimed herself to be tired, and it didn’t take long until Ruff had her dressed for the night and she was lying alone in her dark bedroom. And she was nervous.

It wasn’t the same as the previous two times she’d snuck away though. Wringing the fabric of her blanket in her hands, she tried to lay out a plan for what she wanted to ask Hiccup. Approaching him with such a plea – breaching yet another rule by getting more physical than any unmarried couple should get – was huge; she knew that, and it wasn’t a step she took easily. But it still felt right. Hiccup was not like other men, she’d known that right from the first time she’d heard his voice. She trusted him. And just kissing simply wasn’t enough anymore.

Juggling all those thoughts in her head, she lay still, her heart racing, as she waited for the noises of Ruff and Tuff in their rooms to settle down. Anxiously, she waited for another half hour or so before she left her bed as quietly as she could and walked over to her dressing room on silent feet. With her ears perked up for any sounds, she pulled her hidden stash of clothes from behind one of the wardrobes and changed into the borrowed dress of a serving girl. Warm boots and a thick woollen cloak with the key to the castle’s sallyport in one pocket completed her outfit.

Only a couple of minutes later, she left her chambers through a servant’s entrance, and once she’d reached the more general area of the castle, she dared to breathe a sigh of relief. She’d escaped her guardians’ watch once again, and getting noticed in the general chaos around the still-ongoing feast was fairly unlikely.

Just like the last two times, Astrid escaped the castle without any trouble, and with nervousness churning in her guts, she made her way through the dark night toward the stables.

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Hiccup lay outstretched on the blanket that marked his bed, arms crossed behind his head, and stared at the stable’s ceiling. He wasn’t waiting, he told himself. He didn’t know whether Astrid would come here tonight, so there was no point in waiting for her. He could just as well go to sleep; he’d wake up anyway in case she showed up. And yet, he couldn’t…

He couldn’t calm down enough to sleep, his thoughts and emotions too jumbled, just like they’d been all day. This morning, he’d woken up with mixed feelings already. The idea of spending the day at the fighting ground, of standing against young men who actually wanted to fight and who would – without a doubt – be stronger and more dexterous than him and his stupid leg, had made him nervous. But he’d also looked forward to watching Astrid as she demonstrated her skills with bow and arrow, to seeing her as the strong and confident person he knew she was deep inside. Eret had told him enough of the usual procedure, after all. These two reasons alone had been enough already to leave him torn, but to add to those, the prospect of spending an entire day in her presence without being allowed to even look at her too much… that had been daunting.

By the time he’d reached the garrison, he’d almost felt prepared though, but only to have everything come out differently anyway.

He hadn’t needed to fight at all, since the swordmaster had already validated his skills before. That had been good. And for the rest of the day, he’d tried to focus on that, on the positive. On not getting rammed into the ground by some overly eager heavyweight instead of the panic in Astrid’s
eyes. On discussing his ideas for Redpeak with Daniel instead of going crazy over her absence.

She’d been so pale… Seeing her sitting in that carriage had made his heart sing, as always, but not for long. He’d seen the pain in her eyes, how her face had drained itself of all colour, how she’d trembled. Not hurrying toward her, supporting her… if had taken every tiny bit of self-control he’d been able to muster.

And then there hadn’t been any news about her at all anymore. Over lunch, Daniel had requested an update on how she was doing, but the servant had only been able to inform him that she wasn’t in her rooms, that her warder was with her, but that her maidservant hadn’t told them where they went. Daniel had thanked the man and had sent him away with a knowing smile that made Hiccup guess Daniel knew where she was and wasn’t worried. That was something, at least – but not quite enough to keep Hiccup from worrying for her too.

Not being able to help her – not being allowed to help her – it nagged at him. She was so tough, acting out her part despite all the pain and fear inside her, lying to those closest to her, just because of him… And all he could do when she needed him was standing unmoving and watch her suffer. If only there was something he could do for her, something to help her with her fears and struggles, just… just something!

But he couldn’t think of anything.

With a heavy sigh, he reached for the latest book Daniel had brought, a collection of maps of the Western Mountain Range with explanations and descriptions of the terrain, vegetation, and general information. Maybe this would be able to distract him from thinking about her all the time. At the very least, it would be helpful to know all this come summer, and would let him be even more of an aid for Daniel and the others.

For about half an hour, Hiccup forced himself to concentrate on the pages, successfully pushing all thoughts about Astrid into the back of his mind, before he heard the already so familiar noises from the stable’s entrance door. The unavoidable scraping of metal against metal, the careful rustling of fabric as she entered. In a heartbeat, he was up on his feet and out of his stall, an eager smile on his face when he spotted her.

She looked strange though, weirdly timid in the way she stood there, shifting her weight from one foot to the other, chewing her lip, her hands wringing the heavy fabric of her cloak.

“Hey,” he greeted her with a warm smile, amused by how different this greeting was from the one the night before.

“Hey,” she replied, her voice thin, barely more than a high whisper. She only glanced up at him once before her eyes dropped and a slight blush, barely noticeable in the dim light, spread across her cheeks.

This was not what he’d expected. But maybe, what had happened that morning had hit her harder than assumed. Concerned, he stepped closer, reaching to cup her face. “Hey, how are you? Is everything all right?” His question made a quick smile tug at her lips. Or maybe it was his touch, he wasn’t sure.

“Yes, I’m good,” she mumbled, leaning into his hand for a moment before sobering up again. It made him doubt her answer, especially when she looked up at him with an anxious expression. “I just…” she began anew, biting her lip again before she went on. “Can I ask you something?”

Frowning, Hiccup nodded, pulling her along to sit down on the straw bales in his stall. “Of
course,” he replied sincerely. “Anything.” And he meant it. There was nothing he wanted to hide from her. The thought of her possibly asking after his past made him cringe a little, but if she wanted to know, he would tell her. Or try to, at least. But that wasn’t what she wanted.

“What… what is it that’s between us?”

Her question caught him completely off guard. Was she really asking that? Sure, they’d never really talked about it, but… but she had to know! Right…? “It’s… it’s a soulbond,” he replied carefully, not sure what her question was about or where she was going.

Astrid gazed at him with a weirdly pained expression, nodded, but directly shook her head. “I know but… This bond,” she mumbled, placing her hand over her heart in that gesture he was all too familiar with. “Is that… all?” There was a slight shimmer in her eyes as she glanced up at him again, making her look incredibly vulnerable.

But Hiccup still wasn’t sure what she meant. A soulbond was supposed to be the strongest and truest connection people could share; what else could there be that outranked that?

He lifted his shoulders, a little helplessly, so she went on, “I mean… Is that… all that’s between us? Just this bond, the Gods’ Will? You keep bringing it up, and I… I mean, I can’t compare this to anything else. I don’t know how it’s supposed to feel, but… but to me, it’s so much… more…” she broke off, voice trembling, and finally he understood.

Her reluctance and that pained look she’d gotten when he’d brought up the bond the night before… It all made sense now.

Gasping out a shaky laugh, he slowly shook his head. “Oh Astrid,” he sighed, reaching out for her hand to entangle his fingers with hers – just like their lives were entangled into one thread too. How could she even think… “Of course, that’s not all!” he clarified softly, squeezing her hand tighter. “Astrid, I…” He trailed off, trying to find words strong enough to make her understand.

But even those too-weak words already seemed to be enough for her face to light up. “So, it’s not just that the Gods decided for us?” she asked for clarification, hope shimmering in her beautiful eyes.

It made Hiccup’s heart clench painfully. That’s what she’d been thinking, and because of his words, no less? “No, it’s not just that,” he clarified softly, squeezing her hand tighter. “Astrid, I’ve never felt anything even remotely close to this before. But it’s definitely more than just obeying to the Gods’ wishes. You… you’re like my personal sun, what makes my life warm and bright when I’d thought it would be misty darkness forever. And I don’t really care if it’s what the Gods want or not. It’s what I want. You’re everything to me.”

Joy sparkled in her eyes, and with something between a sigh and laughter, she leaned forward, almost threw herself into his arms even. Before he could do anything, her lips had found his, kissing him, short but hard. “It’s the same for me,” she gasped against his lips, still giggling occasionally. She was shaking, and he pulled her closer, tilting his head to kiss her more deeply in a slow and sensual manner. She complied without restraints until she sat in his lap once more, her hands in his hair driving him mad. Hiccup felt the usual heat build inside him, but fought to push it down in order to concentrate on her, on letting his lips and tongue move with hers.

Holding her in his arms like this, it was a wonderful feeling, especially after how worried he’d been for her all day. Just feeling her lithe body beneath his hands as they wrapped around her waist, knowing that she was all right. Inhaling her potent scent of mayweed, listening to her gasping for air as their kiss ended. Her warmth beneath the fabric of her dress, the way her body yielded, soft
against his chest...

“How was your day?” he asked, retreating slightly to look at her. Forcing himself to focus.

“It was… okay,” she said with a shrug, absentmindedly fiddling with strands of his hair. She looked too tense though for her words to feel real.

“I mean, what happened at the fighting ground…” he asked carefully. He didn’t want to pry, but he wanted her to know that, with him, she didn’t need to act tough.

“Oh, that…” she smiled weakly, slightly shaking her head as she dropped her hands. “It was nothing. I just… overreacted, I guess. It was the place, Odin’s Tree, the memories…” Shivering, she shrugged. “And I feared… well, with how shaky my hands had been, I wasn’t so sure whether shooting an arrow at our future King with the goal to miss him would be such a good idea,” she added, laughing slightly. “Just imagine what would happen if I’d missed that goal!”

Hiccup nodded, understanding. “And afterwards?” he asked gently, not wanting her to linger on that thought. He could imagine all too well how much that idea must have scared her.

“I visited some friends,” she said, smiling absently. “Just getting on other thoughts, you know?”

“And did it work?”

“It did,” she nodded, then frowned. “Those other thoughts, though…” Once again, she blushed, shyly peeking up at him as she bit her lips. “I… I’d like to try something… if that’s okay?”

Confused, Hiccup nodded. A smile tugged at his lips as she leaned closer to kiss him once more and it reminded him of that day after Eret’s accolade, where she’d said something similar. And just like then, he let her take the lead, only carefully kissing her back, and waited for what it was she wanted to try.

Blindly, she reached for his hand, and he complied as she lifted it to her chest, wondering. He could feel her hand over his heart, warm and soothing like so often before. Basking in their connection, feeling each other’s heartbeat while they kissed, it was a wonderful sensation, but nothing they hadn’t done before. So, what was it she wanted to–

Hiccup froze.

Astrid had placed his hand over her heart, as usual, but instead of the firm plain over her sternum, he felt… soft, yielding flesh, perfectly sized for his hand to cup and…

With a grunt, he retreated. He stared at her, at his hand on her breast, and back at her eyes. There was a strange expression in them; stern, but also pleading and insecure. Her hand that was firmly holding his in place even as he made a half-hearted attempt at pulling away, was trembling.

“Astrid, what…?” he gasped, head spinning. This was wrong, he couldn’t, mustn’t touch her like this, it wasn’t allowed, wasn’t…

And yet, he couldn’t bring himself to put more force into pulling his hand away. Not with the vulnerable pleading look in Astrid’s eyes, and not with how… how good it felt. How right! So he just shook his head, over and over, disbelievingly, panting, his heart beating frantically.

“I just…,” Astrid breathed, her voice so weak that he could barely hear it over the blood thrumming through his ears. “I just want to know… I mean, if you don’t want to, you don’t-don’t have to. But… I just want to know… how it feels.”
A strangled groan escaped him. *If he didn’t want to?* Gods, if she knew just *how much* he wanted to! Without his help, his fingers flexed, and the little gasp she made in response almost made him lose every bit of coherent thoughts. Yes, he wanted to; wanted to touch her, feel her, draw more noises like that little gasp out of her. He wanted—

Desperately, he shook his head, yet was still unable to move his hand away. “Astrid, we can’t!” he implored, fighting for control over his body and mind. “It’s not right, too risky. What if—”

“None of this is *right*, if you ask anyone else,” she interrupted him. “Our kisses, our feelings, me being here…”

She had a point. But still.

“Astrid – that’s different. We–”

“I know,” she interrupted him again, voice trembling but with a little more vigour in it now. “And I don’t… I don’t mean…” She broke off, lips and eyes pressed shut for a moment before she looked at him again. “I don’t mean to go… all the way,” she clarified, another endearing blush spreading over her cheeks as she swallowed. “No… no getting naked and… *that*. I just want to know… how it feels when it’s *you* touching me… It’s supposed to feel good, right? I just want to know how it feels, or whether I’m broken…”

Understanding dawned on him, and he could only stare as his mind worked through what she’d said, what she *meant*.

She was afraid. Of course she was, she had been all the time. She was afraid of what had been done to her, of a repetition, of how that influenced her future. *Broken*… She wasn’t broken, and he knew that. If she had been, she wouldn’t have been able to stand *any* of their interaction.

Hiccup swallowed, eyes closed as he tried to *think*. He’d wanted to be able to do something to help her, so that she could overcome her fears… And here now, she asked him for *this*?

He shouldn’t give in. There was nothing but a *very* thin line between what she asked for and what would be too much. But he could see how scared she was, how deeply hurt she was by her fears. He’d wanted to be able to do *something* for her… Well, *this* he could do. For her, he could walk this line.

His free hand trembled as he reached to cup her cheek, tilting her head a little before he leaned in to kiss her, deep and slow, his hand on her breast moving with the same pace.

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When Astrid had come here, she’d been incredibly nervous.

But now, pressed into the straw, she did not, could *not* feel any of that any longer.

She felt *wonderful*. Everything was so intense; his lips on hers, robbing her of her senses, his weight on top of her, barely supported on one arm, his hand on her breast, caressing and squeezing. The way their gasped breaths mingled. It was intoxicating.

A small part of Astrid wanted to laugh at herself. For all these weeks now, she'd marvelled about this strange feeling, this warm tingling in her belly that only Hiccup could elicit in her, had wanted more of it.

On other times, she’d wondered how *making love* would feel, whether she would be able to stand a
man's touch, or whether her attackers had ruined that for her.

But now, she understood. Now, she realised what that tingling sensation was as it grew with every single one of Hiccup's touches, became stronger, hotter, more, until it seemed to consume her, robbed her of all senses, and ruled her every thought.

Oh yes, she would have laughed at her own stupidity if only she'd had the mind for it. But instead, she moaned against Hiccup's mouth as his thumb brushed over her breast, over her nipple beneath the dress. It was such a light touch, and yet so powerful, so overwhelming. She arched up, seeking more, and felt his lips stretch into a grin.

His motions grew stronger, his whole body moving against her, with her, and she wrapped her arms around his waist just to have something to hold on to. It was maddening, wonderful, and her only regret was not to have done any of this sooner.

Eventually, Astrid became too distracted by all those sensations to keep kissing him, and he seemed to fare little better. His lips brushed over her face, her neck, leaving damp spots of condensed breaths and distracted licks in their wake. Her hands clenched, crunching up his tunic and slowly pulling it upwards. Eventually, her hands touched the bare skin on his back, smooth, but damp with sweat. Again, her hands clenched as his tongue left a damp spot just below her ear, her fingers digging into his back. It made Hiccup groan against her neck, the sounds vibrating through his entire body.

Despite her spaced-out mind, his reaction thrilled her. Because he'd reacted to her. She had drawn that sound out of him. Curiously, her hands wandered on beneath his tunic, gliding over more skin than she'd cared to think about so far but found utterly irresistible to touch, Hiccup's continuing groans spurring her on even more.

Soon, he was moving more and more rhythmically, rocking and grinding their bodies together. Her skirts, squished between them, were completely rumpled, but Astrid couldn't care less, the sublime sensation of them being so close on so many levels robbing her of every other thought.

“Ahh-strid!” he moaned, then suddenly let out a wild howl, muffled against her neck. His whole body seemed to twitch and shake, pressed so tightly against her that she could feel how his muscles flexed, even through their clothes.

It bewildered Astrid, but only lasted a couple of seconds. Then he stilled, panting ragged breaths, his body trembling but otherwise unmoving.

“Hiccup?” she asked, confused as she let her hand glide over his back again. “Are you all right?”

He made a low noise, something between a groan and a whine, and pushed himself up on shaking arms to gaze down at her. He looked… strange; face slack with his lips parted, his eyes blown wide, dark, and with an almost… scared expression in them.

“Oh, Gods...” he gasped, slowly shaking his head, then awkwardly rolled off her and sat up. Groaning, he buried his face in his hands, mumbling words she couldn’t quite understand.

Astrid sat up too, watching him. She was confused, didn’t understand what just happened. Why had he stopped? And what had happened to him? “Hiccup, what—” she managed to get out, reaching out her hand to touch his shoulder, but didn’t continue when he lifted his head to throw her a pained look.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, visibly fighting between leaning into her touch and scooting away. “I’m
“Sorry, that shouldn’t have… Freya, forgive me, I didn’t mean to…”

“Hiccup, what happened?” she demanded, now a little scared herself. What had brought on this sudden change?

But again, Hiccup just gave her that pained look. “I’m sorry,” he said instead of an answer. “I just… hope... I hope that it was, was okay? For you, I mean?” He swallowed nervously. “I mean... I know you didn’t… Gods, did that help... help answer things?”

Astrid nodded, getting more confused with each word he said. Okay wasn’t the right word though. It had been fantastic. She still felt as if her body was singing, blood thrumming through her, seeking more of his touch. It hadn’t been enough.

“Good,” he murmured, shoulders slumping. “But this was a bad idea. I never should have let it come this far, should–” Once more, he broke off and shook his head.

Astrid felt the urge to crawl over to him, to embrace and kiss him, to tell him that it was okay. But she didn’t even know what it was that bothered him. Had she made some mistake?

“I-I think you should go back,” he finally said, more firmly than anything he’d said before. “You really shouldn’t be here, it’s too dangerous. Too risky. Yeah, you should…” He fought himself up on his legs, holding one hand out to help her up as well.

Bewildered, she followed him as he led her to the door. He walked a little strangely, but that might be because of his leg. She pondered offering her help to massage it again, but decided against it. Hiccup seemed sincere in wanting her gone. Meticulously, he checked her dress and hair for stray bits of straw and did his best to straighten out the wrinkles in her skirt. Then he declared her good to go, and opened the door for her.

Astrid hesitated though, throwing him another puzzled look. “Hiccup… I’m sorry if I did something wrong, I didn’t mean–”

“No, no,” he cut her off. “No, you didn’t… Gods, no, Astrid. It was my mistake, my responsibility… I’m sorry!”

None of this made sense…

“Are we… good?” she asked cautiously, eyes burning with the threat of tears. She didn’t want to cry, but, Gods, she was so confused.

But to her relief, Hiccup’s features softened. He made a cautious step toward her, and after hesitating for the briefest of moments, took her into his arms. “Yes, we are,” he reassured her, even pressed his lips to her forehead. “We are good, always. But you really ought to go now.” He let go of her, and she made a few steps toward the door, but then turned toward him again.

Let your heart guide you.

Before he could react, she had crossed the distance between them once more and stretched to press her lips to his. Her hands were curled around his sharp jaw, cradling him, holding him.

For the blink of an eye, she thought he would resist, would pull away. But then he leaned in, his arms wound around her waist, his lips parting easily for her. He kissed her back with all the abandon she’d hoped for, the sudden tension between them simmering down into the background.

When they parted, Hiccup gave her an apologetic but warm smile. “We’re good,” he repeated,
voice sincere and thick.

Astrid nodded, smiled tentatively, and then turned to hike back to the castle.

But she still had no idea what just happened.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was one of those I had in mind for ages. I'm pretty relieved that it's done now, even though I feel like it didn't end up quite as I wanted it to... But then, it never does...

What are your thought about the part at the beginning, their conversations and Mala? And what about the Hiccstrid part? Some bits still feel a bit rushed to me, sorry there...
It Will Not Be Long, Love

Chapter Notes

Remember how I said this would be the last chapter before the hiatus? Yeah, well... it's not. Once again, it turned into a ridiculous mammoth and i had to split it. But to fully concentrate on NaNoWriMo, I plan to post the second part of this last chapter on Tuesday or Wednesday... we'll see.

This week's title comes from the song 'She Moves Through The Fair' by Loreena McKennitt

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The next two days were... awkward, to say the least.

Hiccup was acting strangely, but Astrid couldn’t tell why. All she knew was that something had gone completely wrong and that she had no idea what it was. To her, everything had been perfect. Her questions had been answered; she had no doubts anymore about their feelings being real, and her fears about whether she’d be able to enjoy Hiccup touching her had been thoroughly crushed as well.

If anything, she only wanted more. The way he’d made her feel, so light as if she was floating, as if her mind and body weren’t connected anymore, and as if nothing existed anymore but the sensations he elicited in her – she wanted more of that!

But it didn’t seem like she would get more anytime soon.

.o O o.

The day after Dagur’s accolade didn’t start that bad. Astrid woke to her stomach feeling like it was twisting in knots – for reasons other than her soulmate for once – but she hadn’t expected anything else. And in addition, she was once again looking forward to that day’s events.

This day was devoted to basic battle training and assessment of the new recruits, including a little demonstration that was Daniel’s favourite – shield walls against archers. It always was entertaining to watch how the young men, who usually assumed they’d be lone warriors on the battlefield, would try to charge an archery tower – sword raised, shield in hand, and a battle cry on their lips – only for them all to “die” when a padded arrow hit them.

Usually, Astrid would stand to the side with Eret and Dagur, making comments and bets on who would get the furthest. Watching men fight, for them to prepare for real battles, wasn’t her favourite freetime activity, but since Fishlegs would be busy treating head- and stomach-aches after last night’s feast, she had few other options. The fact that they would spend the day at the archery range instead of the garrison helped too. She still didn’t feel like catching up on her performance with bow and arrow, but she also didn’t want to hide anymore. She had her brothers who would protect her if needed, and she had Hiccup who, just by existing, made her life so much better – and that was all she really needed.

But the main reason for accompanying Daniel today was... well... Hiccup. His behaviour last
night had been so odd, and she just needed to see him, his warm smile, had to know that nothing had changed.

When he showed up, however, it was as if everything had changed. He behaved… weird. There really was no other word for it, even though, to everyone else, he had to appear entirely as he was supposed to.

But he didn’t look at her.

Not once.

He greeted Eret and the others with an appropriate mixture of familiarity and formality, that absolutely suited them. When it was her turn to be greeted, though, he changed.

“Good morning, Princess Astrid,” he mumbled, bowing deeply. Astrid couldn’t even so much as catch a glimpse at his eyes as they were firmly cast to the ground at her feet.

“Good morning, Hiccup,” she replied, puzzled, but managed not to show it.

And then he left without giving her so much as a glance, no covert smile, no nod, nothing. It left Astrid confused as she followed him with her eyes. Sure, they’d agreed on being more careful when interacting in public, but this behaviour was still weird.

Practically all day, she had her eyes on him; first as he stood amidst a group of young men, fruitlessly trying to convince them to organise their charge at the tower, and later as he joined Daniel, Dagur, Eret, and a group of castle guards to demonstrate how effective an orderly turtle formation could be. But he didn’t look at her, not once, not even as they were whooping and cheering at their success.

Astrid thought it might be because of the official setting, that he was playing his role as nothing but Eret’s squire. But given how everyone else regularly looked in her direction under some pretence or other, his behaviour seemed weird. And it stayed that way. During lunch, he sat with a group of lads in a far-off corner of the archery ground, declining politely when Daniel invited him over, and even during the less organised archery training in the afternoon, he didn’t even glance once in her direction. Maybe it was because he was so focused on his bow and the target – he wasn’t the worst archer among the lads, but also by far not the best – but somehow Astrid felt more like he was avoiding her on purpose. Especially when, once the training came to an end in the late afternoon, he bid his farewell in an equally sober manner as his greeting, and practically fled her presence.

It confused Astrid. Sure, they had to keep up appearances when in public… but this went way beyond anything they’d done on earlier occasions. She’d at least expected a covert look, a short flash of a smile, just something.

She wanted to talk to him, wanted to sneak away once again and ask him directly, but didn’t get the chance. For some reason, Timothy’s chicken was going crazy and it took ages before they all settled for sleep – or at least the twins did. Astrid’s night was fitful, with her tossing and turning, unable to find a comfortable position in her feather bed, her lower body aching and her mind reeling.

And the following day was even worse. When Rachel came to wake her, she was still incredibly tired and feeling generally miserable; the thought of spending a couple of hours in bed with tea and a book felt like that might be the best thing to do. But when Daniel came to pick her up for one of their last days at the stables, she didn’t turn him down. She couldn’t! The previous day had been so weird, and despite her determination to not risk letting Daniel and the others notice anything, she
still hoped to somehow get the chance to talk to Hiccup. Or to at least silently communicate through looks, exchange a reassuring smile maybe. Surely, he wouldn't be equally distanced as the day before when they were at the stables… right?

Her assumptions were true... to a degree at least. Hiccup wasn't quite as reserved, joked and laughed. It was almost like it always was. Except that it didn’t feel the same. Maybe he was just playing his role, kept his distance as they’d agreed upon. But it felt like more, like there was something concerning him, something that, again, kept him from even looking at her, much less talk to her. It was jarring, irritating, and so… so confusing!

At some point, the men decided to give their horses some exercise in the paddock outside. There had been no time to go for a ride during the previous days, after all, and after these first few days of training, none of them felt like riding out now. Astrid, however, decided to stay inside; the worst part of her moon blood might be over, but as always, it left her dizzy and tired. And in addition… in addition, she hoped for either Hiccup staying behind to keep her company, or to at least get a break without having to act as if everything was okay.

But neither of those hopes came true.

“I’ll stay with her,” Eret offered when Daniel threw her a concerned look, Trample tugging at his rope to finally get outside. “Hiccup, can you take Crusher as well? He and Markor should get along well enough.”

“Of course, Milord,” Hiccup replied, giving his usual exaggerated bow.

Astrid watched as they left the stable, slumping slightly back against the straw bale in her back.

“You okay?” came Eret’s inquisitive voice from the side.

She plastered a smile on her face, but for once not one that was meant to fool anyone – least of all her oldest friend. “Yeah, it’s nothing. Just the usual,” she explained, wrapping one arm around her midst in a telling gesture, and shrugged. It wasn’t even a lie, she told herself. It probably was nothing; she was just overreacting – again. Surely, once she got the chance to talk to Hiccup again, everything would be fine. Tonight, she thought to herself. She would find a way to talk to him tonight, no matter what.

Understanding dawned in Eret’s eyes. “Oh, I see. Want me to rub your back?” he asked.

With a smile, she nodded. As so often, the cramps in her stomach had shifted into her back by now, and this surely wasn’t the first time Eret gave her a light massage to ease them. He settled behind her, the movement of his broad hands and their warmth soon easing her discomfort, and she closed her eyes, focusing on the moment and forcing herself not to think. Absentmindedly, she reached for her chest, for the reassurance.

“We are good, always.’

She would hold on to that.

“Interesting charm you have there,” Eret suddenly commented. When she turned to give him a questioning look, he nodded at her hand. Confused, she followed his gaze and noticed that she was absently fiddling with her key, the delicate chain wrapped around her fingers. Right… Today’s dress had more of a neckline than usual, pulling out the key had been no effort at all.

For a short instant, she worried about what to tell him, but then decided that, for once, the simple truth would be a good choice. “It’s the key to that small coffer Uncle Oswald gave me once,” she
explained light-heartedly.

“I remember it,” Eret said cheerfully. “So why do you have the key with you?”

“Well, it contains all my secrets, so I prefer to carry the key with me at all times.” She winked, making Eret snort good-humouredly.

“Those all fit into that little box?” he asked a little disbelievingly, with a waggle of his eyebrows to show that he wasn’t serious. “I’m disappointed. I could have sworn you had enough secrets to fill at least half of Lake Vola.”

They both chuckled, and once more Astrid was grateful for having such a good friend. A friend who made her feel better for the simple purpose of her feeling better. A friend who accepted that she had her secrets and didn’t pry for them. A friend who, surely, wouldn’t betray her trust if she told him.

But no, she couldn’t do that. Not just because telling anyone would only put Hiccup in unnecessary danger, but also because telling Eret would put him into a compromising situation. She didn’t want to force him to lie too.

“Feeling better?” Daniel asked a while later as he and the others returned to find her enjoying Eret’s massage a bit more.

“Yes, a little,” Astrid replied, her eyes fluttering open. As if drawn by an invisible force, they landed directly on Hiccup, but she immediately looked away and at Daniel instead. It was enough, though; enough to see him finally look at her, enough to see the look of guilt and concern, covered by a soft smile – enough to confuse her even more.

“And we’re done just in time, I’d say,” Dagur chirped cheerfully. “We should go back, freshen up a little. We’re having a date tonight, after all.”

“A date?” Hiccup asked, one eyebrow raised.

“Right,” Eret grinned. “You’re coming too, Hiccup. No discussion, that’s an order.”

“Ahm… okay?” Hiccup made, clearly puzzled. He looked around from one to the other until Daniel took pity on him.

“We received an invitation the other day,” he explained. “Not exactly the usual procedure, but still one we hardly could turn down. What was her name again, Eret? Kayley?”

“It’s Cami,” Eret corrected with a wink.

Astrid’s shoulders slumped a little. Right… The men would be at Freya’s Temple tonight; she’d completely forgotten about that. Almost against her will, her eyes flickered to Hiccup for a split second. The urge to secretly return here again tonight, to talk to him and solve this weird tension between them, was overwhelming. But if he wouldn’t even be here… Well, she’d have to wait another day then.

The thought made her anxious.

“Okay, let’s go then,” Daniel announced once the horses were all back in their stalls. The way back to the castle was a strange experience. Never before had she made this way in Hiccup’s company, much less in such a weird atmosphere. Daniel, Eret, and Dagur were as cheerful as ever, making insinuating jokes that, under proper circumstances, surely wouldn’t be for her ears. Hiccup was
eerily quiet though, walking next to them but not reacting to their jibes nor making any comments himself, and only threw her a couple of covert glances every now and then.

It wasn’t hard for Astrid to guess what was on his mind. But as much as she wished otherwise – as much as she felt otherwise – they weren’t married yet. Wouldn’t be for a long time, in fact. It would be ridiculous to assume or even demand for him not to visit an Ástir for all that time. And she wanted him to know that.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it then,” she announced once they reached the wing with their private chambers. The smile, with which she looked at each of them, was genuine. “Enjoy yourselves!”

In turning, she caught the pained and torn look on Hiccup’s face, but quickly looked away. She wanted to give him a nod, some form of reassurance that she didn’t mind. But with all their eyes on her, that wasn’t feasible. So she just raised her hand to wave over her shoulder at them all as she walked down the corridor, mentally preparing herself for another lonely night of tossing and turning.

It would be a long night.

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As Astrid vanished back towards her chambers, Hiccup had to fight not to stare after her. Although, truth be told, it was an easy fight – fueled by his guilt. Gods, he’d been so stupid...

“Come on, if we’re visiting the Temple, we need to be presentable.” Daniel said, grinning and clapping him on the shoulder.

Hiccup nodded, glad over this distraction as the lessons on decorum that had been drilled into him for the last... Gods, was it almost six years now?, came back with a vengeance. The Ástir might not charge a fee, but you did not disrespect the Goddess they served by showing up slovenly. There usually were basic cleaning accommodations to be found at the Temple, but it was considered a sign of respect to show up presentable already when possible.

The four of them made their way to the castle bathhouse, which was near the residential quarters, and entered the men’s changing rooms. Once inside, Hiccup made his way to the back of the rooms, pulled off his soiled clothing, stinking of the stables, folded them, and left them on the lower shelf of the small cubbyhole that he’d been assigned when he’d arrived some weeks ago; the upper shelf had another of his tunics and trousers from his last visit to the baths, cleaned, laundered and waiting for him.

After getting a robe from the rack, he joined up with the other three, likewise berobed, and they made their way into the bathhouse proper.

It was a nice enough bathhouse, Hiccup had to admit, finely appointed, with warm stones underfoot, artistic mosaics on the walls, and with candles in scones providing a sufficient and soothing amount of light. But the pools here were heated by wood-fires, and part of him couldn’t help but compare them to... to his family’s baths, heated by a hot-spring, and find these baths wanting in comparison.

Daniel, Eret and Dagur were bantering as they entered the half-full hot pool, hanging their robes on the nearby hooks set there for that purpose; the other bathers waved hello, mostly to Daniel and the two ducal heirs, but continued on with their conversations.

As the hot water hit his leg, Hiccup sighed in relief.
“Good to take a load off?” Eret asked with concern.

Hiccup nodded numbly; it had been acting up a lot more over the last couple of days – and he knew exactly why. Sure, the unusual activities of the last days played a part too, but he knew that wasn't the only reason. Guilt pooled in his stomach, but he put on his best calm face and laid back in the pool’s seat, letting the warmth of the water soak into him, and claiming the soap-on-a-rove as it was passed around. Hiccup had to admit that much – the King’s bathhouse had some of the finest soaps he’d ever used.

Mostly, though, he kept quiet as the other three men bantered, feeling miserable.

Guilty and ashamed, but mostly miserable.

Gods, what had he been thinking?

_Not now_, he chided himself. He didn’t want to drown in his thoughts again, not now. Not when he was around people who could not – under any circumstances – know what he was thinking about.

About how soft their sister’s breasts were, how perfectly they fitted into his palm. About the moans she made when he licked her behind her ear. About how incredible it felt when her fingers dug into his back.

Thankfully, at least in the baths... _that_ sort of reaction wouldn’t be commented on. Just the relaxing effects of the baths – or the thoughts of their upcoming visit to the Temple. At worst, he’d get teased.

But he _couldn’t_ think of her like that! Maybe paying Cami a visit was a good idea after all. Not that he had any choice on the matter anyway, but still. He’d been reluctant, had wanted to find some way, _any_ way out of it. But between Eret’s _order_ and Astrid’s reassuring smile… Yeah, it probably wasn’t such a bad idea. It would at least take the edge off his desire, so that he hopefully could interact normally with Astrid again on their next meeting. Oh, how he longed to be alone with her again, to simply look at her, talk to her, to just _be_ with her.

Daniel reached over and snagged the soap bar, which Hiccup hadn’t realized he’d been holding for this entire time, right out of Hiccup’s hands, the bar swaying from the soft linen rope that was embedded in it.

He gave the prince a sheepish smile, and opened his mouth to apologize, but Daniel rolled his eyes and waved him down. “Don’t worry about it, Hiccup. You have one of the finest minds that I’ve had the pleasure of meeting, and I understand if your thoughts were somewhere else.” He scoffed and nodded his head towards Dagur and Eret, who were cheerfully sculpting the soap-foam on their heads into outlandish shapes. “At least I know your thoughts are more productive than these two thickheads!”

Hiccup chuckled weakly as Dagur and Eret protested playfully. Oh, if he only knew...

Daniel lathered up and sniffed. “Hmm... lavender. Nice. And that reminds me, I wanted to drop by the bakery before we head over to the Temple. I promised Kaden to get her some of those lavender-and-lemon cookies.”

“Oho?” Eret commented, wagging his eyebrow. “You sure there’s nothing more to tell?”

Hiccup cocked his head, listening in with interest. Everything was good so long as it kept him from thinking too much.
“Yes, I am sure,” Daniel sighed. “It’s probably like with you and this Cami. I know her, and I like her. I’m more comfortable with her than with anyone else I don’t know at all. But that’s it. She’s a friend, and I know she likes these cookies. So, I’m going to treat her to some of them. End of story.”

Hiccup had his doubts on the ‘like you and this Cami’ part, but quickly dropped that thought again.

“It’d better stay that way,” Dagur sighed, unusually sober for once. “Believe me, it would only make your life complicated otherwise.”

Hiccup gave Dagur a confused look as Daniel placed a clearly comforting hand on his shoulder. He looked like he also wanted to say something, but before he could do so, one of the castle pages came up, panting slightly and red-faced – and fully dressed. That was odd in the baths.

“Your Highness,” the page said, coming to a halt at the edge of the pool and painting a hasty but deep bow, apparently aware of the depth of the breach of manners he was committing by coming into the baths like this. “My apologies for the interruption, but I was sent to come get you immediately.”

Daniel blinked. “Whatever for?”

“I was bid to give you this, Your Highness,” he said, still breathing hard, and handed over a small scrap of paper. “by the warden.”

Daniel’s brow had been wrinkled in irritation, but he took the note and read it.

Hiccup watched as Daniel’s expression went from curiously annoyed to angry to calm composure, and shared a look with Dagur and Eret. They returned it, just as confused as he was.

Daniel looked up after a moment, and then hauled himself out of his pool seat, and, dripping slightly, pulled his robe on. When he finally looked up again to meet their puzzled gazes, there was grim satisfaction on his face. “It’s… Sorry, but I need to go and meet my father.” He paused, biting his lip, then slightly shook his head. “Can you relay my greetings to Kaden? And maybe get those cookies for her as my apology? But this is important and can’t wait until tomorrow.”

“Of course,” Eret nodded. They all knew better than to ask for details when the Crown Prince wasn’t sharing them by himself, after all. Daniel nodded gratefully, and before either of them could say any more, he headed off towards the exit.

“Okay? That was weird,” Dagur stated, forehead wrinkled in confusion.

“Indeed…” Eret agreed. “But I’m sure we’ll learn what it was about eventually.”

They finished up in the pool without further delay, the banter from before having left with Daniel. With their fresh but too casual clothes on, they stopped by at their rooms in the residual wing of the castle to get something more appropriate for the occasion. Hiccup changed quickly and checked himself to make sure his outfit looked decent; casual in boots, trousers, and a fine tunic and vest, but still far more elegant than his usual stable boy attire.

He stepped out to where Eret was waiting, and was greeted with a nod and a broad grin. “Great. Dagur is already ready too, he’s waiting outside. Come on.”

“One could think you’re a bit eager to meet… Cami.” Hiccup remarked dryly, inspecting his fingertips to ineffectively hide his smirk – and also cover up his own nervousness.
“Well, I am looking forward to seeing her,” Eret emphasised. “Everything else…” he trailed off, shrugging.

Hiccup chuckled, but didn’t comment further. Who was he to tease his cousin about being eager to spend the night with his lover, after all? Freya, if he could, he’d turn on the spot and look for Astrid’s rooms without a second’s hesitation. But he couldn’t. Aside from the tremendous inappropriateness of such an action, he had his duties to follow in accompanying his master, and also had to... let off some steam.

.oOo.

“Wow, these cookies really are delicious!” Eret said; he received a couple of weird glances from passersby, but otherwise went without a reprimand for his behaviour. Hiccup would at least have expected a few giggles at the side of him trying to talk past his mouth full of cookies.

They had gotten the lemon-and-lavender-flavoured cookies Daniel had requested for his friend, but also a parcel of cinnamon-flavoured pastries for Cami. ‘I clearly remember her saying she’d like to try those,’ Dagur had said upon seeing them in the bakery, and Hiccup had to agree. He, too, remembered that conversation they’d once had, back in Eastervale. Back when his biggest problem had been to decide between becoming a squire or a stable master...

“Hey, they’re not for you,” Dagur chided, taking the parcel away from Eret to prevent it from being empty once they reached the Temple. Although, after glancing down at the delicious treats and swallowing, he handed them over to Hiccup. “Here, you take care of these. I don’t trust myself either.”

Hiccup bit back a sarcastic remark while Eret pouted, “Spoilsport,” and stuck out his tongue at Dagur when he was sure he wasn’t looking anymore. There was a playfulness in his tone though, a lightness Hiccup hadn’t heard during the last couple of weeks.

“I saw that!” Dagur commented nonetheless, making all three of them laugh.

It was a relaxed stroll through the streets of the capitol toward the Temple. Not many recognised them, not like when they were accompanied by Daniel or Astrid. They were just three young men, looking both important enough and intimidating enough to not be bothered.

“Oh, hey. That’s just what I’ve been looking for,” Eret suddenly exclaimed, and ran ahead without a warning. “Just wait here for a moment, I won’t be long.”

“Jewelry?” Dagur called after him, disbelievingly staring at the sign atop the shop Eret headed to. “I knew you were into some weird stuff, but that’s new.”

Eret, however, just snorted. “That’s not for me, idiot. I just wanted to get Cami a ‘Welcome to the capitol’ gift. I’m sure it’ll come in handy when she’s dealing with some of those stuck-up nobleman around here. Just give me a minute.” And with that, he was gone inside the shop.

Hiccup and Dagur shared a baffled look and a shrug. A minute of waiting turned into a couple more though, and when Eret finally returned, a small box tied shut with a bow in his hand, he found that Dagur had helped himself to an additional parcel of cookies of his own, from another nearby bakery, and Hiccup was carrying another additional parcel, if smaller than the ones filled with pastries. He smirked at Dagur, snatched one of the cookies for himself, and then nodded at Hiccup’s purchase.

“What’s that?” he asked, wiping away crumbs from the corner of his mouth.
Hiccup shrugged, a little self-conscious. “Well, since you both were about to bring Cami a small gift, I thought showing up empty-handed would be weird. So I got her a small something from that shop over there.” He nodded at a large window at the other side of the alley where small wooden statuettes of varying sizes and forms were at display. That was one of the amazing things about the capitol to Hiccup; with all of the glass they made here, glass windows were commonplace, such that even shops in the market had them.

“Heh, a good idea,” Eret announced cheerfully. “A bit of a personal touch to her new home. What did you get her?”

Hiccup placed the delegated parcels of cookies onto a rock nearby, certain they’d be safe from poaching now that Dagur had his own, and opened his purchase. Inside was a small but detailed carving of a running horse, made of smooth reddish-brown wood.

“Oh, she’ll like that,” Eret grinned. “She said the horses all around Eastervale would surely be what she missed the most.”

Hiccup nodded. “I know, I was there too.”

“Right…” Eret rubbed his back, a little sheepish, then suddenly paused. He leaned in to closer inspect the horse, and laughed. “It looks like Markor.”

Frowning, Hiccup glanced at the horse too – and had to agree. And while he often had arguments with himself in the quiet of the night, this was definitely an escalation from the back of his mind.

“True,” he said with a slight laugh, trying to cover up his sudden nervousness. “I didn’t notice; there were several horses of all kind, but this one somehow caught my eye, and…” he trailed off, shrugging. Anxious not to say something he shouldn’t. The truth was that, despite his sincere wish to get a gift for Cami to treat her, it had also bugged him that he couldn’t get Astrid any gifts. Just something small would do, something solid, as a reminder. Or as an apology for his utter stupidity... But that would be too noticeable, too dangerous. So he’d settled on just getting something for Cami, but hadn’t been able to keep his mind from whirling around Astrid anyway.

And apparently, that had even influenced his choice of gifts…

Shit.

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As the three of them entered the Grand Aesir Plaza, Hiccup swallowed as carefully as he could manage, but Eret spotted his reaction. “Right, this is your first time here, isn’t it, Hiccup?”

Hiccup nodded, looking around at the glorious architecture on display.

At the centre of the vast open square was a sacred grove of at least a dozen enormous trees and numerous smaller saplings, their leaves shed, but standing proud and tall. Statues of the Aesir, Vanir and some of the greater Jotunn ringed the grove.

But the outer periphery of the square was what really drew Hiccup’s attention. They’d entered through a covered tunnel, its walls and ceiling carved and painted with images from the sagas of the gods, and emerged into the square, giving him his first look at the place – an effect no doubt intended by the architect, and Hiccup had to give the him or her a mental salute for the effect.

The paving stones underneath their feet had the cobbles arranged in patterns of white, green and brown that suggested branches reaching out from the sacred grove and to the periphery. More trees
grew in regular gaps in the pavement, and Hiccup noted that many of them were fruit trees, although the biggest and mightiest tree in the grove was a yew, still green and hardy despite the encroaching dark and cold. He remembered that this particular tree was supposedly almost a thousand years old, planted when the city was founded.

But the buildings... oh...

Where Hiccup had grown up, the temples were of wooden stave-and-post construction – built on vertical logs with one end sunk into a stone foundation and then a horizontal log across the top to connect them and form the structure. They could grow impressively complex, but they were still made of wood, of a tried and true – and boring and conservative – design.

Here, though... they had ventured into *stone and glass*.

Now that the initial shock had passed, Hiccup saw parallels with the newer wings of the castle, especially the residential wing, and he’d have to check later to see if the same architect had designed both structures – or maybe ask Daniel about it.

A doubled columnade, connected by arches, ringed the vast space, creating a covered space that connected the various temples; the columns were carved to look like trees, and the arches to look like mingled branches. And the buildings themselves...

They were massive confections of intricately carved stone, with stained-glass windows filling massive portions of the open walls. Much like at the residential wing, Hiccup saw flying buttresses, but these were long and elegant compared to the much more muted structures at the castle. But their reinforcement allowed the piers to hold up most of the weight of the roofs, which enabled the architect to allocate all of that the wallspace to the massive glass windows, which glowed in the late autumn gloom from the lights inside.

Undoubtedly, when the grand *blots* were held, this entire open space would be packed full of worshipers, many of them pilgrims from all over the kingdom, with the Fyrirs holding the sacrifices and prayers in the sacred grove itself.

Suddenly a hand waved in front of his face. “Hic?”

Hiccup blinked, and turned to look at Dagur, who wasn’t even bothering to hide his smirk. “What?”

Eret and Dagur shared a grin, and Eret said cheerfully, “You’d think that you just saw a pretty Ástir do a striptease in front of you from the way that you reacted.” He reached over and gently poked Hiccup in the forehead. “And I don’t think it’s the... bust of Freya over there that caught your attention.”

Hiccup stuck his tongue out at the pair of them and they both laughed.

They made their way in the plaza proper, and Eret and Dagur took turns playing tour guide; they’d been coming here since they were boys, so all of the wonder was long since worn off for them. In a bizarre way, Hiccup had found a second reason to be grateful that he hadn’t come to the capitol until he was an adult. The first was not growing up as Astrid’s *brother*, of course... but being able to appreciate such magnificence on their own merits for the first time as an adult, with all of the training and learning that had come with it, ranked on a good second place.

Much like the smaller temples elsewhere, the Temple complex functioned more as lodging, organization and work-spaces for the various Orders than as worship spaces, with the sacred grove
fulfilling that function. So over there was the building that functioned as Frigga’s courthouse... there was the building where Freyr’s Order minted coins, blessed farming implements, and checked the weights and measures used by the merchants across the kingdom... there was Freya’s hospital for the sick – Hiccup saw a young mother carrying in a coughing child as they walked past – and right next to it was the home of the Ástir.

The door, carved and painted to resemble Fólkvangr, with Sessrúmnir visible in the distance, stood under a fifteen-foot-tall stained glass window of the goddess, riding her cat-pulled chariot, with Hildisvíni running at her side and wearing her cloak of falcon feathers – and nothing else – but before Hiccup could take a moment to appreciate either piece of art, Dagur and Eret each took one of his arms and practically hustled him through the door.

“Come back during the day,” Dagur said.

“It’ll look better, trust us,” Eret added.

Hiccup didn’t comment on their actual and rather transparent motivations, since they were right... and instead took in the foyer and the atrium beyond as they took off their boots and cloaks and handed them to an attendant waiting in the foyer, who took them and handed them small wooden chits with numbers on them.

Lush carpets were underfoot, insulating them from the cold stone, and, once past the foyer doors, Hiccup saw a cheery fire that burned in a large hearth which was surrounded by upholstered chairs and benches laden with cushions, most of them occupied. Tasteful sculptures of the goddess filled various niches in the walls, and Hiccup heard what sounded like running water. Turning towards the sound, his eyes went wide as he found the source – an honest-to-the-goddess waterfall inside the temple; water cascaded in a gentle flow down the stones of a five-foot-wide section of the wall between two windows and ended in a small pond on the floor.

“How...?” he asked, stepping towards it, but Eret’s hand clamped down gently – if firmly – around his upper arm, and he was pulled deeper into the atrium.

Around the atrium, there were numerous groups of people, socializing, eating, or engaged in what looked like intense discussion. Some, going by their dress, were noblemen, while others were members of the Temple of various ranks, and others were more humble city folk.

“Good evening, Milords,” a silky voice sounded from behind him, and Hiccup turned with a start. In front of them stood a woman he dimly recognised from Eret’s accolade, but hadn’t cared to remember so far. The short blond hair didn’t make Freya’s Fyrir any less beautiful, and her robe of black satin and golden silk gave her an air of unquestionable dignity.

“Good evening, fair lady,” Eret greeted her, bowing deeply. Hiccup and Dagur followed his example.

The Fyrir nodded, then cocked her head with an unreadable look. “I see His Highness did not accompany you after all,” she stated. There was no question in her voice.

“Indeed,” Eret confirmed. “Sadly, urgent matters kept him busy. He asked us to deliver these—” he held out the box off cookies Daniel had asked them to obtain— ”to Ástir Kaden in his name.”

The Fyrir nodded once more, then lifted her hand to beckon toward a woman sitting in a nearby niche and chatting to a handful of younger women. She nodded, excused herself from the group, and came over, a friendly and curious look in her big brown eyes.
“Yes, Fyrir?” she asked in a melodic voice, light brown curls bobbing around her face with every movement.

“Kaden, my dear, these lords brought a gift for you.”

The woman, Kaden, turned, her puzzled eyes brightening when she spotted the box Eret held out for her. “The Prince sends his regards and his apology,” he announced formally. “He is tied up in his duties and won’t be able to make it here tonight. He wanted to make good on his promise, though.” He handed over the cookies, and Kaden’s smile grew a few shades warmer.

“Oh, that is very kind of him,” she announced, beaming. “Please, convey my honest gratitude toward him. My pupils and I will enjoy these greatly.” She was about to bob a curtsey and retreat when the Fyrir made her wait.

“I know that you are eager to return to your class,” Mala said, her tone somehow soft and firm at the same time. “But since you have more than enough time for them tonight, would you be so kind as to inform Cami that her visitors arrived?”

“Visitors?” Kaden’s eyebrows rose in surprise as she eyed Hiccup and the others, but quickly caught herself again. “Of course, Fyrir Mala. I’ll let her know immediately.” They watched her retreat and disappear up a flight of stairs.

While they waited, Hiccup went over and examined the waterfall, unable to help his curious nature. A few moments of examination revealed a pipe cunningly hidden among the stone that apparently led upwards.

“There’s a rainwater cistern on the roof that feeds it and several fonts in the building, if you were wondering,” the Fyrir’s voice came from behind him, sounding amused.

Hiccup turned, feeling a bit sheepish, but the Fyrir looked pleased. “Go, rejoin your friends. Kaden won’t be long.”

As Eret rolled his eyes at him, Hiccup returned to the pair of them where they’d snagged small bowls of light broth from a pot by the hearthfire. The Fyrir’s words proved to be accurate as Ástir Kaden returned down the staircase a few moments later, politely smiled at them as she walked past, and returned to her class, who cheered as they were offered the cookies.

“I’d say this is proof then that Daniel was telling the truth,” Dagur snickered as the young women passed the box around. “I mean, she wasn’t even mildly disturbed by him not showing up. And let’s be honest, a box of cookies is not that fancy a gift, but she obviously was happy enough. How does the saying go again?” He smirked. “Ah, yes. ‘A man is smitten with the Goddess’ chosen when the purse at his belt swells like the purse of his loins, and–

“–and the chosen feels the same when she finds room in her heart and her coffer for his boons,’” Eret finished. “Yes, yes, okay. So they’re not in love. Better that way anyway, I guess.”

There was an odd tone in his voice at that, and Hiccup gave him a curious glance; he was missing something. All the saying meant was that you knew a man had fallen for one of the Ástir when his gifts grew extravagant... and she reciprocated when she kept them exclusively for herself, rather than sharing with the rest of the Temple. Like how the now-empty cookie box had been shared.

“Indeed,” Dagur agreed, then gestured toward an empty set of chairs. “But let’s sit down there. Walking here was exhausting.”

At that, Eret smirked. “What, you’re tired already? We didn’t even get started,” he teased. “How
exactly do you plan to survive the next couple of hours?"

Dagur just cackled, and Hiccup couldn’t suppress some quiet laughter either as he followed them to sit down as well. Once seated comfortably, waiting for Cami to lead them to her rooms, he couldn’t keep his thoughts from running wild anymore though. He felt… torn. The prospect of spending a couple of… relaxing hours with Cami made him nervous in a way. Sure, this wouldn’t be their first time together, not by far. And being with an Ástir wasn’t meant to be romantic in any way either, not meant to replace the loving intimacy of a married couple. He should be looking forward to it, to get the brunt off the maddening desire raging within him. But he couldn’t shake off the thought that it was… not quite right. He couldn’t stop thinking about Astrid, about how much he would prefer to be with her tonight instead. But that was a thought that had no place at all in Freya’s Temple, and he hastily fought to banish it into the depth of his chaotic mind, hoping for Cami to hurry to distract him.

He didn’t have to wait long, only a couple of minutes. By then, the three of them were engaged in a conversation about the benefits of short swords, when Dagur suddenly went rigid.

“Oh shit!” he cursed under his breath, making Eret and Hiccup look up at him in confusion. “And suddenly, I’m incredibly grateful for whatever prevented Daniel from coming with us,” he muttered, staring past them with wide eyes.

Hiccup turned in his seat – and froze as he spotted the young woman descending the stairs.

Her wild blond mane, usually only loosely bound if at all, was braided in a complicated pattern halfway around her head until it hung in a long plait down her back, ornate with colourful sparkling stones around a light coronet. She wore an elegant dress in varying shades of blue that highlighted her bright blue eyes, the wide skirts, embroidered with a pattern of swans, waving around her lower half like a waterfall. In addition, she wore elegant gloves that reached all the way to her upper arms, and she moved with an air of dignity he hadn’t seen on her before.

A part of Hiccup knew it was Cami, recognised her face between the costume. But for a moment, all he could see was Astrid, dressed as she’d been under that borrowed cloak, back at that first day at the stables.

Chapter End Notes

This is a wonderful place to let this chapter end... don't you agree? O:)

But again, this is not the last chapter before the hiatus after all. Keep your eyes open, there'll be another one, probably on Tuesday or Wednesday.
Listen To Your Heart

Chapter Notes

So, as announced, an unscheduled update to get this off my chest before NaNoWriMo.

This chapter is... very special to me. It is one of the very first scenes I had in mind for this story, and reason for a lot of worldbuilding. It also is a very important turning point for this story, all in all, with (probably) more hints than those that are directly obvious. (;P) Over the months, it went through a lot of changes in my mind, and although I feel it didn't end up as I wanted it to, I still like it very much. So, I hope you'll like it, too. ;)

This chapter's title is also one I decided on pretty early. It's from 'Listen To Your Heart' by Roxette, an old favourite of mine. And although the lyrics don't fit all that much to this chapter, this one line still sums up what this chapter is about.

As Cami approached them, her dress making her look like she was floating, and her hips subtly swaying with every step, Hiccup could do little more than stare in shock.

This couldn’t be happening...

“Good evening, Milords,” she greeted them with a perfect curtsey, her cheeky grin not really covered by her attempt at a polite smile. “What a delight to see you again.”

Eret was the first to pull himself together again. “Cami, what in Loki’s name–”

Cami interrupted him with a light chuckle, even raised her gloved hand to delicately cover her mouth. “What is this, Sir Eret? You look as if you’d seen a draugr,” she giggled, sounding weirdly artificial. “But I assure you, it is just me.”

“But,” Dagur stammered, his eyes wide and face pale. “But you…”

“I am so pleased you were able to follow my invitation,” Cami chirped, throwing smiles all around. “But how about we continue our conversation in my private rooms.” She wound her arms through each Eret’s and Dagur’s and pulled them along after winking at Hiccup, indicating for him to come along as well.

Hiccup followed them in a stupor, nearly tripping as he tried to climb the stairs. This couldn’t be real... He’d known Cami for several months now, ever since Eret had found him, and he’d always enjoyed her company. So when Eret had mentioned meeting her today, he’d been looking forward to it, at least so far as simply meeting her went. But up until now, he hadn’t even thought about how Cami resembled Astrid.

Sure, she had long blond hair too, but he’d gotten to know Cami’s as practically untamable, a wild blond mane that could hardly be messed up further. And yes, she also had blue eyes, but unlike Astrid’s rich colour, Cami’s were much paler, only highlighted now by her clothes and makeup. So
he hadn’t had any additional thoughts or worries aside from those of visiting an Ástir in general.

But now, with Cami clearly dressed up to look like Astrid… Hiccup wasn’t sure what to think anymore. The idea of indulging in that fantasy was alluring, and it clearly was the purpose of her guise anyway. Just getting this maddening desire for her out of his system to be able to concentrate on Astrid, and in a more appropriate way no less, the next time he saw her… yes, very alluring indeed.

His mind was reeling and he barely noticed anything of his surroundings. Only marginally, he registered Eret, Dagur, and Cami talking, teasing and laughing as they went ahead, didn’t pay any attention at all to the people they met in the corridors. He just followed, dumbstruck, until Cami opened an ornate door and invited them in.

The room was splendidly decorated with tapestries on the walls and elegant furniture littering everywhere; a soft couch on the left side of the room, a tea table surrounded by elegant chairs on the right, other comfortable chairs all over the room, and sideboards and shelves framing the door to another room at the other side. Rank had its perks, Hiccup noted numbly; it was one of the finest appointed rooms he’d ever been in, especially for an Ástir... but that was probably also part of the... costume.

The moment the door closed behind them though, they all dropped the act.

Both Eret and Dagur pulled back their arms and made a hasty step away from Cami, whirling around to stare at her in disbelief. “What in Odin’s name is this?” Eret hissed, shaking his head as he took in her appearance.

“What does it look like?” Cami asked, shifting her weight to one side and crossing her arms in front of her, an undeniably challenging smirk playing around her lips.

Neither of them responded, and Hiccup didn’t know what to say either. It was obvious, after all, no questions or doubts. If he just glanced at Cami from the corner of his eyes, Hiccup could almost believe it was Astrid standing there with them. Almost…

“Oh, come on,” Cami snorted as they all just kept staring at her, and walked past them to an elegant and comfortable-looking chair. “Don’t act as if this is completely new to you. Men are weird, and you know that. They want weird things; pretty things, dangerous things, things that are forbidden. And let me tell you, our fair Princess is all of that. Of course, there are men who want her. So, which option do you prefer? That they go mad and actually go after her? After what just happened the other day? Or would you prefer for them to come here, live out their fantasy, and get over it? Believe me, it’s healthier to live those fantasies with me. For everyone involved.”

Eret and Dagur shared a troubled look, but then nodded slightly. “You’re right,” Eret sighed, his hands that had been clenched at his sides relaxing. “But we still don’t need to like it. She’s our sister!”

Again, Cami snorted, rolling her eyes for additional emphasis. “Yeah, well, except she’s not, right? Not really. And you do know about the rumours, don’t you? About your fathers and the King having an agreement that she’ll become the wife of one of you ducal heirs? Good luck with keeping up the brotherly feelings then.”

Hiccup, who stood a little behind the others and just silently observed, swallowed at those words. He had heard about that before… he’d just conveniently forgotten about it. But that didn’t change anything, did it? He still would do everything he could, knowing the Gods were on their side. Whatever it would take.
“I still don’t like it,” Dagur grumbled.

“And you don’t have to,” Cami sighed. “But this is how things work. You’d be surprised how many men there are, young and old, who project their desires on Princess Astrid. But let me tell you, there aren’t just a few.”

Eret let out a deep breath. “I don’t doubt that, actually,” he said, rubbing his forehead. “But are you aware of the fact that we’d been supposed to come here with her actual brother? What do you think how he would have reacted if he’d seen you dressed up like this?”

At that, she cocked her head, the slight smirk returning to her lips. “I think he would have greeted me with the respect he shows to every member of the Temple, just like he did with my sisters who played this role before.”

“He knows?” Dagur blurted out, and Cami shrugged.

“I should think so. As does the King from what I’ve heard.” She flicked at the false-coronet on her head with a finger. “This was already here when I got here, mind you.”

Dagur and Eret shared another troubled glance, but then their shoulders slumped. “All right,” Eret murmured. “But it’s still… weird. It doesn’t sit right with me that someone might think I purposefully seek out an Ástir that acts out being Swanja. It has a bad taste, given how much time we spend with her – all of us. It’s not just me; you took us all to your rooms, and–”

“But who cares?” Cami asked, with a calming smile now. “People think you and she are a couple for years already. And she knows better anyway from what you’ve told me.” She pointedly looked from him to Dagur and back again.

“True, but–” Eret started, but directly got interrupted by her again.

“There is no ‘but’. Let people assume what they want to see – their fair Princess and her childhood sweetheart being in love. And don’t get started on giving false impressions; you’ve done that already each and every time you’ve come to visit me for the last few years.”

At that, Eret had nothing left to say, and Hiccup couldn’t blame him. She was right after all; Eret had been using her for years to cover up that he was more interested in Dagur than anybody else. There were a few moments of awkward silence, before Eret finally spoke up again.

“You’re right,” he finally admitted. “With everything. I’m sorry for overreacting. It was just… unexpected, I guess.” He sighed, then glanced at Hiccup, waving him and the boxes he was still carrying over. “Anyway, we brought you something,” he said, his attempt at changing the subject not subtle in the slightest, but nobody minded.

Cami stood up and came over, sparkling blue eyes curiously on the boxes Hiccup held out for her.

“Oooh, are those the cinnamon cookies you told me about, Dag?” she asked, directly snatching one from the box as Dagur opened it for her and tossing it into her mouth without preamble. Chewing, she said with her mouth full, “Mmh, they really are fantastic. Here, put them into this bowl, that’ll make a lovely additional decoration for this room – for as long as they last.” She indicated to an empty bowl standing on a sideboard, and Dagur went to fill it with the cookies and then placed the bowl onto the elegant tea table.

Her reaction to the other two gifts was equally joyful; Hiccup’s horse found a place among the shelves at one side of the room, and Eret’s earrings landed in an ornate but relatively empty jewellery box.
“My honest thanks for those,” she beamed. “I mean, I can always borrow jewellery from my sisters or the Temple’s possessions, but it’ll be nice to have something of my own. Something to lend to others instead of always having to ask them. Unless this valuable gift is meant as some kind of message to me?” Her last words had an obviously teasing tone, supported further by the playful wink she threw to both Eret and Dagur.

“It means that you’re brilliant, and I adore the ground you stand on,” Eret replied, also grinning. He placed a playful peck on her cheek, having to bend down low as she was a lot shorter than him.

“Mmh,” she hummed. “I know, I know. But now, off with you two. We can talk a little more later.” She shooed them off toward the door at the other end of the room which, without a doubt, led to her official bedroom.

Dagur and Eret didn’t need to be told twice. They wished them fun too, and left Hiccup and Cami alone in the front room. Once the door closed behind them, it immediately thumped, as if someone had gotten pushed forcefully against it. Which, probably, was exactly what had happened.

“I commend them on their patience,” Cami remarked, chuckling as another noise issued from within the bedroom. “And I guess I should have seen their aversion to this costume coming.” She gave a deep sigh, but then turned to Hiccup, a seductive smirk playing around her lips. “But now... it’s just us once again,” she purred, sauntering over to him, her usual rose perfume enveloping him. “And you don’t mind the costume, do you? No, I don’t think so. I’ve seen the way you looked. All this time now, you’ve been staring. But not at me, right?”

There was an almost visible shift in her behaviour, maybe in the way she moved, how she coyly cast her eyes down for a moment. Falling back into her role. “Well, Milord, now you have me. What would you like to do with me?”

Hiccup could only gape, eyes wide in a mixture of panic and longing, his mind reeling. It’s healthier to live those fantasies with me, right? Freya, yes! All those things he wanted to do with Astrid but couldn’t. All those things that still had to wait for over two years. They were driving him insane.

But here, with Cami, he could act them out, was allowed to do so, was even encouraged. It was what the rules proclaimed to be right, no matter how strange it felt. His mind was still in chaos, so when Cami leaned up to kiss him, he didn’t reject her.

Besides, he’d kissed her before already, many times. It was just as usual, just part of the procedure, part of the game. He made an effort to fall into his role as well, and kissed her back, just like he’d learned to. He leaned in for a better angle, responding to her actions, sure but not demanding, letting her set the pace. Just like the times they’d met back in Eastervale. This was no different.

Except it was different. He knew the word shy would never apply to Cami, and yet here she was, only carefully moving her lips against his. Acting. But acting like who? Astrid wasn’t shy when it came to kisses, not at all. She was eager and curious, always seeking more – not like what Cami did right now at all. But this was probably what people expected of how the Princess would behave. Neither they nor Cami could know better, after all.

So he played along, if only not to reveal how much he knew. He laid his hand on her hips and deftly pulled her closer when she kept playing shy, yet skillfully teased him with small motions. So odd, Astrid wouldn’t do that; suggestively letting her fingers glide down his chest, deliberately licking her lips while peeking up at him. She wouldn’t know about those subtle gestures. She was all direct curiosity or insecure hesitation, one or the other, but never both. So brave and honest, and never playing.
Groaning, he pushed those thoughts aside, and forced himself to focus on the present. On getting rid of his inappropriate desires, on channelling them. Trying to ignore the too-sweet fragrance of Cami’s rose perfume, he gripped her tighter, hands roaming up and down her back, over her rear. Beneath his fingers, the fabric of her dress felt weird, too rough and stiff. And it wasn’t what he’d do with Astrid anyway. With her, he would wait until she moved, would only hold her tighter when she pressed closer.

He really couldn’t help his thoughts running wild, of them returning to her. Of letting his imagination run free... The idea of it actually being Astrid here with him, under circumstances that allowed—

With a low groan, he pulled her even closer. He wanted her to be Astrid, wanted to kiss Astrid without worrying, wanted to touch and taste her however and wherever she enjoyed. His hands were trembling as he let them glide up her back, around her to reach for her breast, cupping, fondling. Her answering moan as he rubbed over her nipple beneath the thin fabric was mind-blowing, loud and urgent, begging him to go on. So he did, squeezed and massaged her as her kissing became more demanding. It felt nice, there was no point in denying that his body liked it.

And yet... Hiccup couldn’t help but remember the low and breezy moan Astrid had made, couldn’t forget how perfectly his hand had fitted around her breast while Cami’s more voluptuous curve practically spilt out of his hand.

And he knew perfectly well which he preferred.

*Freya,* what was he doing here?

Who cared that this, ‘living out his fantasies with an Ástir’, was what was considered right and appropriate? It wasn’t what he wanted, not at all. How could this be right, when it felt so... so wrong?

Cami was just about to loosen the cords of his trousers, purposefully rubbing against his crotch, when it all became too much. “Cami, stop!” he gasped, stumbling backwards and pushing her away at arm’s length. With his heart beating frantically, he stared at her, into her puzzled and somehow curious eyes. “I-I’m sorry,” he stuttered, “bu-but I c-can’t do this!” He stumbled further backwards until something soft hit the back of his knees, and he slumped down onto the cushioned couch. Desperately, he buried his face in his hands.

What was he doing here? Cami wasn’t Astrid, never could be. Astrid was special, irreplaceable. No matter what he and Cami did, it wouldn’t change how or what he felt, what he wanted. Because all he wanted was Astrid.

“Who is she?”

Cami’s question caught him off guard, and he jerked up in an instant.

“Uh – what?” he stammered. How could she know what he was thinking? She *mustn’t* know what he was thinking!

“Oh, come on,” she said with a smile that was weirdly soft and kind compared with her usual behaviour. She came closer, but instead of seating herself on his lap, as he’d half-expected, she sat down in one of the nearby chairs. “This isn’t the first time I’ve run into *that* reaction. You don’t have to tell me anything, but please, for the sake of our friendship, don’t lie.”

Hiccup’s eyes were wide, uncomprehending. “Wh-what are you talking about?” he asked, baffled.
If possible, her expression turned even softer. “When a man suddenly – and without any obvious reasons – doesn’t want to sleep with an Ástir anymore… then it’s usually because he’s in love. Now, it could also be a he, I admit that much. But judging by the last few months, you definitely aren’t averse to women either.”

Her last couple of words hardly registered in Hiccup’s mind anymore. Almost on reflex, his hand wandered to his chest – feeling his bare skin where Cami apparently had already opened the cords of his tunic – and the pulsing warmth beneath that was Astrid’s soul.

Love…

A breezy laughter escaped him as he finally realised his own stupidity.

“You’re right,” he murmured quietly, his lips stretching into what had to be a stupid grin. “I love her…” That’s what he should have told her when she’d asked what was between them. When he’d wondered what more there could be than ‘the Gods’ Will’. That he loved her.

“I know that I’m right,” Cami commented dryly, now sounding more like herself again. “The question is, do you want to talk about her?”

Hiccup looked up again, almost shocked. He’d nearly forgotten about Cami for a moment. Her question made him thoughtful though. Did he want to talk? Gods, yes! Yes, he wanted to talk with someone who might answer with more than a snort or a whinny, who might even give him an advice in what to do. But the question was… did he dare to do that?

“I don’t know,” he muttered, biting his lip and averting his gaze. “I can’t… it’s complicated.”

“Or it’s always complicated,” Cami snorted. She scrutinised him for a moment, then stood up and walked over to the entrance door. She opened it, though only a crack, and murmured something, then closed it again. Then she beckoned him over to the elegant little tea table. “Come, let’s sit over here. I’ve ordered us some spiced wine; it always makes conversations more comfortable, don’t you think?”

Hiccup nodded mutely, not trusting his voice. He got up on shaky legs and trotted over to where Cami was already lounging in one of the comfortable chairs, trying to keep his expression neutral. But inside, he was torn. The longing to talk and put some perspective into his feelings warring with the by-now deeply ingrained urge to not let anything slip.

Only a couple of minutes later, the ordered wine and glasses came; nothing but a low knock sounded from the door and Cami accepted the tray someone handed her without Hiccup seeing anyone. Further chewing on his lip, he watched as she filled two of the four glasses with the richly-coloured liquid, then handed him one.

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“Okay, now spill,” she ordered, her cheeky joke not quite enough to make him smile too.

“Cami, I don’t think,” he began, still undecided what to tell her or whether to tell her anything at all, but she interrupted him directly.

“I don’t need a name, Hiccup,” she prompted gently. “I don’t need to know anything about her. But you seem pretty troubled, if I may say so, and I feel like talking could help you. And just for the records, I’m oathbound not to pass on whatever you’re telling me; you do remember that, right?”

Swallowing, Hiccup nodded. She was right, she wouldn’t run around and tell everybody what she’d heard unless it was an immediate threat to the Crown or to the health of another person. And he didn’t need to tell her who he was talking about anyway. But where to begin?
“You’re right, I’m in love,” he eventually started, feeling lighter for saying the word, but also a little stupid.

“Yeah, we covered that already. But what about her? Do you know whether she feels the same for you?”

Smiling faintly, Hiccup once again rubbed his chest. “Yeah, I think she does.”

“Well, that doesn’t sound so complicated then,” Cami said, frowning. “Do you intend to marry her?”

Now, that was an easy question. “Yes. Yes, I do!” he blurted out, beaming. He couldn’t be sure, but he thought he saw Cami’s shoulders drop with a relieved sigh.

“Good. And again, what about her?”

“She does, too,” he announced, more confident now. Cami was right, talking about it felt good.

“Okaaaay,” she made, drawing the sound out until it sounded like a question. “Where’s the problem then? I mean, you’re a good catch: handsome, noble, some very good connections…”

And there went his confidence again…

Hiccup slumped back into his seat, head tilted upwards to stare at the ceiling. “That won’t be enough for her father,” he sighed, closing his eyes. “Besides, she’s too young anyway. It’s two more years before she turns twenty, so…”

“Oh, Loki… You caught yourself a noblewoman? Well, yeah, then I get that it’s complicated.” She must have caught his confused grimace, because she went on without him asking. “Only noblemen stick to this age rule,” she explained. “The rest doesn’t really care, thankfully. It’s ridiculous anyway, especially since most men can’t afford to marry until they can support a family, and that’s usually when they’re in their mid-twenties, so the age thing is usually moot by then.”

Hiccup closed his eyes and let out a deep breath as worries rose inside him. Had he said too much already? Would she be able to guess which almost-eighteen-year-old noblewoman had stolen his heart? But no… there were plenty of young noblewomen of that age in the capitol, especially with the upcoming Midwinter festivities – they and their families would be here for the blot that would be held in that magnificent plaza just outside.

“So, your problem is to convince her father?” Cami asked between sipping her wine and cramming a cookie into her mouth. “Wouldn’t a recommendation from your friends–” she nodded at the closed door to her bedroom, occasional sounds still coming from within, “–be enough? I mean, they are kinda influential.”

Hiccup gulped. “They’d first have to know about it,” he muttered, but quickly shook his head before she could dig deeper on that point. “But no, convincing her father is not the problem, not really. That’ll work out when the time comes, I have no doubts there.” There it was again, this comfortable certainty that, even now, was enough to let a weak smile tug at his lips.

She accepted that with only a nod and no further question. “Alright. But what exactly is your problem then? I mean, it sounds easy enough to me. Pay your respect to her father and officially inform him about your intentions. Maybe also inform him about whatever plan you’ve made to prove yourself worthy of her. Most fathers actually are fairly agreeable once you’ve convinced them that your intentions are genuine.”
“That’s… not the point,” Hiccup replied. He paused, realising that, to make Cami understand, he would have to tell her what he so desperately tried not to think about. He had to admit his weakness and his mistake, everything. “It’s… for now, nobody can know about us, but that’s not the problem, not really. The problem is… well… we simply can’t stay away from each other. I mean, so far, there were mostly just fleeting kisses but… but lately…” He paused, taking a deep breath, and then quickly added. “We’ve had secret meetings at night.”

There, he’d said it. No turning back anymore. Now it was on Cami to react, to get angry and to tell him how wrong it was. That he should know better, should never let that happen again. Just meeting her in secret was so wrong, after all, and she didn’t even know about the rest.

But against his expectations, she didn’t get angry. Her only reaction was to place her glass to the side and to give a weirdly sober, “Go on?”

Nervously wringing his hands, Hiccup took a moment to gather his courage before he settled on just quickly spilling everything. “It’s not as bad as it may sound. We just-just wanted more time—no, we needed more time. Time to talk and-and just be together. I know it’s wrong, spending so much time with her without some form of supervision, but… but we can’t bear it to be separated for too long; it’s complete madness.”

He took another deep breath, fearing Cami’s judgement. But she stayed silent, so he went on with his confession. “There was… kissing, of course. And cuddling… intense cuddling. And I know I should have stopped there already, but… but she’s so curious and eager. So brave. And I can’t stop her. I know I should, but I just can’t. I want her so much. Not a minute passes where I don’t think of her; her smile and her eyes, this inner fire she possesses. Loki, I-I can’t even relieve myself without images of her appearing in my mind! And I know that’s wrong. I know that I shouldn’t think about her that way, but I just can’t. I want her so much. Not a minute passes where I don’t think of her; her smile and her eyes, this inner fire she possesses. Loki, I-I can’t even relieve myself without images of her appearing in my mind! And I know that’s wrong. I know that I shouldn’t think about her that way, but I can’t help it. She’s everything to me, my entire life seems to revolve around her and I miss her every second I can’t be with her.”

Again, Hiccup paused in his monologue. A small part of him thought these words should sound pathetic, admitting that he had nothing left in his life but a girl he’d met only a few weeks ago. But it just wasn’t in him to feel that way. Yes, Astrid was all that was left to him. But it felt like so much more: a purpose, a goal, a whole future to look forward to.

And when he glanced at Cami, she didn’t look as if she thought him pathetic either. There was a softness around her eyes, maybe even the hint of a smile tugging at her lips, despite her carefully schooled expression. “That doesn’t sound too bad,” she prompted carefully.

Hiccup’s shoulders slumped. “It’s not,” he agreed with a pained smile. “But what’s bad is… A couple of nights ago, she, she asked for more. She’s had some bad experiences in the past, so when she wanted me to touch her, to replace those bad memories with better ones… I agreed.”

“And…?”

“So and I lost control,” he admitted, dropping his head in defeat. “I mean, I don’t even know what I wanted to do. I just wanted to help her, to show her that not all intimate contact feels that bad. But I got carried away. When she liked the way I touched her, I wanted to give her more. Just one more touch, one more kiss… Before I knew it, kissing and touching turned into, well, more. No clothes were stripped, but suddenly I was frotting with her. It felt so good… And-and she seemed to like it too. And I knew it was wrong, too much, crossing a line I was not allowed to breach, but… And I told myself to stop. Just one more moment, just one more breathy moan, just feeling her one more time…”

Hiccup pressed his eyes shut, his hands clenched into tight fists as the memories alone made his
heart beat quicker, blood rushing south until his trousers became uncomfortably tight. Gods, never in his entire life had he felt anything like in those minutes with Astrid. It had been so much more intense than being with any Ástir ever before. And it had felt so right, despite the fact that he’d known, even then, how wrong it was.

“What happened then?” Cami asked, voice low and serious. When he looked up, she had a stern expression on her face, not quite angry but surely not happy either. She had to know what he would say next, surely, she knew. But she made him say it anyway.

“I came,” he admitted weakly, eyes closed again. He didn’t want to see the accusation and disappointment in Cami’s eyes. He felt enough of that on his own already. “I spilt into my clothes, just like some inexperienced youngling. I swear, I didn’t mean to. I didn’t intend to… to use her like that. I never wanted to cross that forbidden line. If I could, I’d go back and club myself unconscious for being so stupid. But I can’t. I can’t make it undone, and I’m sorry. And I know that doesn’t mean anything. I failed. I failed her, failed myself, and I failed you and every one of your sisters who taught me better. I failed, and I’m sorry, but I can’t change it anymore. And… and I just don’t know what to do. I can’t even look her in the eyes anymore.”

He slumped down in his chair, hands tearing at his hair. It was all so hopeless. How could he allow himself to ever be alone with Astrid again when he couldn’t control himself? Being alone with her was already wrong, but this… No, he couldn’t take such a risk.

“Did she at least reach her climax too?”

Cami’s sudden question caught Hiccup off guard. “What?” he gasped, raising his head and throwing her an incomprehensible look.

But Cami didn’t answer. All she did was giving him a stony look, unyielding and piercing, that made him squirm in his seat.

“That—that’s not the reaction I expected,” he mumbled.

“I know. Now answer the question.” She was adamant.

Hiccup swallowed, dropped his eyes to his still untouched wine glass, and shook his head. “No, she didn’t,” he admitted, guilt further festering in his guts. “When… it happened, I freaked. Shooed her out directly, and…” He shrugged, feeling completely helpless. What had he been supposed to do?

For a short while, it was eerily quiet between them. Hiccup didn’t dare to say any more or to look up to gauge the level of Cami’s anger. He didn’t even dare to move. He just sat still, waiting for her verdict. Surely it would contain the order to never meet Astrid again without a chaperon – and no matter how guilty he now felt, he wasn’t sure whether either he or Astrid would be able to bear that.

But when Cami finally spoke, she surprised him.

“Gods, Hiccup, you’re unbelievable,” she snorted. “I honestly don’t know whether to laugh or to cry.”

At that, Hiccup finally dared to look at her after all, his confusion written all over his face.

“What?”

“You’re so… so adorable, sticking to all those rules and holding yourself to a nearly impossible standard. But the one rule that really matters, you ignore?” Something like a desperate laughter escaped her as she shook her head in almost comical disbelief.
“I don’t understand,” Hiccup muttered, forehead wrinkled in bewilderment as he tried to make sense of Cami’s reaction. “What do you mean?”

Cami gave him a long and nearly pitying look, then sighed. “Hiccup… I kinda hate to break it to you, but your perception of which rules matter and which don’t is pretty off.”

“But—”

“No, but,” she interrupted him directly. “Let me explain. I give you high marks for trying to stick to all those rules society has made when it comes to the interactions between a man and a woman. But as you said yourself, you already breached those by just meeting her.” Cami paused, clearly pondering how to phrase what she wanted to say and giving Hiccup time to fidget nervously. “What I mean is… Freya, what you did was only natural. Society would demand that I reprimand you, but I don’t serve those pompous gits. I only serve the Goddess herself, and she has her own rules when it comes to what is allowed and what is not.”

She took another deep breath, and her features softened. “Hiccup, it is clear as daylight that your intentions are genuine. In favour of keeping the peace, the Gods frown upon careless sexual interactions. You’re not to frivolously and accidentally produce offspring. But that’s it. You care for this woman, care for her deeply, there’s no question about that. And if I take you by your word, then there’s no danger of some future husband treating her badly for having loved someone else before him either.”

Hiccup blinked, uncomprehendingly shaking his head. “What… what are you trying to tell me?”

Again, she sighed. “Hiccup, I’m trying to tell you, that you haven’t done anything wrong by meeting her. The good people outside of the Temple wouldn’t want you to know this… But what you did is not against the rules. Or well… To be precise, there are only three rules that really matter, to the Goddess at least. The first is that you’re not to seduce and fool around with random girls just for fun. That’s what we’re here for, and it keeps the feuds and honour-killings to a minimum and all that. But that rule doesn’t apply to you. She’s not some random girl to you.”

“Exactly,” Cami nodded. “So, here’s the second rule. You’re not to produce any offspring out of wedlock.”

Hiccup waited for her to continue, but she didn’t. She just pointedly looked at him, one eyebrow raised as if she wanted him to reply to that. So he nodded, hesitantly. “I… know that. But what…” He shrugged a little helplessly, dazed.

“Oh, come on,” she snorted. “Okay, let’s see. You do remember how the whole impregnating business works, right?” Hiccup blushed a little, nodded, but didn’t say anything, so Cami went on without preamble. “So, did you do anything that could impregnate her?”

“I already told you, I came—”

“–in your pants, yes.” She rolled her eyes. “But not in her. You even were both still fully clothed, if I recall correctly.”

Slowly, understanding dawned on Hiccup, but he didn’t dare to jump to any conclusions. If she meant what he thought she meant… “So, you’re saying that… that…” he tried to clarify, but had a hard time to wrap his head around it. If she was serious…

“I’m saying that, so long as you make sure she doesn’t end up pregnant, you can do pretty much
whatever you want. In fact, make sure she stays a virgin; that’ll eventually make things easier for your wedding,” she advised, then a devious grin spread across her face. “But I know that you’re versed in enough alternatives, so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

At first, Hiccup could only stare, dumbfounded. Dimly, very dimly, he remembered having heard those rules before, when he’d first visited Freya’s Temple in his youth. But those rules had gotten overlain by countless conversations with his elders, by all the rules and expectations society placed upon men, especially noblemen. But those dim memories were enough to know that she wasn’t playing him for a fool. And he knew Cami well enough to trust that she wouldn’t do that anyway.

Slowly, a smile crept across his face as the meaning of her words sank in. So many things he wanted to do with Astrid, so many things he’d thought he had to banish out of his mind for the next two years, but now… To think that he actually could follow his wishes there, so long as she agreed, it was… was…

“Oh, and one other thing on that matter,” Cami interrupted his thoughts, the smirk on her face now almost intimidating. “You were afraid of relieving yourself because thinking about her that way would be wrong… Well, it’s not. It’s natural. You desire her, and since that appears to be mutual, there’s definitely no reason for you to refrain. I know men who think of all kinds of weird stuff as inspiration, thinking about your lover isn’t even creepy. On the contrary, that should help to keep your underwear clean,” she added, winking as her words made Hiccup blush once more.

Again, he took a few moments to think about her words, but then nodded. “Thank you, Cami,” he said wholeheartedly, smiling. “You have no idea how much that helps. I mean…” he trailed off, gaze shifting into the distance as images flooded his mind, images of him holding Astrid in his arms and of kissing her, uninhibited by those constant fears of going too far. They brought a dreamy smile onto his face.

A smile that got wiped away when he noticed how Cami’s expression had darkened. “And then there’s the third rule,” she said, now glaring at him. “That’s where you really failed, and I’m not sure what an appropriate punishment would be.”

“Ahm,” he made, frantically trying to remember. He was sure he knew the rules, all the rules, but–

“You’ve got to make sure that your partner reaches their climax too,” she exclaimed, agitatedly throwing up her hand. “Especially in a case like this where you’re more experienced. Seriously, Hiccup, I can understand if you don’t want to wait two more years to get physical with your love. And I gladly support you in whatever way, may it be by covering up where you are or answering questions. But you can’t, under any circumstances, leave her hanging like that. I mean, what do you think how she felt? If she needed you to show her that being touched can feel good, she probably hasn’t even touched herself. And you got her all hot and then just sent her away? Honestly, I thought you were taught better than that!”

Despite the still teasing undertone in her voice, Hiccup also saw the real anger in Cami’s eyes, and gulped. She was right… Groaning, he buried his face in his hands once again. Amidst all his guilt and fear, he hadn’t even spent one thought on how his stupid reaction had made Astrid feel. “Oh, Freya, forgive me,” he mumbled into his hands. How was he supposed to make that up to Astrid? If only he could go to see her directly once they left. Or even better, right now. Who knew how long Eret and Dagur would take, they hadn’t gotten the chance to spend time together like this in a while after all. Would they even think twice about it if he just left? Cami had already offered to cover for him; it would be easy. Just leaving and letting her tell them they were already done and that he’d been tired. He was pretty sure that he would find the way through the capitol and back to the castle, and if not, he could always ask for the way. And then he could–
No matter how much he needed to see her, to apologise and explain… he couldn’t. Nothing had changed, after all. He still couldn’t simply go to her whenever he wanted. No, he would have to wait for her to seek him out again… if she even would do that again after how much of an idiot he’d been.

“What am I supposed to do?” he groaned, mainly to himself. But, of course, Cami answered anyway.

“You know that it’s not the Goddess who has to forgive you, right?” she said. There was a dangerous tone in her voice, not really threatening and not really playful, but rather a mixture of both – which made it even worse. “You have to make it up to your love. So let’s see.” Carefully, Hiccup peeked up at her, not sure he wanted to hear her suggestion. She tapped her finger against her chin, making a show of thinking about it when the gleam in her eyes told him she already knew the answer. “Right. How about… you’re not allowed to come – at all – until you’ve made her come at least three times?” Hiccup choked in surprise as she made more considering noises. “Hmm. Yes, that sounds like a good idea to me.”

“Excuse me?” Hiccup sputtered. He hadn’t been expecting that!

“What?” she gave him a challenging smirk. “You’d rather I up it to nine times? No problem. Although, I kinda pity your girlfriend in that case.” She snorted, but then shook her head and became sincere again. “Seriously though, Hiccup. It’s her you have to beg for forgiveness, if you ask me. You’ve got to apologise and explain what happened to her. And, if you’re going to keep up these secret meetings… Well, she’s got to know the rules, too. And, yes, if she wants to learn more about sex as well, it is your responsibility to give her an introduction.” She chewed her lips, pondering, before she nodded to herself.

“Okay, let’s see,” she went on in a rather business-like tone. “Officially, you’d get this lecture on the day of your wedding. So when that happens, you better act all interested for the officials and witnesses and what-nots. But as you’ve probably noticed, you can’t treat your girlfriend like me or one of my sisters. If she’s a proper little noblewoman, and from the little you said I figure she is, then she doesn’t really know anything about sex. And since I know how… let’s say passionate you can be, my first advice is to go slowly. Very slowly, you hear me? Give her time to get accustomed to the new sensations, give her the power to stop or take a break at any moment. This is important, okay? For the start, it’s all about her; about her feeling good and safe and secure.”

Hiccup nodded a bit numbly – and then a slow smile started to crawl across his face as the penance Cami had given him grew in his mind, ideas already starting to sprout...

Since I’ll probably never get closer to the source than this,” Cami mumbled past her full mouth, but swallowed before she went on. “Do you guys have any suggestions on how I could improve in this role?”

It was hours after their arrival at the Temple, but Hiccup had lost count on how long they’d actually been here by now. Eret and Dagur had taken their sweet time, and Hiccup was incredibly grateful for that, even though he hardly could tell them so. Cami had used the time to explain a few things to him that he hadn’t known so far. Like how, in comparison to an Ástir, it would be more difficult to notice what Astrid might like as she possibly wouldn’t even know that herself. Or how sensitive she could be, how easily these new sensations could overwhelm her. Or why it was important that he didn’t put anything into her, not even his fingers, as her intact maidenhead would
become important before their wedding. By now, he felt dizzy with all the information, but also eager to meet Astrid again. There were so many things he wanted to show her... if she was still interested. But even if she’d changed her mind by now, if she didn’t want him to touch her again, just being with her would be so much easier now.

Although, he shouldn’t be thinking about that, not now. Not while he and Cami sat with Eret and Dagur around her table, drinking wine and chatting before they would part again. Upon Cami’s question, Eret and Dagur shared a thoughtful look, their wine glasses paused midway to their mouths.

“I don’t know,” Eret finally said, forehead wrinkled. “It’s really hard to imagine how Swanja would be like when teasing and seductive… But I think you’re doing a good job already. She’s confident, but not always quick to open up to strangers. So there’s always this… this front of polite etiquette.”

“Yeah, and I’d say you’re doing that alright,” Dagur chuckled. “Maybe even better than our dear Princess Royal herself, with all her barely hidden rebellion against this etiquette.”

“Oh, you think so?” Cami asked, overly affected. She’d even raised her hand to polite hide her smile and exaggeratedly fluttered her eyelashes at them all, which drew amused snorts from her audience.

“Yeah, well, never do that if it’s your goal to impersonate Swanja,” Eret laughed. “She’s more likely to throw daggers with her eyes than do that.”

Hiccup chimed in on the laughter, completely agreeing with his cousin. “Another thing you could change is your perfume. She uses mayweed, and not your trademark rose fragrance,” he added, chuckling. His comment made the other two men pause and throw him a strange look. Dammit, he really should pay more attention to what he said... “What, it’s true,” he shrugged nonchalantly, forcing his expression to stay neutral.

After another awkward moment, Dagur, who sat closest to Cami, leaned over and sniffed at her. “Heh, he’s right,” the red-head confirmed cheerily. “I didn’t even notice that. But then, he undeniably got a little closer to you than I did.”

“Indeed, he did,” Cami confirmed, smirking. She leaned over to Dagur, again fluttering her eyelashes at him, and ask, “Jealous?”

With a grin, Dagur turned to give Hiccup an appraising look, then replied, “Maybe.”

Hiccup rolled his eyes, but then chimed in on the general laughter. After months of other meetings of the four of them like this, he was quite used to their teasing and bantering.

“So, you had a good time then?” Eret asked, joining in on the general mood.

“Well, not quite as good as yours, from what we’ve heard,” Hiccup replied dryly, earning himself a light punch to the shoulder from Eret, just as Cami leaned back in her chair with a smirk.

“Well, we certainly had,” she confirmed, stretching like a cat. “Definitely a night to remember.” She gave Hiccup a wink that made Eret snort and Dagur cackle loudly.

Hiccup though dug his head and didn’t comment further in a not-kiss-and-tell manner. She was telling the truth, after all, if her comment ‘Funny, that’s surely the first time I took three men to my rooms and ended up having no sex at all.’ was anything to go by.
Still shaking his head in amusement, Eret leant forward to reach for the last cookie, but suddenly stilled. He cocked his head, looking at Cami’s ears, and grinned. “They look good on you.”

Cami preened with the new earrings on her ears, twisting her head left and right to put them on better display. “Thank you! I figured that I would give them a try. And with my hair bound like this, they’re thankfully even visible, even though it's a nuisance to braid them.”

“I can imagine,” Eret nodded, still grinning, and took a bite of the cookie as his eyes wandered around the room, searching… and then paused on a spot behind Cami. His grin faded, eyebrows drawing together as he quickly scanned the rest of the room only to land on that spot again.

Hiccup followed his gaze – to where earlier that night the horse sculpture had been.

Eret shot Cami a baffled look and swallowed his mouthful of cookie. “What happened to Hiccup’s gift?”

Cami’s face turned into a mixture of theatrical sorrow and a mischievous smirk. “Oh that…” she said, pressing a hand to her bosom as if in remembrance. “It went to a better place.”

Dagur whistled. “And I thought we were loud.” He gave Hiccup a backslap. “Good job, Hic!”

Hiccup flushed... and resisted the urge to give Cami a grateful look. Because, no, they hadn’t broken it during extremely athletic sex – not that Cami wasn’t occasionally rough on the furnishings, as Hiccup quite well remembered. No, she’d taken it down from where she’d put it and given it back to him.

“If not even your closest friends know about your lady love,” she’d said, “then give her this. An anonymous gift for everyone else, but a token to remember you for her.”

Hiccup had accepted Cami’s instruction with a thick swallow, touched by her thoughtfulness. And he would gladly follow her instructions, not just this one, but also those she'd given him before.

Smiling, he thought about what Cami had said a few minutes ago, and agreed wholeheartedly. This was a night to remember. Because, from now on, he would stop being afraid of crossing lines all the time when he was with Astrid. Because the only lines that mattered were those they set themselves.

He chimed in on the laughter about yet another joke Dagur had made, placing his hand on his chest as if he had trouble breathing. Feeling the warmth pulsing beneath.

From now on, he would only listen to their hearts.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah... another short addition before I head off into my hiatus. haha... Just imagine this would really have been part of the previous chapter...

Anyway, really looking forward to hearing your opinions and reactions to this chapter, please keep them coming, they're incredibly motivating! :D
As Daniel hastily left the bathhouse, having donned his clean tunic and trousers in a hurry, still tightening down his belt as he went out the door, he couldn’t help but feel triumphant. *Finally!*

Finally, he’d made progress.

Finally, he’d know for sure.

Finally, he’d be able to *act*.

Grim satisfaction filled his heart as he crumpled the inconspicuous note in his fist. He wasn’t fooling himself, as he knew perfectly well that this small note was only the start of a long and probably ugly process. But that didn’t change how pleased, even *excited* he was to finally get started. After months and *years* of escalating incidents, he finally had the chance to crack the shell of the conspiracy that was rotting the kingdom from the inside out.

With sure strides, he walked down the corridors and several staircases until he reached his goal: the castle’s dungeon. The guards that stood at the door to the side corridor he was heading at greeted him with a silent nod, and opened the door without a single word only to firmly close it behind him again. Not a word of what was spoken in here would reach unintended ears. The corridor behind the door was a short one; only a few strides deep with one door on each side,
leading to further rooms. The left one was a cell, the one to the right an additional guard room. Daniel paused, gritting his teeth as he glanced at the cell, but pulled himself together and entered the other room. He would get his chance to deal with the prisoner soon enough.

“Ah, I see the note reached you, Your Highness.” Fyrir Alvin greeted him with a nod as he entered, his deep voice barely more than a low rumble. The broad man filled a considerable amount of the small guard room, but as it was otherwise empty except for the small and hunched form of Fyrir Gothi and Daniel himself, it wasn’t much of an issue.

“Fyrir Alvin. Fyrir Gothi. Yes, I got your note; thank you for sending for me directly. So, he finally gave in?” Daniel asked, excited. He’d been waiting for this note to reach him for days now.

Frigga’s old Fyrir nodded, mutely as ever, and stepped forward to hand Daniel a folded piece of paper. Both Fyrirs stood quietly as he quickly unfolded it and scanned its content. As expected, it was nothing but a quickly scribbled list. A list that made him grit his teeth in hatred, yet at the same time made his heart thump eagerly. It was a list of names.

After scanning it twice, Daniel nodded and safely stowed it into the front pocket of his jacket. “Thank you for your efforts,” he said with a grim smile. “Hardly any name here comes as a surprise. Especially not...” he trailed off, gritting his teeth, but then gave a small nod. “I want to speak to him once more.”

“We didn’t expect anything else,” Alvin nodded, and led the way over to the cell and its resident. Gunter Erwinsson still wore what had to be the remnants of his formal court attire, but after several days now, it had lost a great deal of its former dignity. The formerly neat trousers, tunic, and west were stained with dust and sweat, the fabric dishevelled and partially torn. The former Count Ravenledge had been offered clean clothes as Daniel knew, but he had refused to wear anything that would diminish his status.

The man sat on a low pallet, an empty bowl at his side, and looked up as the door to his cell opened. “Ah, what an honour,” he sneered in a low and raspy voice. “The Crown Prince himself again. This is it then? Is my time up?”

Daniel scrutinised the old man. Directly after his imprisonment, he’d used every opportunity to fight his way out, but it seemed like he’d given up by now. Or he’d accepted that he had no chance of escaping anyway with Fyrir Alvin blocking the way.

“But yet,” Daniel replied solemnly. “We’re still waiting for our couriers to return with a more accurate assessment of County Ravenledge’s current state. You still have a few days left.”

Gunter Erwinsson gave a harsh laughter. “How very kind of you. A few days more to wait for my slow and degrading death...” He gave the two Fyrirs standing behind Daniel wary glances, before he got up on his feet, slowly, indicating that he was no threat. “I assume you got what you wanted, Your Highness. Each and every man I know of being guilty of supporting the title disputes, as you requested.”

Daniel nodded, once. “And you swear that all these names are valid? You know these men are guilty?”

The former count snorted. “Indeed. I’ve only been to one of their meetings, but that was enough to get what they’re up to. All they want is chaos and power.”

Again, Daniel nodded. He knew the former count’s story by now. How a certain influential duke
had approached him with an offer of power if he agreed to support him, how the count had refused, and how, in retaliation, the duke had arranged for his county to be taken from him.

A part of Daniel saw the value in the former count’s action. He’d been loyal to his position and House Berserker, hadn’t been a bad vassal, all things considered. But that didn’t change the fact that he was a bad man and had been a horrible leader to his people.

“And are these all the noblemen who conspire against the Crown?” Daniel asked calmly. He already knew the answer, but still had to ask.

“Hardly,” Gunter snorted. “But those are all the names I can confirm without a doubt.”

Glancing to the side, Daniel saw how Fyrir Gothi nodded. The former count was speaking the truth. “All right,” Daniel said, turning to leave the cell, but paused when the other man spoke again.

“What about our agreement?” he inquired. “What about my son?”

Glancing back at him, Daniel let out a sigh. “Our agreement stands,” he announced. “You told me what I wanted to know, so I will keep my end of the bargain. Your son Angus won’t suffer any further consequences by your or Harold’s actions. He will remain a knight in the Royal Army, and will suffer no inferior treatment for what his family did. You have my word.”

He didn’t feel comfortable with having the son of this man, Harold’s brother, among his personal guard. But so far, Angus hadn’t done anything wrong, was a good and loyal soldier, in fact. Punishing him just for his relations wouldn’t be right. Although, Daniel would certainly keep an eye on him.

“Thank you, Your Highness,” Gunter muttered. He insinuated a bow, before he slumped back down onto his pallet.

Daniel gave him a last look before he followed the Fyrirs and left the cell. The man looked completely broken.

Once back in the solitude of the guard room, Daniel turned toward the Fyrirs again. “You’ve worked on him for several days now. What is your evaluation?” he asked, glancing from one to the other.

Gothi and Alvin shared a look that spoke of decades of cooperating. “He’s telling the truth,” Alvin finally grumbled. “Most of the names he gave us didn’t come as a surprise, and the few that did—” he shrugged, “—well, they aren’t exactly known as close allies of the Crown either. And he has no reason to try and twist the truth in any way. His story makes sense. He was loyal to House Berserker, and when he refused to cooperate with the traitors they took away his city, and burned it to the ground when he came to take it back. A punishment and a warning. There was never any loyalty between him and those men; he just tried to get as much out of revealing them as possible.”

Fyrir Gothi nodded in agreement, and Daniel did as well. “Why now, though?” he wondered idly. “I didn’t offer him anything that I haven’t offered him at the beginning already.”

Again, Gothi and Alvin shared a brief glance. “Maybe he realised that you wouldn’t offer him anything else anyway?” Alvin suggested. “Maybe he gave up?”

“Yes, probably.” Sighing, Daniel grimaced. “Either way, we have what we wanted. Now, we just have to decide what to do with this list. Did you send a note to my father?”
Alvin nodded. “And to the Grand Dukes too, as requested.”

“All right. Then I better not let them wait.” With another nod, Daniel bid them farewell, and left the dungeon again.

As he made his way back to his rooms to change into a more formal attire before meeting his father and the Grand Dukes, he felt the same sense of excitement as before growing inside his chest. Finally, they would be able to do something! And there was one name on that list that Daniel was looking very forward to dealing with, one name that hadn’t come as a surprise at all.

Duke Thuggory of Meathead. Of course he’d been on that list of traitors. Gunter Erwinsson hadn’t been able to confirm Daniel’s suspicion, but he was sure that Thuggory had cooperated with Harold to get to Astrid. Just like he was sure that Thuggory was somehow behind the first attack on her all those months ago, too. Daniel had no proof or evidence, not even a hint or rumour, but he simply knew it. The satisfied smirk that had flickered across Thuggory’s face on that day… Even after all these months, Daniel still couldn’t forget that look.

But now, finally, he could get back to him. Maybe not directly for what had happened to Astrid, or how he’d treated other girls, if rumours were true, but in the end that didn’t matter. He would stop Thuggory and his malicious doings, would gladly do whatever was necessary, pay whatever price it took. Everything, if only it meant revenge for what he’d done to Astrid, and would turn the Kingdom back into a safer place to live in again.

A burst of laughter made Daniel look up, just in time to see three familiar figures turn around the corner at the end of the corridor he just passed. For a second, he considered calling after Eret, Dagur, and Hiccup – but decided against it. He didn’t want to ruin their cheerful mood with politics; they’d get the chance to discuss it at a later occasion.

Their cheerfulness made him a little melancholic, though. If only it would be possible for them to spend more time here at the castle than just these brief few months each year. Their presence was so incredibly good for Astrid, Eret’s especially. Ever since his arrival, she was like a completely different person.

Or well… no, that wasn’t true. She wasn’t like a different person. She was herself again. Not the fearful and jumpy shell of a person she’d been during the months after the spring festival anymore, but happy and laughing. So full of life again. If only they would see how good they were for each other…

And, well… Cold-blooded as the dynastic logic was, Astrid would almost certainly be married off to either Eret or Dagur the day she turned twenty anyway. She would be expected to start popping out heirs as rapidly as possible, if only to avoid another succession crisis in one of the grand-dukedoms. No matter how much they all liked to ignore it, those were the solid facts, their future – and the only solace was that she still had two years for her mental and emotional wounds to heal before she would have to accept getting intimate with a man again.

It was the same cold-blooded logic that demanded for Daniel to soon choose a wife, too, with an impeccable bloodline of course, and to sire heirs on her, regardless of his heart. No matter how much he despised that thought, it, too, was a solid fact, a future he was prepared for. And he comforted himself that it was yet another way to make his friends’ lives easier, if nothing else. If anything were to happen to him, he didn’t want the weight of the Kingdom to lie on Astrid’s shoulders. To place a target on her – and her future husband. Nothing cemented an usurper’s legitimacy like marrying the last remaining member of the old royal line, after all. And they surely wouldn’t refrain from turning her into a widow first, either.
Idly, he wondered whether the way the Tribes handled their successions, electing their future ruler, rather than having the succession be merely a matter of bloodlines, was the more prudent way, with fewer intrigues and blood-shedding. Although… that *obviously* wasn’t how it always worked, either.

Sighing, Daniel pulled his thoughts away from *that* whole complicated mess. There was nothing he could do to influence the Tribes and their situation, he had to accept that – no matter how much he’d like to. Forcefully, he focused back on things where he *could* make a difference – the future of his beloved sister. All Daniel wanted was to ensure that she would be happy. But Astrid refused to see Eret as anything but her brother, and the same went for Dagur and Snot. If only she would overcome those sisterly feelings, and see them as something else. Maybe not as a true lover, as marrying for love was a luxury they couldn’t afford, but at least as a partner. Someone to spend her life with. Someone who would make sure she was happy, so that Daniel could stop worrying over her.

Letting out a deep breath, he threw one last glance to where his friends had vanished moments ago, then he continued on his way. There had been a time, a couple of weeks ago, when he’d mildly entertained another hope. He knew his sister well, after all. Lively as she was, she’d still always struggled with opening up to strangers, even before that first assault. So when she’d opened up to Hiccup without any problems, he’d hoped… Surely, she wouldn’t see him as a brother, too. And while he didn’t know Hiccup as well as he knew Eret or the others, Daniel was still convinced that Hiccup was a good man. There had been the hope, that, if he would agree to the union, he certainly would take good care of Astrid.

But Harold’s assault had destroyed that hope. Sure, she wasn’t as jumpy and scared as she’d been after the spring festival. But while her behaviour toward Eret and Dagur, her *brothers*, hadn’t really changed, the differences in the way she interacted with Hiccup, a relative stranger, were striking. Gone was her playful lightness around him, the joking and teasing. It even seemed like she grew especially tense around Hiccup now, probably because of his physical resemblance to Harold.

*Damned* be Harold to Hel for what he’d done to her! And damned be Thuggory for pulling the strings from the background; and all just because she’d repeatedly turned him down. He prayed that Nidhogg would gnaw on their entrails.

Daniel let out an angry growl, startling a passing maidservant, and took a deep breath to calm himself again. Exhaling, he relaxed his gritted teeth and clenched hands, and forced himself to relax, to return to his controlled self. Getting angry wouldn’t do him any good, he’d learned *that* lesson already. Especially back then when he’d arranged for the quick execution of Astrid’s attacker. If only he’d been more patient… if only he’d waited to first *question* the man. Maybe he could have already put an end to Thuggory’s doing then.

Smiling grimly, Daniel felt for the folded note in his pocket. This time would be different, though. This time, he wouldn’t act too hasty. This time, he would use calm logic and politics to fight. That was something he was good at, after all; thinking and tactics. This time, he would free Astrid and the entire Kingdom of Thuggory. And with him of many others who were a threat to their people’s safety in their own ways.

For that goal, Daniel was willing to pay any price.

.o O o .

“Can’t say any of these names come as a surprise,” Oswald grumbled as he leaned over the King’s shoulder to glance at the piece of paper.
Daniel stood quietly and watched the three men on the other side of the impressive desk. The more agreeable of the two older Erets, his friend Eret’s father, nodded mutely.

“The question is just what we’re going to do about them now that we have confirmation,” Osmond sighed, placing the piece of paper onto the tabletop in front of him.

Daniel gave the list a thoughtful look. “Putting them on trial, as we did with Count Ravenledge, won’t work, right?” he asked, even though he already knew the answer. As much as he preferred such a relatively clean solution – things wouldn’t always be that easy.

“Sadly not,” Eret II confirmed, rubbing his tattooed chin. As so often, it amused Daniel how similar he and his son were, in looks and mannerisms, but today, that wasn’t enough to make him smile. “There’s nothing we can accuse them of, nothing solid. Sure, they are the ones to blame, but that doesn’t mean that they ever did more than pulling strings. And even proving that would be difficult. We have, after all, only the word of a convicted criminal who had heard them giving big speeches.” He shook his head. “No, a trial wouldn’t lead us anywhere; if we tried that, we’d almost assuredly fail. And if we give them any excuse to raise their banners in rebellion in retaliation, to start a civil war…” He trailed off, shaking his head. But he didn’t need to explain anyway.

The names on the list – well-placed and well-off counts, and even several centrally-placed dukes – had demesnes that wound their way through the heart of the kingdom. Their fiefdoms were wealthy and well-populated – often with lands stolen from other lords – and their own personal forces, while not nearly a match for the Royal Army, could still inflict a wound on the kingdom that they might never recover from.

Daniel thought of the landscape to the west, of burned-out orchards and skeletal towns. Of overgrown fallow fields and mass graves of the fallen.

The thought of that sort of devastation here in the kingdom’s heart... it gave him chills. And apparently, he wasn’t the only one.

For a minute or three, they all fell silent, thinking, contemplating how they could go about this problem. Daniel followed his father with his eyes as he got up and produced four elegant glasses from a cupboard standing to the side and filled them from a bottle. He eyed the rich amber liquid after his father handed him a glass, then followed the other men’s example and tossed it back into his throat in a single swallow. The Tribal whiskey burned on its way down, and he put the glass back on the desk with a thunk.

There was a slight scoff from the other side of the desk, and Daniel turned his head to look at Oswald’s mildly amused expression. “I remember well how, five years ago, you tried a single sip of that, spat it out, and said that you didn’t understand why we drank it. You’ve surely grown up since then.”

Daniel scoffed in reply. “That was before I saw the battlefield firsthand... and, even worse, politics.”

Both Oswald and Eret II chuckled weakly, but his father just nodded and refilled the small glasses before handing one back to Daniel. “Aye, those can do things to a man. Those, and...” the King trailed off, sighing. Apparently lost in thoughts, he gazed at his own glass, at the sloshing golden liquid, then lifted it. “To absent friends.”

“To absent friends,” the Grand Dukes murmured in reply, raising their glasses.

Daniel chimed in, lifting his own glass, and wondered which lost friends they were seeing.
battles to the west had given him a number of faces that he would dearly love to see again.

A melancholy silence filled the room, and he contemplated suggesting to relocate to the other part of the office, the lower table with the comfortable sofa and chairs around it – but decided against it. For once, this was his father’s office; it would be his privilege to suggest that. And in a way, Daniel even understood why he hadn’t done it yet. The conversation they were about to have wasn’t going to be a comfortable chat among friends after all, but a sober and surely not comfortable discussion about politics and traitors.

“How about…,” Oswald eventually began, though only to trail off again, resolute eyes drilling into the whiskey in his glass, before he sighed. “How about we use assassins?” He looked around, rolling his eyes at the somewhat scandalised looks he earned himself for that comment. “Oh, don’t act so surprised; you all have thought about it, and you know it! We all have our contacts, after all.”

“But sentencing them all to death, just like that?” Eret II asked sceptically.

“As traitors to the Crown, they deserve nothing else,” Oswald replied, shrugging. “We could even make the sentencing official before – there’s reason enough, I’d say. Not to mention the countless murders and other crimes that go on their account. We would just need to–”

“That wouldn’t work.” King Osmond interrupted him quietly. As Daniel glanced at his father, he looked deep in thoughts, concentrated, but also weirdly tired. “You’re right, I have thought about that. If we only had to deal with one man, or maybe up to three, that would be an option. But with–” he glanced down at the list between them, “–well over two dozen men of high ranks? No, I don’t think so. Hiring enough men to deal with them all at the same time is too risky. It would take just one failure to put them on guard, one capture or turncoat, and it would blow back in our faces.” He raised one hand to ward off an interruption by Oswald. “I know what you want to suggest. But even if we use someone who’s loyal and supposedly as invincible as your specialist, then it still wouldn’t work. After the third accidental death of a High Lord at the latest, the others would retreat into hiding. And while that might serve to calm these disputes for a year or two, it surely wouldn’t help on the long run. No, what we want is… is to draw them out! So that we can deal a lethal blow to this conspiracy’s roster and set them back. Many of them don’t have heirs or clear lines of succession, and that would revert them to the Crown, or allow us to judge who succeeds them. If we removed enough of them at once, we could completely hamstring this faction’s aggregate strength of arms and fortune.”

Grumbling, Oswald nodded, clearly not happy but seeing the logic in the King’s words nonetheless.

“Drawing them out… Maybe with something like a tournament?” Daniel suggested thoughtfully. “The prestige of a big tournament surely would be enough to lure them here, and accidents do happen all the time at such events. We’d just need to place the right men as participants.”

“Maybe,” his father agreed hesitantly. “But even then it would draw attention when so many accidents happen. Again, if it becomes obvious which participants accidentally get killed, the others would retreat quickly. The general idea might work, but…” he trailed off, shaking his head.

“How about a Hunt then?” Eret threw in. “Out in the forests, nobody would ever know how certain accidents happened. And we could invite enough other noblemen so that the number of accidents wouldn’t look overly suspicious either.”

“But if it’s such a common Hunt, many of these wouldn’t even participate,” Oswald pointed out, waving at the list. “They would consider it beneath them.”
“Maybe something like the old Dragon Hunts then?” Eret II went on, unperturbed. “Something that’s special enough to lure them out. They might even end up killing each other if the prize is grand enough – they’d all be in this for themselves, and, well, as the saying goes... no honour among thieves.”

“I know you’re fond of old traditions like the Dragon Hunts, old friend,” Osmond remarked with a small smile. “But you know as well as I do that those were nothing but excuses. I don’t think there’s been a dragon killed in living memory during one of those arranged hunts. Maybe Fyrir Gothi remembers one. But there simply aren’t enough dragons around here anymore. And you do remember the one Dragon Hunt we participated in some – oh, was it almost thirty years ago already? When we spent the entire three days of the Hunt in that tavern next to Freya’s Temple?”

Eret and Oswald shared a glance and Eret snickered like a young man for a moment. “Aye, just like practically... everybody else did too,” he added, then glanced at Oswald and clapped him on the shoulder. “And you can’t say it didn’t work out for Oswald here!”

Osmond rolled his eyes as Oswald flushed slightly. “Aye, and now her daughter works here as one of the best bakers in the city.” Daniel blinked at his father’s words. Oh. Was that where Uncle Oswald had met... he shook his head, trying to stay focused, despite the whiskey and the old gossip. “But that’s the problem. No dragons, no prize or prestige worth the effort, and unless you think that they’ll die of exhaustion in Freya’s Temple, there’d be no risk to them.”

“Ah, but that’s not a fair comparison. Wasn’t that at your father’s fiftyth birthday celebration? Those were stressful days and that Dragon Hunt really was only planned as a break for everyone from the weeks of feasting and socialising. I mean, that was...”

The other men drifted off into memories about the old days and teasing Oswald, but Daniel wasn’t paying close attention to that. There was something in what Uncle Eret had said, something that sparked the hint of an idea, something–

“How about this,” he said thoughtfully, interrupting the other men’s joking. “I think we all agree that drawing them out in order to thin their ranks is what we need to do. A tournament, though, would be too random and obvious, and a Hunt possibly too common. But how about we do both? We could host a grand event, like what was done for grandfather’s birthday, something stretching over half a month or more. Something where accidents can happen every now and then, where people might tragically disappear in the forests, and where the glory at stake is high enough that some of these greedy lords turn on each other. Divide and conquer is a tactic I’m familiar with; we do that in the West all the time.”

Daniel felt his heart beat faster as his idea more and more took shape in his mind. “When we know that there are several groups of bandits, raiders, and enemy soldiers in the area – especially when they’re from different Malarian princedoms – then we place some kind of bait to lure them out and let them fight each other over it, so we only have to deal with whoever’s left. We could do that here, too. Host such an event, lure them out, let them fight each other, and deal with who’s left.”

There was a moment or three of silence, before Eret II nodded. “I think that might work. We just need the right bait.”

“Exactly,” Daniel agreed eagerly. “Too bad that we already offered County Ravenledge to Lord Gregson, that might have been just what we’d need as a bait.”

“Don’t overestimate the value of that county, son,” Osmond said grudgingly. “From the little we’ve gotten so far, it’s in a pretty sorry state. But even if it were in a better one, men like Thuggory wouldn’t compete for such a county themselves. They’d send their vassals instead, and
then control the land by controlling them.” He shook his head, grimacing. “No, we’d need something else. Something so big, so valuable that they’d want it for themselves.”

For a few minutes, they threw around several ideas like a chest of golden coins from the royal treasures, trade contracts, or other admissions. But nothing appeared to be suitable, nothing that the greedy lords would want for themselves, instead of being content to control it through pawns. Eventually, they ended up sitting and standing mutely, all thinking, but without being able to come up with further ideas.

Until Eret II spoke up.

“I… might have one last suggestion for what we could use as bait,” he said quietly. He’d had his eyes glued to the ground, but now raised his head to look at them all in turn. “But you’re not going to like it.”

. o O o .

Hours later, Daniel stood in front of the window at the end of the corridor outside of his room and gazed out into the distance. When he’d been younger, he’d used to do that often. From here, the view over Lake Vola with the broad shores of white sand and the surrounding hills and the forest was breathtaking.

But tonight, he barely registered anything of that. Not because it was dark night outside, no; there was enough light from the moon and the stars to make out the shapes and to reflect on the waves. The reason why he didn’t pay any mind to the beauty surrounding him were his distraught and troubled thoughts.

_The price was too high!_

He’d thought he was ready to pay _whatever_ price he had to, but he’d been wrong. The option uncle Eret had suggested was too high a price, and he _hadn’t_ been ready for that.

And yet, it was the only option.

They’d spent _hours_ discussing it afterwards. Even though they’d build in a loophole that made it bearable, Daniel knew that nobody, not he himself, not the Grand Dukes, and certainly not the King was happy with their decision. And yet, they’d committed to it anyway.

Because it was the only way forward that they could see.

With his hands clenched into tight fists and his eyes pressed shut, he let his head fall against the cold glass. _I’m sorry!_ he thought desperately. _I’m so, so, sorry…_

But, of course, his apologies wouldn’t reach the person they were meant for. And never could, not until it was too late.

He didn’t really notice the passing of time as he stood there and gazed out into the darkness. But he figured it must have been a while when suddenly a familiar hand landed on his shoulder.

“Hey, you’re still up?” Eret asked. “That must have been quite some news if they kept you up for so long. Were you able to deal with whatever it was?” He had a lazy grin on his face, similar to Dagur’s behind him, but when they noticed Daniel’s despondent expression, they sobered up in an instant.

“What happened?” Dagur asked, stepping closer as well, but Daniel just shook his head.
“It’s… nothing of importance right now,” he tried to placate them. “Yes, everything’s dealt with… or at least plans are made.” He swallowed, then shook his head. “But let’s not talk about that now. How was your night?”

Eret gave him a scrutinising look. “It was good. Kaden sends her thanks and gratitude.” He hesitated for a moment, but then went on, “You know you can tell us what bothers you, right? And if it’s some political secret we’re not yet allowed to know, you at least can vent, if that helps. We always have an open ear for you.”

That brought a small smile to Daniel’s face. “Yes, I know.” He paused, honestly considering for a moment, but then shook his head. “And it’s actually not ‘you’re not allowed to know’. You’ll learn about it soon enough, I guess. But… But I think it would be better if you didn’t know just yet.”

“What, you doubt our loyalty?” Eret asked, theatrically pressing a hand to his heart as if he was hurt. But Daniel wasn’t in the mood for joking.

“Believe me, my friend, your loyalty is the last I’d ever doubt.” he placed one hand on Eret’s shoulder and gave him a strained smile. “In fact, I’m very much counting on your loyalty for all this to end well. But it is also because of this loyalty that I can’t tell you just now.”

There was confusion on Eret’s and Dagur’s faces, and it pained Daniel to not be able to clear it. But he also knew that, sometimes, not knowing something could be a blessing. And he didn’t want to inflict that kind of pain on his friends. They shouldn’t have to be forced to choose to whom they were more loyal.

Chapter End Notes

*jumps back into hiding and waits for the explosion*
Sooo, this is finally going to continue. I know it's just been a month and there even was the surprise interlude, but to me, it felt like it's been ages. And I can't really say why.

So, NaNoWriMo is over, and I'm proud to say that I 'won' with roughly 54'000 written words. I actually didn't expect that, so it makes me pretty happy. But I also have to confess that only about 15'000 of these words were for FTLOAP... when I'd planned to only write that and build a bit of a buffer. Ah, well, that's how it is. So I wrote a couple of one-shots and drabbles, a couple of chapters for 'Undine', nearly the entire story 'Lessons In Dancing And Dreaming' which I'll start to post soon, the entire outline and the first chapters to a Ballet AU... Looking at all this, I think I needed a break from FTLOAP which pretty much ruled my life for this entire year (HOW IS IT DECEMBER ALREADY?). So that's good. Back with new energy! Or at least I hope so...

Anyway, here's another chapter where I knew pretty early which lyrics I would use as a title. It's "I Wanne Be The Slipped (slipped) Wor Upon Your Lip (lip)", once more from 'Whatever It Takes' by Imagine Dragons. (I like this song very much and I can promise that there will be at least more chapter named after lyrics from this song...)

To Hiccup, the trip back to the stables was barely more than a blur. He remembered – vaguely – that they’d said their farewell to Cami, agreeing upon coming to visit her again soon. And he also dimly remembered how Eret and Dagur had walked off into the direction of the castle once they’d left the city streets behind them. They’d asked if he wanted to come with them – “to spend the night in a real bed for once” – but he’d refused. He quite liked the solitude of the stables, and the accommodations there weren’t all that uncomfortable anyway.

And he definitely needed the time alone to work through everything Cami had said.

Some bits were simple or wouldn’t affect him for a long while to come, like the whole topic about Astrid’s maidenhead. From what Cami had said, Hiccup supposed it was quite possible that its state was checked upon every now and again, simply due to the ‘value of the virgin princess to the kingdom’. Given her love of horseback riding, it could easily break by accident, after all. If that happened, then Astrid would have to spend a couple of months secluded within Frigga’s temple to ensure that she wasn’t pregnant before their wedding. Nothing bad, all in all, but inconvenient, which meant that he wasn’t by any means to break it. That was simple logic and easy to remember.

Cami’s lesson on how to eventually break it while inflicting as little pain as possible had been a bit more complicated. But Hiccup decided not to dwell on that. All that was still so far away in their future, and he would receive this lesson again once the time came, after all.

But what really occupied his mind was the question what he would do once he and Astrid got the
chance to be alone again. What would he tell her, what would he do? Of course, he had to explain, to apologise, had to assure her that it had been his mistake, and not hers. And he had to make it up to her. If she wanted that.

Thinking about how to make it up to her made him swallow, though. He knew some men struggled with impatience when it came to pleasing women, but he himself never had that problem. He loved to thoroughly explore his partner’s body and to please them, with the reactions he elicited driving his own arousal higher. But the prospect of doing so with Astrid, of finding the spots that made her shiver and of learning all her noises and subtle signs – everything without the fears of breaking the rules – it was nearly more than he could bear right now.

And that was another reason why he hadn’t accepted the offer to sleep in the castle. He couldn’t be sure that he wouldn’t try to sneak his way into her rooms if he were to spend the night in such close proximity, and he knew how dangerous that would be. It was too much of a risk.

No, he would have to wait until she could come to the stables again, hopefully soon, maybe even tomorrow night already.

Oh, Gods, please, let her come here tomorrow, he silently prayed as he reached the field in front of the stables. It wasn’t just because of his desire for her though, he reminded himself as he pushed open the door and entered the relatively warm stables. He could deal with that problem well enough by himself. No, it was so much more than that. He reached up to kindle the lantern near the entrance, smiling at the prospect of just gazing at her smile again, of hearing her laugh, of holding and kissing her, of talking freely. Once again, two days were already enough to miss her terribly, the gleam in her eyes, her voice, the sense of warmth and rightness she emitted.

“Hiccup?”

Gods, he thought he could even hear her voice. Hiccup chuckled, shaking his head at himself. He really was a lovesick fool, there was no point in denying that. And he wouldn’t want to change a thing.

“Hiccup, is that you?”

Hiccup flinched, then whirled around in an instant when he heard her voice again. With wide eyes, he stared into the darkness beyond the light of his lantern, at where, slowly, a shadowy outline was forming.

Astrid, wrapped into his warm blanket, stood at the entrance to his stall. She looked tired as if she’d just woken up, sleepily rubbing her eyes and blinking into the light, but smiled when her gaze became clearer.

“You’re back!”

Astrid couldn’t deny that she felt a little stupid.

She’d known that Hiccup wouldn’t be at the stables, after all. She’d known that he wouldn’t be back until late in the night, and fresh out of the bed of one of Freya’s Ástir. She had no illusions there, and wasn’t even sure what she expected. But it didn’t really matter to her how late he would return or how exhausted he would be – so long as she could see him that night. Talk to him.

After an hour of fitfully tossing and turning in her bed, of constantly thinking about him, and worrying over his weird behaviour during the last days, she had decided that waiting another day
wasn’t feasible. She wouldn’t find any sleep tonight anyway. So she’d made her way to the stables after all, fully prepared to wait for him – only to fall asleep after all once she was nestled into his blanket, surrounded by his scent and that of fresh hay and the soothing noises of the horses.

But now he was here, looking so achingly beautiful in the dim light of the lantern, and stared at her in utter disbelief.

“A-Astrid?” he gasped, and yes, she couldn’t help but feel stupid.

What if he didn’t even want her to be here? He’d already spent the last couple of hours with a woman, after all. Self-consciously, she pulled his blanket around her shoulders tighter.

“Yes, I-I’m sorry for intruding here.” She let her gaze shift to the side, not wanting to see his reluctance or maybe even annoyance. He’d been so reclusive during the last two days, so why would he want her to be here now? “I just… I wanted to see you. Talk. I-I missed you, and…and…”

She didn’t get the chance to get out more of her stammered explanation. Hiccup crossed the distance between them with only a few strides of his long legs, and before she could utter even one more word, she found herself caught in a tight embrace.

“Oh, Astrid,” he mumbled, muffled against her neck and into her hair as he practically curled himself around her. “Astrid, I’m so sorry! I was an idiot and a fool, and afraid, and I’m sorry, so sorry.”

He kept on repeating his apology over and over, but Astrid didn’t register much of his words. With his arms holding her, his lips moving against her skin, and his warmth surrounding her, all anxiety momentarily melted off her. She wanted to return his embrace, to pull herself closer against him, but with his blanket still wrapped around her, that wasn’t practical. So she just burrowed deeper into his embrace, sighing in relief.

*They were good.*

*Always.*

Eventually, Hiccup retreated to look at her. “I missed you too,” he belatedly replied to her words, brushing away wayward strands of her hair. The touch of his fingers on her skin felt good, even as they trembled slightly. “And I’m so sorry. If I promise to try and make it up to you, do you think you can forgive me?”

“Forgive you?” she asked, frowning slightly, but distracted as she leaned into his touch. “For what?”

“For chasing you away the other night,” he explained in a remorseful tone.

Astrid frowned. “Oh… that…” She hadn’t thought of that night as something he needed to apologise for. It had been wonderful to feel him so close, something she hoped to repeat soon. But then, she still didn’t really understand what had even happened.

“Yes, that.” He swallowed, then gazed into her eyes as if he was looking for something. “I’m sorry,” he said once again. “My behaviour was stupid and I can only guess how confusing that must have been for you.”

“What even happened?” she asked a little sheepishly, shrugging. “For me, it was… everything was perfect, and then suddenly… it wasn’t.”
“It was my fault… And I owe you an explanation.” Sighing, Hiccup released her from his embrace, but only to pull her along to sit down more comfortably in his stall. Astrid watched him, unsure where to sit down herself, but then decided that being cautious didn’t really feel right. So she climbed onto his lap, and wrapped the blanket around them both as a sorry excuse for an excuse – which earned her a loving smile from Hiccup that made her heart beat a little faster.

“You were right,” he began, playing absently with a loose strand of her hair. “With what you said the other day, I mean. Nothing of what ever happened between us has followed any of the rules for proper decorum. Meeting you in the first place, seeking you out in that darkened room, kissing you whenever we could steal a moment… None of that was right by any official standards. But it was also still… safe, if you know what I mean.”

He gave her an intent look, searching for understanding, and Astrid nodded. She did know what he meant – vaguely. But she couldn’t agree. To her, those stolen moments hadn’t felt safe, although for different reasons than what he was implying. She had always felt safe with Hiccup… but at the same time she’d been concerned for his safety.

“But when you came here that first night,” he continued in a low voice. “That changed. Here, at night, we suddenly had so much time, and there was nothing that would stop us from… from going too far. So I swore to myself that I wouldn’t let it go too far. That I would be good, that I would at least stick to a few of the rules I’ve been taught…”

Astrid watched him closely as he spoke, watched how his features tensed a little and his smile faded. She had an inkling to where he was going, and she felt a spark of guilt nag at her – because she had been the one who’d pushed him. But they hadn’t done anything wrong… had they?

“But the last time you were here… I felt like we were walking a thin line along the edges of those rules. I knew it was… risky, but I thought that I could manage. You are too important to me, so I thought I’d be able to ‘not make a mistake’. But then I failed, and I… I freaked.”

Letting out a deep breath, Hiccup lowered his head to lean against hers – as if he needed her support. It was a pleasant if somewhat strange sensation. Usually, it felt more like it was him who lent her his strength than the other way around.

“I’m sorry for how I reacted,” he finally muttered. “It was stupid, I know that now.”

“You… could have just told me, you know?” Astrid noted carefully.

Hiccup gasped out a shaky laugh. “Yeah, that would have been the better thing to do, wouldn’t it?” His hands on her back felt good, warm as he slowly rubbed up and down.

Astrid was quiet for a moment, and then asked, “Why didn’t you? You… can tell me everything, remember?” The implication that he didn’t trust her… stung.

Hiccup lifted his shoulders in a helpless shrug. “I know… I know that I can tell you everything. It was more that… that I thought I couldn’t talk with you about… this! That I mustn’t… I’ve been taught not to talk about sex with anyone but an Ástir. Even joking with Eret and the others feels… strange to me. All of this breaches rules I thought were set in stone, and… Well, I think I was afraid of what would happen if we broke those.”

He gave her a long and pleading look as if he was asking for forgiveness. But Astrid still couldn’t see why he would need that. He’d only done what he thought was right, after all. Even if she hoped that they could solve it together, should a misunderstanding like this ever come up again.
But there was one other point in what he’d said that occupied her mind even more. Not necessarily what he’d said, but how. Because he’d used the past tense.

“So,” she began, nervously biting her lip, but then lifted her eyes back to his. “Does that mean you’re not afraid anymore?”

Hiccup gazed into her deep blue eyes, and idly contemplated how easily he could lose himself in them. He could look into them all day, trying to uncover every aspect of the beautiful person within. But she’d asked a question, and even though it sounded casual, he understood the deeper meaning behind her words.

“No, I’m not,” he replied, voice husky. His heartbeat quickened at that confession, and he could see how Astrid’s breathing got a little heavier too. He pondered how to phrase what he wanted to say, how he could make clear that he wasn’t demanding anything. Only offering. “Astrid,” he began, “I’ve… learned a few things tonight, about these rules. And… and if you still want to-to know how it’s supposed to feel then… then I can show you.”

Hiccup didn’t have to wait long for an answer. She didn’t say anything at first, but her eyes brightened with joy, and a moment later her mouth was pressed against his. He responded with a low groan at feeling her soft lips and tasting her sweet tongue, and wound his arms around her to pull her closer, even as she was soundly pressed against him already.

“I do,” she gasped in-between kisses, her hand tightening into his tunic at his back as he lightly nibbled at her lower lip. “I-I want to know… please.”

Hiccup hadn’t needed such a verbal confirmation, not with how eagerly she was kissing him. But it was good to hear it nonetheless, good to know that they were on the same page. Because he, too, couldn’t deny that he was eager to show her.

Deftly holding on to her, he rolled them around until she lay on the straw beneath him. She let out a breathy giggle, eyes gleaming with excitement as he once more leaned over her, careful not to hurt her by resting his weight on her too much.

“Promise me one thing,” he whispered urgently. She somewhat sobered up, apparently sensing how serious he was.

“Anything,” she replied with an earnest smile, reaching to caress his lips with her fingertips. It made his mouth twitch, but he quickly grew serious again. “Promise me that you will tell me if it’s too much,” he whispered, holding her gaze in an effort to communicate the importance of what he was saying. “If you don’t like what I’m doing, or if you need a break, or want to try something else, then please tell me so. Okay?”

She seemed to understand, her eyes growing wide, and she gulped. “I promise,” she whispered. Hiccup nodded, swallowing, then, almost ridiculously carefully, leaned down to brush his lips against hers. It started as a slow and measured kiss, but it didn’t take long until them moving together developed its own dynamic. He knew what he wanted to try, where he wanted to go, but it was fun to get there at Astrid’s pace, to experience all these small moments of her courage, of her deepening their kiss and of her holding him tighter on her own account. Hiccup just took it all in and played along in kind, focused on how she reacted to his teeth nipping at her lip, to his breath tickling at her ear, or to his tongue tracing the vein running down her throat.
Soon, he was acting solely by instinct, drinking in her reactions to everything he did, memorising what she seemed to like and what left her mewling. His left hand glided up her front, but instead of cupping and fondling her breast, like he’d done and enjoyed the other night, he planned to go a little further. If she agreed…

His hand came to a halt between and above her breasts, a place where it had rested so often during the past weeks. But tonight, that gesture had another meaning. Because it rested over the cords that held the upper part of her simple dress closed. Breathing heavily, Hiccup retreated a little to look at her, to ask her permission. With flushed cheeks, Astrid stared up at him for a moment, glanced down at her heaving chest beneath his hand, then back up at him – and nodded.

Holding her gaze to gauge her every reaction, Hiccup blindly fiddled with the bow that held the cords tight until it loosened. With slightly shaking hands but without hesitation, Astrid wriggled beneath him, apparently intent on showing that she wasn’t about to change her mind. A minute later, she lay still again, expectantly gazing up at him. Wearing nothing above her waist but a beautiful blush and a thin chain with a key as a charm around her neck. He couldn’t keep a low moan from slipping out his throat at the sight. Her pearly white skin had a light golden shimmer in the dim light of the lantern, the flickering fire drawing dancing shadows onto her body. Everything was visible, her firm breasts with the already hardened nipples, but also every line of muscles beneath her skin, her collarbones, the indentation at the base of her throat. The flush in her cheeks reached all the way down her neck, and her eyes were gleaming, excitement and joy clearly visible inside them – and not a single trace of fear.

Slowly, oh so slowly, Hiccup learned how to play her body. He started with his hands, caressing her skin, feeling her and letting her feel him in return. He watched the tiniest of dark clouds flicker up and disappear in her eyes as he cupped her bare breast, and drank in the high-pitched whine she made as he carefully pinched the sensitive bud at its top.

Time lost all meaning. For all Hiccup knew, hours could have past while he explored her body, learned what she liked and at the same time taught her what her body was able to feel. It was intense, her every reaction so powerful that it felt like a lightning bolt shooting through his own body as well. Like the beautiful cry she made when his mouth closed over one nipple to suckle at it, the way she writhed beneath him, leaning into every contact, seeking more, or how her entire body bent and buckled when he placed one knee between her legs to let his thigh press and rub against that sweet spot hidden beneath layers of cloth. It was mind-blowing, and he loved every second as he lost himself in the moment, in her moans and little sobs, in the way her back arched in search of more and her hands clutched at his hair and clothes as if to make sure he wouldn’t stop.

As if he ever would.

“Hiccup…”

At first, he thought the breathy moan slipping off her lips was meant as a plea for a break. But before he could react, her body beneath him became taught, her fist in his hair clenching almost painfully. A moment later, Astrid’s lewd cry echoed through the stables as she shook, spasmng. Groaning against her breast beneath his mouth, Hiccup held her tight, trying to anchor her through what most likely was her first orgasm ever.

When she calmed, he slowly let go of her and pushed himself up until his head was level with hers again. Her face was slack; her lips were parted and visibly red from her biting on them. She was taking in panting breaths, and her eyes, that had a glassy shimmer, were gazing rather unseeingly at the ceiling above them.

“What…. What was….” she muttered weakly, visibly fighting to focus her gaze, but not quite
managing yet.

Licking his dry lips, Hiccup reached to cup her face with his hand, thumb gently rubbing her cheek. “That’s… how it’s supposed to feel,” he murmured, a little apprehensive. “Are you okay?”

Astrid gasped out something like a laugh. She closed her eyes and, with a sigh, leaned into his hand on her face. When she opened her eyes again, they were soft and glowing with a warmth from deep within. “I’m okay,” she whispered as her gaze eventually focused on him. “More than okay. That was… was…” she trailed off, laughing weakly as aftershocks ran through her body. She shifted closer until her head rested against his arm, cuddling into him. “Can… can we do that again some day?”

Chuckling, Hiccup pulled her into an embrace and a kiss, wrapping his blanket around them both to ward off a chill when he felt how sweaty she was. “Of course,” he mumbled against her lips, feeling how she smiled. “As often as you want.”

.o O o.

Astrid couldn’t describe how she felt, not even to herself. She felt weak, her body gone pliant and soft, and yet there was something incredibly powerful and encouraging in the way she lay in Hiccup’s arms. She hadn’t bothered yet to properly put her dress on again, and while that should have made her feel vulnerable, all she felt was safe. And she simply couldn’t get enough of it.

At first, the sensation of his hands and arms, of the rough fabric of his tunic and the even rougher fabric of his blanket on her bare skin had been… weird. Not even Ruff would touch her bare skin when she bathed her. Feeling Hiccup now, so close and intimate and… and casual… it was strange. Unfamiliar.

Of course, it already had been so right from the beginning, when he’d purposefully induced all those overwhelming sensations in her body. Sensations she hadn’t even known were possible and that she was eager to feel again.

But right now, with them lazily cuddling and kissing, enveloped in that blanket and each other’s warmth… the combination of fabric on skin just felt strange – wrong even in a way. And it took her fuzzy mind a while before she realised what it was that bothered her.

“Hiccup… can I ask you for something?” she asked after gathering her courage.

Hiccup, currently nuzzling her behind her ear, chuckled. “Whatever you want,” he hummed, the sensation sending pleasant shivers down her spine.

And yet, she hesitated. What she wanted to ask… it felt like a huge step. Like yet another rule someone somewhere must have established. But then… They already had pushed one quite heavy boundary tonight; maybe it was worth it to see just how far they could push it.

Instead of an answer, she let her hands wander down his chest, feeling him but at the same time not feeling him – only rough fabric. Hiccup tensed a little when her hand reached his stomach and still wandered further down. But before he could react, she’d reached her goal, the hem of his tunic. Tentatively, she let her hand glide beneath the fabric, over the hot skin over his abdomen, feeling his muscles move beneath.

“Can you… take this off?” she finally mumbled. “I… I’d like to see you too. To feel you.”

There was a strange gleam in Hiccup’s eyes as he gazed at her, as if he was proud in a way, but it quickly vanished and got replaced by a warm and soft smile. He nodded, then sat up and took off
his tunic in one fluid motion. A tiny part of her was jealous at how quickly and easily he could get rid of his clothes, but that thought vanished as soon as her eyes landed on his bare skin.

It wasn’t entirely smooth like her own, but littered with scars of varying sizes. Most were small, barely more than faint lines over freckled skin, but there was one that stood out. Or two, actually. Two long lines running like rifts from his left shoulder over his back all the way to his right hip.


Hiccup halfway turned toward her, looking a little apprehensive. “A Monstrous Nightmare was about to raid our stables. And foolhardy as I was, I jumped in to chase it away.” Hiccup shrugged, chuckling self-consciously.

“A monstrous... what?” Astrid asked, confused by the unfamiliar term as she hesitantly reached out to caress Hiccup’s back.

He sighed at her touch, noticeably relaxing beneath her hand. “A Monstrous Nightmare,” he repeated. “It’s a dragon species, one that’s quite common in the North. Vicious beasts that can set themselves on fire, very territorial.” Sighing again, he leaned back a little more, into her touch. “Mmh, that feels good.”

Encouraged by his reaction, Astrid scooted a little closer, running both her hands over his bare back, exploring. The part of her that was trained in medical matters noticed that the scars on his back had healed far better than the one on his leg, the one that made him limp and which still hurt. From what she could determine, this wound must have been equally bad, if not worse. And yet, these were much smoother. As if they’d gotten better – far better – treatment.

Or maybe he'd just been lucky. Astrid pushed the thought aside as her hands wandered on, lightly massaging the tense muscles. “So... You actually fought dragons?” she asked carefully. She didn’t want to ruin the mood by bringing up his past... but he’d started it, and that small comment alone already made her curious. To her, dragons had always been a mystery. She'd never seen one at anything that resembled close range, and hadn't ever heard anyone tell tales about it either. Even Eret had never encountered one, even though they were more common around Eastervale than they were here.

Snorting, Hiccup shook his head. “No, I haven't. Not really,” he mumbled, and further relaxed beneath her hands. “Only fully initiated warriors are allowed to actually fight dragons; they can be incredibly dangerous if you aren’t careful enough. Everyone else gets other tasks: extinguishing fires, chasing away dragons from the livestock or the storage barns, taking care of the children and the elderly, handing out weapons... stuff like that.”

“And you were not a warrior?” she asked, somewhat surprised. She’d seen him fight over the last few days. And while he surely hadn’t been the best fighter she’d ever seen, he’d still been far from being bad either. But apparently, that hadn’t been the right question to ask.

Hiccup tensed. “No, I wasn’t,” he confirmed in a strained voice. “I hadn’t passed the test yet, and... and I...” He trailed off, noticeably trembling now.

“It’s okay,” she murmured. She leaned closer, forehead resting against his back and her hand flat against his skin. “You don’t need to tell me now.” In fact, she didn’t want him to tell her now, not if it upset him in any way. They had all their lives to learn about each other’s pasts. She didn't want to taint tonight's special mood with such things.

Exhaling a shuddering breath, Hiccup awkwardly turned his head in her direction, his intentions
clear. Astrid reacted eagerly, shifted too until they faced each other. For an endless second, Hiccup just gazed at her, wonder and adoration glowing in his eyes, before he kissed her. In comparison, the kiss was a relatively calm one, tame with only their lips gliding together. But only because Astrid was thoroughly distracted by other sensations.

His skin against hers felt *amazing*. Smooth and hot, sliding against her like nothing she’d felt before. Her hands followed, trying to feel and get to know him as much as possible. The way his lean muscles moved as he held her tight, how his chest rose with every panting breath. She couldn’t get enough of him.

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Hiccup felt like the whole world was spinning around him. In one moment, images of burning houses had flickered behind his eyes, and he’d felt the old pain all over again. And in the next, there had been deep blue eyes to chase away the fire, soft skin to soothe the pain. Astrid was like a remedy to all his suffering, and he drank her in eagerly.

Every soft moan she made, every little touch of bare skin on skin was enough to forget the sorrows of the past and to look forward to their future. And, Gods, did he *want* this future with her. Never had the simple touch of hands on his back affected him like Astrid’s light massage, and feeling her so close now, her bare breasts pressing against his chest, nearly robbed him of all his senses.

With a low groan, he pulled her tighter, grinding against her in search of more contact. No matter how much of her skin he mapped with his hands, no matter how much she mapped of his in return, it seemed like it would never be *enough*. All her low moans and her whimpering when he found yet another sensitive spot wasn’t enough to sate his yearning for more, so when she retreated, pulling him down with her, he gave in without a second thought.

Soon, he was blanketing her with his body, drunk by all these powerful sensations she elicited. He felt her mouth on his neck, hot and smooth, and he couldn’t help but moan as she ran her tongue over his skin, sucking lightly, tasting him. Freya, did it ever feel good.

“Astrid,” he moaned her name in a rare moment of something resembling clarity, when she was distracted by his hand playing with her breasts. “What… what do you want?” He knew that she wouldn’t yet know what exactly she wanted. But he still wanted to make sure, didn’t want to push her too far. He wanted her, only the Gods knew how much, but only if it was what she wanted too.

She looked up at him, dazed, clearly trying to form an answer. “You,” she finally whispered. “More. I-I want more of you. Of this.” She let her hand glide across his chest, her other one reaching around his neck, not quite pulling him down but the implication was there. Freya, she was amazing. Sighing, he nodded, then gave in and leaned down to kiss her again.

When she parted her legs and he effortlessly slotted between her thighs, Hiccup gasped out a short laugh. This was so much easier than the first time she’d lain beneath him like this. That time, he’d been torn; between the longing to fulfil her wish and the fear of going too far, between how right it had felt to be so close to her and his guilt over how wrong what they’d been doing had been. But this time, there was no fear, and no guilt either. This time, nothing distracted him from focussing all his actions on Astrid and on where he wanted to take her, and nothing kept him from enjoying every moment of it.

Their wet kisses that became more and more distracted. Their bare torsos touching, the slide of skin on skin overwhelming. The way she gasped as he pressed against her, the bulge in his trousers against the fine fabric of her underwear. It was intoxicating, wonderful, and just so very, very right.
Hiccup let himself drown in the moment, in being with Astrid and all the sensations. Her hot skin on his and her hands holding on tight, the beautiful flush on her skin and the spark in her eyes, the sweet taste of her lips and the salty taste of her skin, her gasps and whimpers, her scent of mayweed and sunshine mixed with the earthy scent of fresh hay. It was maddening, and staying focused became harder with every minute.

He pushed himself up on his forearms, both to be able to watch her every reaction and to have more leverage as he started a steady rhythm of grinding and rocking against her. Every now and then, he dipped down to place a random kiss onto her face or to nibble at her exposed throat when she bent back her head.

It was a heady mess of rocking motions and panted breath, of clutching hands on sweaty skin and whispered nonsense-words, until the sensations became too strong to even think. His world condensed down to Astrid beneath him, her mewling and whimpering, to the way she clung to him, eyes closed and lips parted.

When Astrid began to move on her own, instinctively seeking more friction by rutting up against him, it was nothing but sheer willpower that kept him from falling apart right then and there. He felt like he might tumble into blissful relief any moment, but he owed it to her to hold back, just… just a little longer.

“Oh, Gods,” she moaned, her back arching up which made her breasts press against him, her nipples scraping over his skin. “I… I… Hi-Hiccup!”

Her cry was louder this time, and Hiccup reacted without thinking. He leaned down to cover her mouth with his, swallowing her noises of pleasure, and it wouldn’t have taken the sharp pain of her fingernails in his back or her frantically jerking against him to push him over the edge as well. Her crying out his name like a prayer was enough.

Groaning, he came shortly after her, once again making a mess in his trousers but not really caring one bit. It was a moment of blissful perfection. And it took nearly all his remaining strength and control not to crush her, to roll to the side instead and hold her in his arms as they slowly drifted down from their height.

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Astrid felt as if she was made of jelly, all her bones melted away and muscles too weak to make even the tiniest move. Trying to catch her breath, she lay in Hiccup’s arms, basking in the slowly dwindling rush from just moments ago, and couldn’t be happier.

“Oh Gods, that was… that was just… I… wow… I mean...” She felt like she needed to say something, to let Hiccup know how she felt, how incredible this had been. But there didn’t seem to be words suitable, nothing that was strong enough.

But he seemed to understand. With a low chuckle, he brushed his lips against her forehead, then pulled back to look at her. His eyes were soft, peaceful, his smile easy and warm. “I’m glad you liked it,” he murmured, and lifted one hand to brush aside a few strands of sweaty hair from her face. It was something he’d already done so many times, and yet… It felt different. More intense, as if his touch reached deeper than his fingers on her skin. As if they’d grown even closer.

So she didn’t feel like she needed to answer, didn’t need words to convey how she felt. She just smiled, and snuggled into his hand, enjoying how he made her feel with nothing but such a simple gesture.
After a moment or three, he chuckled. “I have to apologise, though,” he mumbled, voice slow and sleepy. “I had... orders not to come until I made you come three times. And those were only two. I’m sorry. I... I’ll catch up on that... as soon as I can move again.”

Come? Was that how that intense explosion of sensations and feelings was called? Astrid filed the word away in her head as she awkwardly huddled closer to Hiccup, cuddling against his warm torso. “I think I’m okay,” she replied, also chuckling. “Maybe later.” On the one hand, she wanted nothing more than to experience another one of these explosions, but at the same time, she wasn’t sure whether she could stand it right now. Her entire body was tingling and her mind foggy enough as it was.

Her words made Hiccup laugh in earnest, although he, too, seemed to be anything but unaffected, his motions slow and speaking of fatigue. He sighed, then propped himself up on one arm, gazing down at her with eyes that were filled with wonder.

“There’s one other thing I realised today,” he whispered. “No, that’s not true. I knew it already, but... but I realised that I never told you.”

His words sounded meaningful and maybe would have made her worry a little. But he seemed to be completely at ease, so she just gave him a lazy, questioning look, indicating him to go on.

Hiccup smiled, once more reaching to cup her cheek with one hand, and softly caressed her with his thumb. “I realised that I never told you that I love you. So I better rectify that.” His gaze, still entirely soft and relaxed, got a few degrees more intense. “I love you, Astrid. With everything I am.”

A few moments before, Astrid had thought she couldn’t possibly be any happier. But she’d been wrong. Her heart was swelling at his words, flowing over with warmth and joy. Not that she’d had any doubts, not anymore, not really – but it was good to hear it nonetheless.

Slowly, always holding Hiccup’s gaze, she placed her hand on his cheek, felt the rough stubbles on his chiselled jaw. “I love you too,” she whispered, the joy in her heart bubbling over and making her giggle. “Gods, I do. I love you, Hiccup.”

Hiccup beamed and, letting out a deep sigh, leaned into her touch, eyes closing for a second, before he kissed her once more.

It was a sensual and unhurried kiss. Astrid could hear one of the horses snort past her slowly calming heartbeat, and she enjoyed the warm slide of skin over skin, his chest against hers, as they slowly, almost lazily even, nipped at each other’s lips. Now, with the tension from before completely melted away, Astrid felt as if she could appreciate Hiccup on an even deeper level. Every touch, every look, every moment they shared suddenly seemed so much more meaningful and at the same time so effortless, as if they were forging an additional layer to that bond that connected them.

And when they eventually settled for sleepy cuddles, her head resting on his chest and his heartbeat the most soothing sound she could ever imagine, she thought that she’d never felt as much at home like in this moment.

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Hiccup woke to the familiar noises of the horses waking up – and the pleasant yet highly unfamiliar sensation of a warm and soft body halfway draped over him. At first, he was confused, but almost instantly memories of the night before flooded his mind; of hot skin and soft flesh, of
Astrid mewling and of her fingers digging into his back, of whispered ‘I love you’s and of feeling closer to her than ever before.

He sighed contently, and his hand slowly caressed her bare shoulders as he settled back. Through half-closed eyes, he gazed unseeingly at the ceiling and enjoyed the feeling of simply waking up next to her, of her sleep-warm body against his, and of simply doing something as ordinary as starting the day with her.

A second later, his eyes flew open. Shit! The horses were awake and demanding food. The night was over, the day about to start. And Astrid was still here.

“Astrid, wake up!” he muttered, and carefully shook her shoulder. “You’ve got to go back.”

Astrid groaned and tried to shake off his hand by burrowing deeper under the blanket they’d shared. “Mhm not yet,” she mumbled almost incoherently. “Just a bit longer.”

Under different circumstances, Hiccup would have quite enjoyed her reluctance, would have gladly cuddled her a bit longer and maybe even would have made a teasing comment about her being a little grumpy in the morning. But they didn’t have time. With quite a bit of effort, he pushed himself into a sitting position, forcing Astrid to wake up more too. “Astrid, it’s already morning. You need to be back in time, remember? Come on, get up.” His voice was more urgent now, and it seemed as if his words finally reached Astrid’s mind too.

In an instant, she sat up straight, staring at him in shock, then let her eyes wander around. “Morning?” she gasped. “But… but it’s still dark outside. How long have we slept?”

Hiccup was already on his feet, wincing a little as his leg twinged a bit – and at the uncomfortable feeling of his soiled trousers – and reached for his tunic. “We must have slept for a couple of hours. The horses are waking up, which is usually my sign that the day begins. You still have at least an hour before dawn, but…”

“Oh shit,” she cursed, and scrambled to her feet too. Hearing her using such a very unladylike word made him grin, but he spared her any comment. Instead, he stepped closer to help her with correctly putting her dress back on, and actively refrained from mourning the sight of her bare skin. If her eagerness last night was anything to go by, then he guessed he would soon get the chance to enjoy it again.

Astrid cursed some more as she hastily tried to refasten the cords of her dress, and Hiccup quickly went to help her. “Here, let me do that,” he said, and stepped closer. It took him only a minute or two to thread the cords through the eyelets again, concentrating only on the practical work, and it was enough to somewhat calm them both down a bit again.

“Thanks,” she sighed once he was done, and smiled up at him.

“Anytime,” he replied, chuckling a little. “And good morning, milady.”

A wide grin spread across her face, and Hiccup tried to memorise the image in his mind as one of the most beautiful he’d ever seen; her being so happy, tired as she still was and with her hair dishevelled from sleep.

“Good morning, Hiccup.” She stretched to place a peck on his lips before she started to shake out her skirts, and Hiccup couldn’t help but chuckle at the simplicity of their interactions. It felt so good, so right, casual and easy without hesitation or nervousness. Just as it should be.

Quickly, too quickly despite frequent interruptions for light caresses or playful kisses, they had her
ready to go, all stray bits of straw or hay removed and her warm cloak wrapped around her shoulders. They were about to go to the door where they would have to part, when Astrid suddenly paused and whirled around again, one hand pressed to her chest.

“My key,” she gasped, and rushed back to his sleeping stall, eyes suddenly wide with something resembling fear.

“Your key?” he asked, puzzled by her reaction. “You mean the key to the sally port? Isn’t that in the pocket of your cloak?”

Her hand flew to said pocket, searching for the clearly visible bulge the heavy key created. “No, that one’s here. I mean the other one. The one I carried as a necklace.” She’d reached the stall by now, and her eyes wandered over the straw.

“Ah, that one.” Hiccup dimly remembered her wearing it earlier in the night… But he also remembered her without it. “I… erm, I think it must have fallen off at some point,” he chuckled with slight embarrassment. His eyes roamed over the straw as well, but he knew how hopeless it was to find a small object like a necklace in it. Especially when there was only little time. “Is it important? Because you really should go back now.”

Her gaze was a little frantic now, flickering from one corner to the other, to his face, and back to where they’d spent the night in each other’s arms. “Yes, it is important,” she explained, a trace of panic in her voice. “It’s the key to a small coffer, which contains my… my treasures.” She gave him a slightly sheepish smile, but then sobered up directly again. “A doll my mother made for me, my father’s boon… your tunic,” she added, and shrugged self-consciously. “I need it.”

Biting his lip, Hiccup glanced into the stall, then nodded. “Okay, but you don’t need it now. I promise I’ll look for it, all right? But you really need to go now.”

Astrid hesitated for a moment longer, but then nodded. “All right. And yes, I should get back. I just…” she trailed off, giving him a sad look.

Hiccup sighed, and wrapped his arms around her. “I know,” he murmured into her hair. “I wish you could stay, too.”

Chuckling, she wrapped her arms around his torso and pulled him close. “I’m going to miss this the moment I step outside,” she muttered. “Miss you.”

Letting out a deep breath, Hiccup hugged her tighter before he eventually let go of her. He felt as if he ought to say something, but one look into her eyes was enough. They didn’t need verbal communication to know the other’s feelings right now: a deeply settled calmness after this night of exploring each other, and the unmistakable sad note about having to part.

Before she left, when she was already standing in the open door, she paused one last time. She placed her hand on his cheek, and he instantly leaned into it, the simple gesture radiating a familiarity between them that hadn’t been there only hours before. At least not in this intensity. Hiccup turned his head to nuzzle her hand, to first place a lingering kiss on her palm and then other more fleeting ones onto her knuckles that made her giggle. They were stalling for time and both knew it, but they couldn’t find the strength to stop either.

“I love you, Hiccup,” she eventually whispered, their foreheads resting against each other now.

He wanted nothing more than to kiss her goodbye, and by the way she was biting her lip he guessed she felt similarly. But they knew that, would they give in to that urge, they’d probably
never part. So he just lifted his head to press a quick kiss onto her forehead. “I love you too. So much…”

Finally, they let go of each other, their eyes holding the connection until she was barely more than a shadow moving through the night.

And Hiccup had to agree with her earlier statement. He missed her already.

Chapter End Notes

*points at the rating* You were waiting for it, right?
You Only Show Half To Me

Chapter Notes

So, everyone recovered from the previous chapter? Great. A fair warning, this chapter won't be quite as exciting, I fear. But then, not everyone can be such a highlight? There need to be calmer transition chapters too? Still, I feel like this is a bit boring. Ah, well, I can't help it _._

This week's title is from the Song "Half Life" by BANNERS. It refers to how, no matter how close friends our chaos squad has become, they all have secrets. Truth be told, I didn't really know what to pick as the title for this chapter. But when I heard this song of my playlist, this seems oddly fitting. It makes me sad that they can't be completely honest and open with each other. But then... That's life?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Astrid woke a few hours later, it was – once again – to Daniel calling her and shaking her shoulder.

“Hey, sleepy head,” came his annoyingly cheerful voice, cutting into her drowsy mind. "I know why Dagur and Eret slept longer today, but even they're awake by now. What’s your excuse for sleeping this long?”

Astrid grumbled and tried to pull her blanket over her head, but Daniel prevented that. Laughing, he wrestled her for the blanket, and soon Astrid was laughing too. She couldn’t really stay grumpy, not today. Not after this night.

“Morning, Swanja,” he greeted her when she was finally fully awake, both siblings grinning. “Sorry for interrupting your beauty sleep. But it’s my last free day before I return to Westhill, and I thought I spend it with my little baby sister instead of her slumbering away the entire day. What do you say? Any ideas what we could do?”

Astrid’s mood fell a little at his words. Right… Daniel would soon be back at the front, and during the Midwinter festivities of the following two days, they wouldn’t have any free time to speak of. Only the night of the second day was free of any official events, but if Astrid remembered correctly, Daniel and the others had scheduled their long-planned visit to the tavern for that day, and she couldn’t very well accompany them there.

With a half-amused and half-annoyed snort, she let herself drop back into her cushion. Not to go back to sleep, but just because it was more comfortable than sitting halfway propped up on her elbows on the soft mattress. "Baby sister?” she asked in affected indignation. “I’m turning eighteen in two months! Don’t you think you could leave off the ‘baby’ by now?” Not to mention that, after spending the night with Hiccup, she felt more grown-up and mature than ever. A pleasant shiver ran down her spine at the memory. Surely, the term ‘baby’ didn’t suit her any longer.

But Daniel just gave her a wistful half-smile. “You’ll always be my cute little baby sister, no matter whether your hair is decorated by a coronet or dry leaves.”

“That only happened once,” Astrid snorted, and rolled her eyes as she swung her legs out of the
bed. “And it’s been what… eleven years ago now? Besides, may I remind you that it was you who encouraged me to hide in that massive pile of leaves? Seriously, you have no right to put any blame on me for the tantrum my governess threw afterwards.”

“I never said it was your fault,” Daniel defended himself, arms raised, before they shared another grin at the memory. “But my question still stands. What would you like to do today? The choice is totally up to you.”

Astrid walked over to the bedroom door to give Ruff, who undoubtedly stood outside, the sign to come in. “I assume that was meant as a rhetorical question?” she deadpanned. What did he think where she would want to go?

“Well, I wanted to give you the choice anyway,” he said, shrugging, and averted his gaze. “I wouldn’t want to persuade you to agree to anything just because I suggested it.”

Sighing, she threw him a fond smile. “That’s cute. But I think we both agree on where we want to spend a free day.” She paused for a moment, biting her lip as she pondered, but then added, “Besides, I have a second reason to want to go to the stables, other then just going to the stables. I lost my necklace, it’s probably there… somewhere… Maybe we’ll be lucky and can find it?”

“Your necklace? Sure. That’s definitely a good enough reason to go there, in case we needed one.” He winked, and stood up from her bed’s edge as Ruff came in with a curious expression. “I’ll go and tell Eret and Dagur. And get a picnic basket packed for us?”

“That sounds perfect,” Astrid agreed.

Both she and Ruff followed Daniel with their eyes as he left, then her maidservant commented, “I assume that means you’ll wear another one of your sturdier dresses today? Frigga, I’m so glad I just got a few of them back from the laundry.”

Astrid chuckled slightly, knowing Ruff had a point. Her wardrobe really wasn’t cut for prolonged weeks of this life of freedom. Not long after, Ruff returned with one of Astrid’s recent favourites; a woollen dress in deep forest green with a few golden highlights that came with an incredibly sturdy and warm cloak in moss green and brown.

While Ruff got her dressed, Astrid allowed her mind to drift away for a bit. The hours she’d spent with Hiccup last night had been spectacular. Never in her life had she imagined something could feel so good, so liberating, like those lightnings bursting through her, like an explosion. She longed to feel it again. And she would, she knew, maybe even tonight. But even more powerful in a way had been the rest, being so close to Hiccup without even the slightest barrier between them. As if that physical closeness had brought forth a deeper mental closeness as well. And just lying with him, sleeping arm in arm… despite it only lasting for a couple of hours, it felt like that had been the best and most restful sleep she’d ever had.

In addition, staying that long at the stables hadn’t been a problem either. She’d been back at the castle just in time to join a group of servants coming over from the city for their daily work, and luckily, Ruff hadn’t noticed her absence either. There’d even been enough time to sleep for a bit longer before anyone checked on her. Now, there really was no reason for her not to meet Hiccup as often as she liked, when even getting enough sleep wasn’t an issue anymore.

Now, all she could hope was that their newfound closeness wouldn’t show in their normal interactions.

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With a low grunt, Hiccup sat back on his haunches, and hopelessly looked around his stall. Usually, it didn't seem to be *that* big, but when one was almost literally looking for the needle in a haystack...

After Astrid had left, he’d fed the horses with an entirely new flourish, feeling so light as if nothing could ever darken his mood again. All his fears and worries had evaporated, all his hopes fulfilled. So long as they kept a bare minimum of clothes on, there was nothing holding him back during those nights she came to him anymore, not any rules, no fears of going too far, and no worries about scaring Astrid off either. He just might need to be a little more careful, as he was suddenly going through his stack of clothes at a much quicker rate.

But Freya, the way she’d responded to his touch, so pure, so eager and curious. Hiccup thought that he could have continued forever to explore her body – to help *her* explore her body. Watching the wonder in her eyes had been almost better than everything else. Almost.

Because the best had been... just holding her, sleeping with her in his arm, waking up next to her. Exploring how the sexual part of their relationship would be had been fantastic, just as he'd hoped. But never in his life had he imagined how wonderful something simple as her warm and sleepy weight on his chest could feel. He couldn't wait for when that would be normal.

But that was still years away...

Sighing, Hiccup focused back on the present, and, not for the first time since Astrid had left, ran his fingers through his hair as let his eyes wander over his makeshift bed. So far, there’d been no sign of her key. Sure, he’d only looked for little over an hour after caring for the horses, but his knees already hurt from crawling around and now, his left leg started to twinge a little.

But it wasn’t like he had anything else to do anyway. There was no combat training today, so he didn’t need to be at the garrison or the archery range in time, and he didn’t know of any other plans that might include him either. No, all he had to do today was give the horses some exercises, Chomp especially, and try not to get distracted all the time by thinking about Astrid too much.

Like the warmth and lightness that radiated from the bond in his chest. Or the way just remembering her laughter made his heart swell. Or how much he wished he could simply run his fingers through her hair, just once... He wanted to play with it, to disentangle the silken strands, and see how she liked it. He couldn’t even say what it was about her hair that drew him in. Maybe it was simply the fact that he couldn’t, since even dishevelling it here at night would be too dangerous. Getting those endless silken waves back in order would take *forever*. But that didn’t change the fact that her hair held an almost irresistible allure to him. Sighing, he pushed that thought away. One day, he reminded himself. But until then, brushing away loose strands every now and then was all he could do.

Lost in his daydreams and in the studious activity of rifling through the straw, the sound of the front door opening caught him completely by surprise. He barely had time to scramble up on his feet before the cheerful voices of his friends reached him.

Eret was the first to call out. “Ho, Hiccup? Are you here?”

“Yeah, over here,” Hiccup called back, and poked his head out of his stall, smiling as Dagur and Daniel entered the stables behind Eret. The prospect of spending some time in friendly company was good. But as welcome as the sight of his friends was, there was nothing that quite matched the moment Astrid came into his view as well.

Only a few hours had passed since he’d last seen her, but that didn’t keep his heart from making a
joyful leap at her sight. He actively had to suppress the urge to walk over to her, to cradle her face in his hands, and to kiss those soft lips that were twitching into a bright smile right now. Fighting to not show his emotions too obviously, he quickly turned his attention away from her.

“Good morning, Milords, Milady,” he greeted them all at once, and bowed in his usual playfully exaggerated manner. It might have started as a way to tease Eret, but by now it had become almost second nature to him. It felt right... in a weirdly wrong kind of way.

“Morning,” Daniel replied. There was something like a smile around his mouth, but it didn’t reach his eyes. He looked tired, exhausted even, and Hiccup wondered idly what it had been that had occupied him last night, what the note he’d received had been about. It seemed to have been important, judging by how little sleep Daniel apparently had gotten.

“Morning, Hiccup,” Eret greeted him too, and placed a basket on one of the straw bales. It was a familiar sight by now, and meant they intended to spend the whole day here, or at least long enough to justify eating here. It was also a very welcome sight as it meant good food and even better company today. Although...

Involuntarily, Hiccup’s eyes flickered in Astrid’s direction for a scant second. Lately, there hadn’t been a problem with behaving normally around her, not with the prospect of eventually being unobserved and free to interact with her again. But last night, something new had formed between them, and Hiccup wasn’t sure whether he’d be able to interact with her directly without showing just how much he felt for her, whether he’d be able to contain what he felt. The chance of slipping up and for their friends to suspect something was pretty high.

And Eret’s next words didn’t exactly help to soothe those concerns either. “What were you doing back there?” he asked, and nodded at Hiccup’s sleeping stall.

Hiccup bit his lips. ‘I was looking for Astrid’s necklace after I must have ripped it off during heavily making out with her last night’ probably wasn’t the most sensible way to answer. “I…” he began, and swallowed as his eyes wandered from one mildly curious face to the other. The faint blush on Astrid’s cheek didn’t help his concentration either. “I was taking a nap?” Damn, why had that come out like a question? “It was a long night, after all, and I was still tired after…” he trailed off, shrugging, and hoped to appear nonchalant.

“Understandable,” Daniel answered with a grin. “From what I’ve heard, you had a good time at Freya’s Temple? This Cami must be a rather spirited woman. Dagur even mentioned some broken furniture?”

“Ahm… Not last night, no,” Hiccup hastily rectified. Again, his gaze flickered to Astrid, wondering what she would be able to make of such a comment. But there was nothing but curiosity in her soft eyes, and it helped to somewhat settle his nerves again. “But yes. Last night had been… It had been fantastic,” he added with a wide grin. Daniel and the others didn’t need to know that he wasn’t talking about Cami, after all. However, the words reminded him of the supposedly broken figurine that was still hidden in his cloak. Last night, he hadn’t gotten the chance to give it to Astrid, and now he wondered when there would be a good moment.

“No argument there,” Dagur chimed in, a slightly dazed look on his face. “Who would have thought that a human body could be so flexible.”

Eret choked on a bit of sweet bread he’d just swiped from the food basket, but managed to hide it as laughter as Dagur cackled at his own comment. Oh, that might be a bit of information Hiccup would keep in mind for teasing Eret every now and then.
He and Daniel chimed in on the laughter, but the Prince quickly sobered up when a strange coughing sound interrupted the general amusement. All eyes wandered to Astrid standing to the side and watching them. Her face was red, and Hiccup could read her all too well. She was fighting back her own laughter. But apparently, Daniel interpreted her flushed face differently.

“Erm, right,” he muttered, and sheepishly rubbed the back of his head. “Probably not the best topic. Sorry, Swanja.” He gave her an apologetic smile – which she returned with a simple nod – before he turned back to Hiccup. “Anyway, I suggest you go back to the Temple some day when it’s still bright outside. The architecture of that place is amazing! Have you seen…”

He digressed into a monologue about the structures Hiccup had already admired last night, and Hiccup would have been content to listen a while longer, making mental notes of all the small peculiarities he was to look out for. But as Daniel threatened to drift off into a detailed description of a secret statue hidden between a few roofs and only visible from a few selected windows, Hiccup caught the desperately pleading look Eret threw him, and intervened.

“I’m not sure I can keep all these information in my head,” he said, and held up his hands to make Daniel pause. “But maybe you can make a list of the most important points? Or even better, show me tomorrow when we’re there for the grand blot?”

Daniel blinked, apparently realising that he’d once more gotten carried away. “Right… I think such a list even already exists. I’ll see if I can find it, because I fear I won’t have the time to show you tomorrow.” He sighed, and Hiccup nodded, understanding. The grand blot tomorrow was, of course, an official and public event. Not the right time for the Crown Prince to make a private tour for a stable boy.

“Anyway,” Daniel went on, noticeably more cheerful and obviously intent on bringing up a new, brighter topic. “You haven’t by any chance found a necklace somewhere?”

For a second, Hiccup’s heart dropped into his stomach. How could Daniel know about… Hiccup physically fought against glancing at Astrid, but what little he got from the corner of his eye, she seemed relatively relaxed.

“N-necklace?” he asked, deciding that playing dumb might be the best way. He wasn’t supposed to know about any necklace, right? “What kind of necklace?”

“It’s–” Daniel began, but at that moment Astrid stepped forward and interrupted her brother.

“It’s just a simple necklace,” she explained, acting timidly. “A plain golden chain with a small key as charm. I must have lost it here yesterday.”

Hiccup was about to answer, scrambling up every bit of acting skill he could muster to interact normally with her, when Eret beat him to it.

“You lost your necklace?” he asked, brows furrowed in confusion. “Here? Are you sure?”

Astrid turned towards him, shrugged, and nodded. “Yes, I think so. I mean, I only noticed when I was back in my rooms, but where else could I have lost it? Sure, it also could have fallen off on the way back to the castle, but I can’t imagine why or how. No, I think it’s here somewhere.”

Eret’s forehead was still wrinkled, but he nodded. “I see,” he murmured, then turned to address Hiccup as well. “So, did you find anything?”

Hiccup shook his head, internally sighing in relief. Talking to Eret was way easier. “No, I haven’t found anything,” he announced as sober as he could.
“All right, let’s have a look then?” Daniel suggested. “Where were you yesterday? Do you remember? You certainly were here in the main corridor. And in Markor’s stall too, if I remember correctly.”

Astrid nodded, a little hesitantly. “And in the tack room.”

“All right, then let’s see if we can find it.”

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With a heavy sigh, Astrid wiped a loose strand of hair out of her eyes, and silently cursed herself. She hadn’t been thinking when she mentioned the key, had she? What did it matter whether she got it back now or in a couple of days? Sooner or later, either she or Hiccup would have found it anyway. But no, she just had to mention it, hadn’t she? Daniel had been right; it wasn’t as if they needed a special reason to spend a day here…

And she really ought to have known better. She should have known that her brothers would do anything to help her get her necklace back. Even if it meant for five people to crawl around in the straw for hours. Or that was what it felt like at least, even though it probably was barely more than one hour so far.

“I fear this is hopeless,” she sighed, frustrated. She knew they wouldn’t find her necklace after all, not with where they were looking. At some point, Eret had brought up that, with Hiccup having already fed the horses, it could actually be in one of the other horses’ stalls too, so they’d extended the search places accordingly.

“No need to give up just yet,” Daniel called over from where he tied Trample to a hook in the corridor to have space to search his stallion’s stall in peace. “There’s still a few places we can look, and when we can’t find it, we’ll simply dig a little deeper. It’s got to be somewhere, right?”

Except that we’re not looking where it actually has to be, Astrid thought, resigned. This was not how she had thought this day would proceed. Truth be told, she’d hoped Hiccup had found the key by now, that he would offhandedly comment he’d seen it lying around and hand it back to her. But this… It was Daniel’s last day off, and she didn’t want him to waste it on this fruitless search.

Deciding to try and redirect today’s path, she slumped down on a nearby straw bale, and shook her head. “I don’t know. It could be anywhere. Maybe I lost it on the way back to the castle after all, or it’s somewhere hidden in yesterday’s dress.” She shrugged. “It’s okay, maybe it’ll show up again, and if not…” She trailed off, feigning indifference.

Daniel looked crestfallen, but didn’t contradict her. “You’re probably right. I’m sorry. I’d hoped I could at least…” Sighing, he shook his head.

“I’m sorry too, little sis,” Dagur said, and placed a comforting arm around her shoulder as he sat down beside her. “But how about we all go to the city and get you a new necklace? How does that sound?” He sounded cheerful as ever.

Astrid, unable to resist his good mood, smiled, but shook her head. “That’s a kind idea, really. But I have enough jewellery.”

“And that’s not the point anyway,” Eret threw in. Shrugging at Dagur’s puzzled expression, he explained, “It’s the charm that matters, right Swanja? It’s the key to the coffer your father got for her some years ago, and what’s valuable is what’s inside that coffer.”

“It is,” Astrid agreed, but tried to play it down in order to make them drop the topic. “But it’s not
that bad. It’s mostly full of keepsakes, you know, swan feathers and arrowheads and the like. Personal things, but nothing of real value.” She chuckled, feinting embarrassment. “I’m sure the key will turn up eventually.”

Dagur nodded. “And if not, we can always break it open, I guess. So how about we go and get you a new coffer right away? I saw a shop in town, and I’m sure they’d love to have their work used by the Princess.”

“You just want to get another box of cookies,” Eret commented, laughing as he leaned against the wall of Trample’s stall.

“Well, that wasn’t my main intention. But now that you brought it up…” he shared a grin with Eret, and Astrid could swear she heard Hiccup chuckle from where he was half-heartedly searching through another stack of hay a few steps away.

“Cookies don’t sound so bad,” she said, not quite getting the joke but too occupied with preventing unnecessary damage anyway. “But I don’t think we need to get a new coffer just yet. As I said, maybe the key will show up somewhere after all. Maybe we should keep breaking it open as a last option if everything else fails?”

“Indeed,” Daniel agreed, sounding surprisingly cheerful all of a sudden as he poked his head out of the stall he’d been searching. Astrid looked up to find him with a bright grin on his face. “Before we resort to brute force, there might be another option we ought to consider first.” He paused, making sure everyone was listening, and if possible, his grin grew even wider. “We could try to meddle with the lock itself first. I mean, I think our skills at lockpicking aren’t that good, but maybe it could also be disassembled? Now, if only we knew someone whose versed in mechanics and the like.”

There was a moment of silence before everyone turned to look at Hiccup. So far, he hadn’t really participated in the discussion, and Astrid understood all to well why that was. With the memories of the previous night still glowing so brightly in her mind, it was hard to keep her usual calm facade around Hiccup. And she guessed he didn’t feel much better.

Although, right now he looked just as surprised by Daniel’s suggestion as Astrid felt. His eyes wandered from Daniel to Astrid, over Eret and Dagur, and then back to Daniel again before he found his voice again. “I… I think I could… give it a try?” he mumbled, more asking than anything else. His eyes searched hers once more, openly asking her opinion for once, and it felt strange in a way.

“Would that be okay for you, Astrid?” Daniel asked, a trace of concern now in his voice. “If we go back to your rooms right away, I can stay with you the whole time if that makes you feel better.”

Astrid was hard pressed not to laugh out loud, but managed in the last moment to keep quiet, even as her head was suddenly spinning with all kinds of thoughts. If she agreed, Hiccup would be in her rooms. It was a dream and a nightmare at the same time; him appearing in the middle of the night to surprise her when she slept, his arms winding around her, their lips meeting, never letting go again. And always the fear someone might spot him. But of course, this would be different. Hiccup would be there on official invitation, not just on hers but on Daniel’s too. Daniel would be there to observe that nothing inappropriate happened, so there was no risk of getting caught.

But on the other hand, Daniel would be there. If Hiccup was successful in opening the lock, then she somehow had to make sure that Daniel wouldn’t even take a fleeting look inside. Could she manage that?
Maybe it would be better to not let Hiccup try… The key *had* to be somewhere in his stall, after all. She could wait another day or two. Yeah, that was probably the best option.

Astrid was about to decline the suggestion – but when she wanted to say so, she couldn’t. *How* was she supposed to explain her decision? By implying that she didn’t want Hiccup in her rooms? Or didn’t want him to see what was inside by any chance? She wanted to seem indifferent to Hiccup, not averse.

All these thoughts crossed her mind in the span of only a few seconds, but in the end, all she could do was nod. “That… would be okay,” she muttered, unable to come up with a more reasonable response. At least she had a little more time to think of a way how to keep Daniel away from the coffer now.

“Good,” her brother exclaimed cheerfully. “Let’s go right away then.”

Chapter End Notes

So... yep... sorry that this chapter not as exciting. :

But there's one other bit I wanted to talk about... There's the key... I thought about what to say, if I should say anything or keep the mystery just for fun. But then I thought there already are enough secrets, so I could just as well clear this up right away. They lost key serves a purpose in the end. But it's only a small piece of a bigger picture, and it's not to reveal their relationship or even blackmail them.
Hey Brother! Do You Still Believe In One Another?

Chapter Notes

Another week, another chapter... Though truth be told, I don't really know how it came to pass. There was a lot on my plate this week, and my head feels like mashed potatoes... *shrugs*

This week's title comes from "Hey Brother" by Avicii.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

As his boots crunched along the gravel path back to the castle, Hiccup could practically feel the awkwardness as a physical entity. Eret and Dagur had opted to stay behind at the stables for a few moments of privacy, with the excuse of feeding and exercising the horses, and without them to buffer talking with Daniel and Astrid, it was... awkward. Yet Hiccup couldn't resent the pair taking the time to be together in private; he just hoped that they would at least avoid making use of the stall he slept in. Or, if they couldn’t hold back from the allure of soft blankets, that they wouldn’t stumble across Astrid’s key in there.

But with their absence, it was just him, Astrid and Daniel... and while Daniel was trying to make conversation – on the grand blot, on the alterations he was planning on making to Redpeak when he had the chance, on the sorts of personal tales made by the group when they’d been younger – they were mostly falling flat when he tried to include Astrid. She was walking quietly at Daniel’s other side, occasionally chuckling or humming to one of his comments, but not really answering. It was obvious to Hiccup that the Prince was trying to come up with a conversation topic that would interest them both, and was failing miserably. As a result, they got noticeably quieter the longer they walked. It wasn’t really Daniel’s fault, though; he couldn’t know after all that his two companions deliberately wouldn’t participate in any mutual conversation.

So, when they finally reached Astrid’s chambers – after having made a small detour to the castle guards’ armory for Hiccup to pick up a few pieces of suitable tools – it was a relief for everyone, at least concerning the pressure to make small talk. He noticed, however, that Astrid grew tenser and quieter the closer they got to her rooms.

Hiccup wondered why, whether she was reluctant to let him see her private rooms, or whether she had some other reason. But he didn’t get the chance to further think about it – or, Odin forgive him, ask her. He’d been quite impressed with Cami’s rooms at Freya’s Temple last night, but what he found behind the door as he followed the Royal siblings inside put all that to shame.

Astrid’s main room had twice the footage of Cami’s, easily, and while they were similarly appointed – both with a nice tea table and chairs to make one conversation space and a pair of padded loungers in another space – Astrid’s rooms made clear the difference between pretending to be the Princess, and being the Princess. A hearth was set into the wall, with a merry flame already lit inside it, instead of the candles and brazier that Cami used for heat and light, and the wall around it was plastered and painted with detailed frescos, while the other walls were covered with finely dyed light blue linen panels for insulation – and then intricate tapestries and paintings on top of that. A drawn curtain of the same thick blue linen would cover a tall glass window, currently letting in what little light the winter day was deigning to give them, and which gave a gorgeous
view out over the city and lake beyond. Thick wool rugs covered the floor, and when Hiccup glanced upwards, sure enough, there was a candle-filled chandelier... and the ceiling was decorated with marquetry of at least a dozen woods depicting a teeming woodland. Open doors revealed other rooms in the suite that were similarly decorated.

But... while they were all gorgeous, this room wasn’t Astrid. The powder blue, certainly suiting the bright room, was more in honour of House Hofferson than of Astrid herself, who preferred stronger colours. There were barely any swan or horse, her favourite animal, beyond some tiny figurines in a freestanding display cabinet or as part and the paintings. But those were either portraits or battle or hunting scenes, and while they were very well done, as his artist’s eye told him... they certainly were not to the taste of the woman he loved.

This might have been the Princess’ official sitting room, but it wasn't Astrid’s room. Not like Hiccup’s room had been his, years ago.

“Ruff? Could you bring some tea for me and my guests?” Astrid’s voice tore Hiccup out of his reverie, and he turned to spot a young woman standing at attention. He wouldn’t have needed to hear her name to know that she had to be Tuff’s sister. He’d never seen Astrid’s maidservant before, but the similarities between the twins were telling enough.

“Of course, milady,” Ruff replied with a curtsy, and left after throwing him a curious glance.

Daniel’s eyes followed her with a bemused expression as she left, but then he shrugged. He indicated Hiccup to follow him to one of the adjacent rooms, when Tuff appeared in the doorway.

“You’re back already? I thought you’d wanted to spend all day with those horses. Such a short visit barely justified making the trip at all,” he stated dryly, eyes wandering from Astrid to Daniel before they landed with a raised eyebrow on Hiccup. “Did something happen I ought to know?”

“No, everything is fine,” Daniel assured. “Hiccup is here on our invitation. He…” He began a quick explanation of the situation, but Hiccup didn’t get the chance to listen further as Astrid suddenly addressed him directly.

“Hiccup? If you would, I’ll show you to where the coffer is. It’s not very big, but it’s heavy enough that I don’t want to try to move it.” She sounded unusually formal, and Hiccup tried to mimic her tone as best he could.

“Of course, milady,” he answered with a bow. He noticed the glance Astrid threw past him, likely at Daniel who was still talking to Tuff, but didn’t turn to make sure. Focused on not seeming suspicious, he followed Astrid to the very door Daniel had headed to before, and when he stepped past her to enter, he found himself in another splendidly decorated room that held a little more personality than the main sitting room outside.

While not her bedroom, this space was still far more intimate than the impersonal sitting and reception room just on the other side of the door; a large metal bathtub, currently empty, sat in one corner, with the folding lacquer screens that would shield her from view when being bathed folded up and leaned against the wall, while an empty space next to it with several mirrors likely served as a dressing space. And there was a writing desk in a corner; it was splendidly decorated with more marquetry, but was still well-used and had the usual accoutrements – ink, quill, paper – on top, with a comfortable looking chair in front of it.

The pictures here weren’t quite as artful he noticed, but they showed images he imagined suited Astrid’s taste better; paintings of horses and swans predominated the walls, with technical studies and more drawings of bows in between. There also was one large painting of a woman that could
have been Astrid if not for the oval, more longish face and her apparently being some years older, despite the picture itself obviously not being new. It had to be Astrid’s mother, he realised, the former Queen Brenna. Hiccup had to agree to what was said on the streets and in the taverns. Astrid looked just like her mother.

“You need to be careful.”

Astrid’s voice was barely more than a low hiss, and Hiccup turned to give her a confused look. She still stood next to the half-open door, at least partially visible from the other room where he still could hear Daniel and Tuff talking. Being alone with her in one of her private rooms gave him a weird feeling, a thrill that made his heart beat a little faster and seemed to sharpen all his senses. But at the same time, he felt weirdly safe. This was not the place to get close to her. These were the rooms of the Princess Royal, with her brother the Crown Prince being within hearing distance. Behaving appropriately had never been easier. So why was she reminding him to be careful? And why was there this undeniable panicky glint in her eyes?

“Daniel mustn’t see what’s inside the coffer,” she explained hastily. “I’ll try to keep him occupied in the sitting room, but when you’ve managed to open it, you better close the lid again in case he comes in after all.”

A part of him was touched by her confidence that he could open the coffer before he’d even given it the slightest of looks, but it got quickly smothered by the real concern in her voice. So he nodded. “I’ll be careful,” he promised with a reassuring smile, and added, “And I won’t take a look inside either.”

Astrid rolled her eyes and was about to reply when the door fully opened and Daniel joined them after all. “I hope not,” he commented on Hiccup’s last words. “I trust you not to violate Astrid’s privacy, you more than any random craftsman we could hire in the city.” He gave Hiccup an intense look who nodded, gulping.

There was a moment of awkward silence, Hiccup not daring to say anything lest he might reveal in any way just how much of Astrid’s privacy he’d invaded lately, before Astrid interrupted it. “Here, this is the coffer,” she said, walked over to the desk, and pointed at an ornate wooden box of the length of his forearm, also decorated with marquetry, although this was more abstract – and, taking a closer look, the inlays weren’t all wood; there were shells and stones and bits of fine metals as well. He stepped closer too, focus immediately on the lock he was supposed to disassemble. It, too, was prettily decorated, with fine filigree around the lock, but the lock itself was not very sturdy; opening it shouldn’t be a problem. Though whether it would still be usable afterwards was another topic altogether.

Astrid made a quick step away from Hiccup as he crouched down in front of her, his attention completely on the mechanical riddle in front of him, and she couldn’t help the bemused smile playing around her lips. She’d already seen how absorbed he could be when his mind was elsewhere, during a conversation with Daniel, or when he tended to the horses or mended tack. But this was a new dimension entirely, the way his nimble fingers prodded and probed, his gaze intensifying. It made clear just how much of a passion such mechanical devices were to him. Astrid felt as if she could watch him all day.

“So, what do you think,” Daniel interrupted the silence after a couple of minutes. “Do you think you can open it?”

Hiccup blinked, then looked up at Daniel with a slightly sheepish smile. “Yeah, I don’t think
opening it will be much of a problem. I doubt this coffer and lock were built to host anything of real value; privacy, yes, but a strongbox, it isn’t. I can’t promise that it will be fully functional afterwards, but I think taking up Dagur’s suggestion to get a sturdier and safer box would be better anyway.”

Daniel nodded, then turned his attention to Astrid. “Would that be all right for you?” he asked. There was an underlying concern in his voice that reminded her to keep up her composure.

Belatedly, she nodded. “Of course. I mean, I’d like to keep the box Uncle Oswald gave me, but if it’s so easy to open it, it’s probably not the best place to keep my personal things anyway. Not that anyone could get in here easily, but…” she shrugged, threw one last glance at Hiccup who was already fully absorbed in his work at hand, and fought back another smile. “Maybe I’ll just use the box to keep loose paper instead.”

“All right,” Daniel agreed, and turned toward Hiccup once more. “But remember, no peeking inside. Or I might have to punish you for High Treason after all.”

He laughed lightly at what apparently was meant to be a joke, and Astrid had to secretly commend Hiccup as he joined in, if somewhat shakily. Because she couldn’t find the composure to even smile about that comment.

The rattling of cups saved her though as Ruff returned, her placing the tray down on the table in the other room audible even in here. “How about we let Hiccup concentrate on his task and wait next door?” Astrid suggested, cursing the slight tremble in her voice. If Daniel wanted to stay here to keep Hiccup company, or simply to observe him to learn about mechanics himself, then he was bound to see the tunic. Surely Hiccup would have to open the lid at least once, if only to ensure it was really unlocked.

But to her utmost relief, Daniel nodded, if hesitantly. “Okay,” he agreed, even as he threw a regretful look at Hiccup who was now laying out the tools he’d brought. “We’ll leave you to it then. If you need anything, we’re right in the next room.”

“All right,” Hiccup murmured absentmindedly, and Astrid honestly wasn’t sure whether he’d even registered Daniel’s words. Now that Daniel had agreed to wait in the other room with her – and she could be confident that her secret would remain a secret – the soft smile was back on her face as she once more glanced at Hiccup’s concentrated expression before she went ahead and left the room.

Once seated at her tea table in the sitting room, with Daniel a safe distance away from her treasure chest and its content, Astrid finally could relax again. The tea helped probably too. And maybe, this day wouldn’t turn into a total letdown for her time with Daniel after all. Sitting here, comfortable and with a cup of tea, and simply being able to chat with her big brother was a nice way to spend some time too, and such a rare occasion. And Daniel seemed to feel so too, even though the topic he brought up wasn’t quite to her liking.

“So,” he began after a while, clearly reluctantly. “We didn’t really get the chance to talk much since… you know, since the reception. But… well, I haven’t even asked yet, so… How are you doing?”

Astrid blanched as his words brought back the memories of the reception. Of Harold. Thinking about all that made her feel as if an invisible ring was around her chest, shrinking with every second and leaving her unable to breathe. But at the same time… there also was Hiccup’s warm glow inside her, holding that ring – and all connected memories – at bay. Without her help, her hand landed on her chest, feeling for their thrumming connection. It wasn’t enough to make her
smile, not while remembering Harold. But it was enough to keep any traces of panic away. “I’m okay,” she eventually murmured, not meeting Daniel’s gaze. She meant it, but she couldn’t explain to him why she felt so different from last spring this time. Ever.

But Daniel didn’t really seem to believe her. Carefully, he placed his cup down on its plate, and gave her a weirdly intense and apologetic look. “I’m so sorry, Astrid,” he murmured. “I promised that I would protect you, that I wouldn’t let something like this happen again. But I failed you, and—”

“It’s fine!” she interrupted him a little more vehemently, and the smile she gave him was genuine now. The last she wanted was for Daniel to burden himself with unnecessary guilt. Nothing of what had happened had been his fault, after all. “Really, I mean it. I’m okay. Besides,” she added, a little lighter and fully intending to quickly change the subject, “You can’t protect me from everything and all the time anyway. You’ll be gone in three days, and I’m not a child anymore. If anything, you better make sure that you stay safe.” It was a genuine concern. It was he who would soon be close to enemy territory, after all.

But to her surprise, Daniel didn’t seem to be the least bit bothered, and even snorted out a short laugh. “Oh, don’t worry about me.”

Astrid’s forehead wrinkled with a slight frown. “Don’t act all confident, I’m not one of those boys that need convincing to join the army. I’m here when the mourning ceremonies are held for those who fell, remember? Going to Westhill is dangerous.”

“Oh, I know,” Daniel sighed, a little soberer now. “It’s just… I’m not in that much danger. Not more than the usual soldier, at least, and really less.” Astrid was about to lecture him that he wasn’t invincible, but he cut her off with a soft shake of his head. “I know it’s dangerous,” he assured her. “It’s not open war, but it’s by far not safe territory either. And believe me, I have no delusions. The Malarians mostly know who I am; even if I were to travel under some disguise they would sooner or later find out. I’m not naive; I know that they have their spies everywhere. It’s more the opposite, actually. They know exactly who I am, and they know it’s in their interest not to harm me.”

Astrid had been about to take another sip of her slowly cooling tea, but paused mid-movement. “Ransom.”

“Got it in one. That’s half of why this war keeps going. They capture some of our men and we ransom them back. We capture theirs and do the same. Back and forth, back and forth... we do the same with the territory as well.” He scowled. “And in the process, we reduce the land to waste.”

Astrid sighed. She knew this was a sore subject for him.

“But, yes, the ransom for a prince,” he motioned to himself, “would be a fortune. So the times that they’ve tried capturing me... well...” he chuckled humourlessly. “I make good bait.”

“You’re not helping my worries,” she replied.

“But that’s my point! A dead prince isn’t worth anything beyond an apology, and possibly a prayer to Odin that Father won’t wave the bloody shirt and call up an army drawn from the entire kingdom to avenge me,” Daniel said earnestly. “But a live prince... well, nobody’s going to just kill that sort of golden goose.”

“And what if they kept you as prisoner to extort something other than gold out of Father?” she pressed. “Despite my governesses’ best efforts, I do know something about politics.”
Daniel chuckled.

“No, I’m serious! What would you and Father do if some Malarian prince captured you and said to Father, ‘You get your prince back when your army aids mine in capturing all of the princedoms and making me king of all of Maladur?’ What then?”

Daniel sighed and picked up a piece of sweetbread that Ruff had brought with the tea. Taking a nibble, he said, “Father will counter-offer with the ransom.”

“And if they say, ‘No, I want my crown?’” she pressed. “What then? You’re the heir!”

He set the sweetbread down and gave her an eerily stern look. “And you’re the spare.”

She felt the blood flow from her face. “No.”

“Yes. Your future husband would become the king if they killed me. So I’d be very politely telling my captors that the ransom is all they’ll get, and mercenaries are an option. But killing me gets them an angry army, instead of one to help them conquer.” He picked the sweetbread back up and took another bite. “So that’s the rationale. I’m safe because killing me gets them less than nothing, but keeping me alive gets them a fortune.” He chuckled. “And to even accomplish that, they’d have to get through my guardsmen, and that, as many a bandit group have found out, is no easy task.”

Astrid sat quietly, staring at her brother, and tried to wrap her head around what he’d just told her. It should soothe her to learn that, however twisted this logic was, it somehow served to keep Daniel safe. That she kept him safe. But it was a lot to take in, and it didn’t seem as if she would get the time to do so now.

Suddenly, loud rumbling was audible from the other room, followed by Hiccup’s cursing, and Astrid shared a bemused look with Daniel. What exactly was Hiccup doing? A minute later, Hiccup cursed again, more elaborately this time, and Daniel got up, apparently to check what was going on. It served for another spark of panic to flare up inside her, but before Daniel even reached the door, it already opened and Hiccup appeared, a distraught expression on his face – and her broken music box in his hands.

“I-I’m so sorry,” he stammered. He was pale, his eyes darting to and fro between her and Daniel. Astrid somewhat relaxed, now that the danger of Daniel discovering anything he mustn’t was averted, but also noticed how Daniel on the other hand tensed up.

“What happened?” he asked, voice eerily neutral.

Hiccup swallowed, threw her another short pleading look, but then seemed to catch himself a little again. Turning toward Daniel, he explained in a hurried voice, “I… managed to open the coffer. It wasn’t all that difficult, but something got stuck at the end so I had to lift it to get better leverage, and then it suddenly sprang open. I-I didn’t see what was inside, didn’t look, but this–” he held up the music box, “–fell out and… and I fear it broke.” The last word came out as barely more than a weak whisper. Again, Hiccup’s eyes searched hers, and he looked so upset and sorry that Astrid felt the urge to walk over and hug him.

“Let me see,” Daniel murmured, took the box from Hiccup, and when he turned it around the unmistakable rattling noise of something moving inside that shouldn’t was audible. “Uh, that’s… unfortunate. Ahm…” Daniel looked stricken, brows furrowed and lips pressed into a thin line. He probably contemplated how to react, whether Hiccup deserved a punishment for breaking her
things, but clearly not wanting to do that. It made a bubble of hysterical laughter rise in Astrid which she was barely able to suppress.

“That’s okay,” she quickly threw in, and got up to join Daniel and Hiccup where they stood. “You didn’t break it, it already was broken before.”

Relief visibly washed over both men’s faces, and Astrid was hard pressed to keep up her front when all she wanted was to hug them both. “Thank you, Lord Tyr,” Hiccup muttered, just as Daniel asked, “It broke? When? You never mentioned that.”

Shrugging nonchalantly, Astrid wrapped her arms around herself as the memories of that day resurfaced. It hadn’t been such a bad day, in the end, but those particular hours she’d spend with her music box then were not those she enjoyed to remember. “It… happened a week ago,” she replied curtly. “And there happened so much. I guess I just forgot about it.”

Daniel gave her a sorrowful look and nodded, accepting her explanation without digging deeper. Instead, he suddenly paused and an almost childlike excited expression spread across his face. “But… maybe it’s actually a fortunate coincidence that this happened now.” He held the box out in Hiccup's direction. “Do you think you could fix it?”

Astrid blinked in surprise. She hadn’t really thought about this possibility so far. Would it be possible to repair such an intricate device? Her eyes followed Daniel to look at Hiccup, hopefully. Maybe she didn’t need the box anymore to ward off dark thoughts, but she surely wouldn’t complain if she could get it back. Especially not if it was Hiccup who did that for her.

Hiccup, however, looked a little intimidated, biting on his lower lip and one hand raised to scratch at the back of his neck. “Ahm… I’m not sure that’s possible,” he mumbled meekly. “And I certainly don’t know whether I can do that. I’ve never seen something like this before. I mean, I can give it a look, but I can’t promise anything.”

“Well, it can’t get more damaged, right?” Daniel said lightly. “Just say what you need, and I’ll have it brought to you.”

Astrid sat idly on top of a rough blanket and let her gaze wander over the small lake in front of her. This had been a good day, she mused, and tugged her warm cloak closer around her shoulders as a cool breeze blew across the water toward her. In the distance, the usual group of swans glided over the lake while her brothers flipped stones across the surface. It created an intricate pattern of waves, and Astrid basked in the lightness and tranquility of the moment. The next days would be far from this peaceful, so she tried to absorb as much of this atmosphere as possible.

A part of her was sad that Hiccup wasn't here to share this moment with her, no matter how inconspicuous they would have to be. But then, maybe it was even better that way. Without him being around, interacting with Daniel and the others had been so much easier. And remembering just why he wasn't here brought a soft smile to her lips anyway.

After Daniel had suggested he should try to mend her broken music box, Hiccup had insisted on starting right away, so he hadn't accompanied them back to the outer stables and instead had gone to the main stables. Or, more precisely, to the main stables' tack room workshop. He'd said something about how that was as good a place to work as any other, and that Lavo would surely be able to help him get whatever tool he would need. He'd looked so excited, his eyes practically gleaming with the prospect of dissecting a new mechanical device, and Astrid thought that she wouldn't even mind if he couldn't fix it. Seeing him so untroubled and enthusiastic had been
enough of a gift already.

Since then, she and her brothers had spent another relaxed day outside. They'd gone for a short ride through the woods, had bantered and laughed, and effectively pushed away any thoughts about this being the last day they would spend like this for a long while. These last few weeks had been a blessing, and not just because of Hiccup's presence in her life. It had been like travelling back in time to when they'd been younger and the problems of the Kingdom's future hadn't rested quite as heavily on their shoulders. And in the next years, things would surely only become more difficult. Yes, this last day of leisure with her brother had been a blessing indeed.

Astrid jumped a little as suddenly a large figure appeared in the corner of her eye. But she immediately realised it was just Eret, relaxed again, and smiled as he sat down beside her. "Aren't these birds getting boring by now?" he asked teasingly, nodding at the swans. He knew exactly that she wouldn't get bored of watching them so soon.

"No, not yet," she replied, grinning. "Just look how graceful they are, beautiful, yet strong and unafraid. There really is nothing that bothers them. If anything, I only might get a bit jealous."

Eret chuckled, shaking his head at her words, but then changed the topic. "As for nothing bothering you... I'm sorry, but we didn't really look for your key anymore."

"That's all right. I don't really need it anymore now that Hiccup opened the coffer, though I might need a sturdier one of those now. Either way, I'm sure you were occupied otherwise anyway," she added, smirking.

Eret grunted, something between a cough and a laugh. "True. Though we did churn up the straw a bit."

Astrid snorted, memories of her and Hiccup 'churning up the straw' last night resurfacing in her mind. His hot skin against hers, their hands exploring each other, his mouth on her breasts... She was incredibly glad that the chilly air had her cheeks red already; it meant her blush wouldn't be quite as noticeable.

"Anyway, that's not where I wanted to go," Eret went on, settling back on his elbows as his eyes wandered over to where Daniel and Dagur were practising combat stances, with long sticks as makeshift weapons. It seemed like they would never grow up. "I didn't think of this or I would have told you before. But I think I remember you still wearing that necklace when you said your farewell at the castle last night."

Astrid nodded, slowly, trying to buy time. He was right of course, she knew that. "So it's probably somewhere entangled in my dress after all," she eventually replied, sighing. "I'm sorry I made you all look for that stupid key this morning then, when it's most likely not there after all."

"Hey, it's all right," he appeased her. "You'd do the same if it were something one of us had lost. You certainly already do enough to help anyway..." He trailed off, and when Astrid glanced at him, he was chewing his lip, apparently lost in his own thoughts.

She didn’t react, and instead let her gaze wander back to the lake in front of them. Eret said she already did enough, but it didn’t feel that way to her. Sure, keeping their secret until they knew where their future would lead them was at least something, and she apparently already did a lot for Daniel by simply existing.

But she honestly wished she could do more.
Chapter End Notes

So yeah... another chapter... If it's awful then I'm sorry.

And on that note: I can't promise that the next chapter will be on time. Lots of family and chaos to come. I'll try though.

Happy Holiday.
Okay… First of all, I need to apologise that there was no new chapter last week. Between the holidays, school holidays, and a general lack of motivation/writer’s block, I didn’t manage to write anything. This week is a little better, even though I’m still not really happy with this chapter.

Because I hear you. And I feel you. You’re ready for things to happen, for action and real drama… Believe me, so am I! But this is what I was talking about at the beginning of the second part. It’s about development, on many points, and might become a little boring… BUT! We’re almost through. I can’t/won’t say how many chapters are still to come in this second part, because I never know if a plan of three or four chapters stays that way… But know that we’ve almost reached the end of this part, and part three will be much more interesting…

But yeah, not entirely happy with this chapter… because I wanted to add so much more here, but simply didn’t manage to write it all. I mean, in the end, this chapter reached a decent size, so it’s fine. But yeah, things tend to get longer than intended, and I’m sorry.

Either way, this chapter is dedicated to @poppysfanworld over on Tumblr. It was her birthday last week, and I’m so sorry that I missed updating on that day of all days. Although, this chapter would have been dedicated to her anyway. For those who don’t know: a couple of weeks back, she drew a fanart for this story, and, without her knowing about it, the scene she drew is in this chapter! So, yeah, Poppy, this chapter is yours. I hope it’s okay ._.

This week’s title… is probably nothing but incomprehensible babbling to most of you. It’s from the German version of “Think Of Me” from The Phantom Of The Opera, and means something like “Remember! No force can separate us – except time and space”. Now, I could have simply used the English lyrics instead… But here’s the funny thing: The English lyrics at that point are “Remember me, once in a while, Please, promise me you’ll try” – which, as you hopefully agree, is not quite the same… xD

"So... is there anything you want to do?" Hiccup's voice was low, rough even, as he spoke into her ear in-between kisses. Those kisses had started intense from the first he’d given her, only moments after she’d arrived at the stables, and had only grown more heated since then.

Astrid sat across his lap, having landed there after a stormy greeting, and couldn't really think about anything except that she wanted to keep kissing him, wanted to feel his hands and mouth, his hot skin against hers again. This last day spent with her brothers had been great, but spending the night with Hiccup was even better. "I don't know," she gasped after a few more kisses that left her breathless. She hadn't even gotten around to take off her cloak yet, so what gave him the idea that she could think properly? His hands on her waist and around the small of her back felt wonderful, like a promise of happiness, but she’d rather they took off her dress and his tunic again. "Show me
Hiccup chuckled, a deep rumbling that vibrated through them both, but obliged nonetheless. His kisses grew even more intense, his teeth nibbling and tugging at her lips, and his hold on her became rougher as he pulled her closer until her chest was flush to his. There was still too much cloth between them for her taste, but the way he made the fabric rub against her breasts was still enticing enough. For now.

When his left hand moved away from her back, she wanted to protest at first. She wanted more, of him, of those forbidden sensations, more explosions and more softness afterwards. But then she felt his hand on her thigh, beneath her skirt, and forgot any complaints. His touch on that unexpected and ridiculously sensitive bit of skin made her gasp, her wide eyes meeting his as he retreated and looked up at her.

"Is this okay?" he asked, and the husky tone in his voice made a pleasant shiver run down her spine. His hand on her thigh moved a little, slowly wandering higher up her leg to emphasise the meaning of his question.

Astrid felt dizzy, a small flicker of fear rising as his touch brought back the memory of Harold touching her. But that flicker disappeared just as quickly as the other one last night had when Hiccup had cupped her breast with his large and work-rough hand. Those memories had no power over her anymore, and the fact that Hiccup asked was the ultimate difference. Because Hiccup would never force himself on her, would never do anything she didn't want him to. With him, she was safe.

A little overwhelmed by this renewed realisation and the sheer difference of how Hiccup's touch felt, she wasn't quite able to form any words. Instead, she nodded, and choked a little when his fingers suddenly brushed over her sex. He started with slow and light touches, soft strokes over the thin fabric of her underwear, only teasing her sensitive body beneath. But it was enough to make her shiver, made her clutch at his shoulders for an anchor, and with his dark eyes avidly taking in her every reaction, she felt simultaneously exposed and cradled, caught in this wonderful whirlwind of emotions and sensations that made her dizzy.

When his hungry mouth resumed kissing her, it made everything more intense, and it didn't take long before his hand became bolder, too. The press of his finger against those hidden folds or that hot spot at the top let everything else fade into the background until all she cared for was feeling more. More of his tongue gliding along hers, more of his touch. Occasionally, he slowed down, a proud grin pulling at his lips when that made her grind herself against him in search of more sensation, and at some point, Astrid couldn't remember when, he must have slipped his hand beneath her underwear, because suddenly not even that bit of fabric was between her and his hand anymore. It should have made her cautious, but she trusted Hiccup not to tear what had to remain intact, trusted him with everything.

Gods, he looked so beautiful as he gazed up at her in what looked like awe, even with how silly she had to look, pathetically grinding and rocking against his hand as she was, mewling, her face surely flushed and covered in sweat. But he didn't look as if he thought her silly, not even as another one of those explosions tore through her body and left her twisting and screaming. If anything, he looked as if he honestly enjoyed watching her.

"Was that what you wanted?" he murmured into her ear. His hand was soothingly rubbing her back after she'd sacked against his chest and panted against his neck with her head resting on his shoulder.

"Mmmh, yes," she hummed, giggling as another of those small but pleasant waves ran through her
body. Gods, how had she ever thought she wouldn't like this?

Hiccup's embrace, which felt like it was all that was keeping her upright at this point, tightened for a moment as he pressed a loving kiss to her temple. Then he guided her soft and so wonderfully pliant body down onto the blanket before he stood up.

"Where are you going?" she asked, confused and not really able to think yet.

"I... I'll be right back," he muttered. "Everything's fine, I just..." He swallowed, bit his lip, shrugged, and then left the stall.

Too dazed to give his strange behaviour much thought, Astrid basked in how relaxed she felt, how comfortable here in this simple stall surrounded by Hiccup's scent. Eventually, she wriggled out of her cloak and tossed it to the side before burrowing into the blanket, giggling. When he returned, however, he still seemed oddly tense.

“Are you okay?” he asked, anxiously. He kneeled down beside her, and looked her over. “Did I... Gods, did I hurt you?”

Astrid blinked up at him, puzzled. “No, you didn’t. I’m fine.” She reached for his hand and wanted to pull him down toward her, to cuddle and kiss. But when she touched him, she noticed that his hand, cool and damp, was shaking. “Hiccup, what happened?”

“I…” he stammered, his gaze darting around, to her eyes, their hands, and around the stall as if those wooden walls held any wisdom. “There was… blood on my hand just now, and– Gods, I thought I was careful enough, but... but...” He broke off, his gaze now pleading, desperate.

Astrid, however, relaxed. “Oh, that,” she murmured as she shuffled to make space for Hiccup beside her. “It’s the time of my moon blood. It’s almost over, but...” she trailed off, shrugging. Then another thought occurred to her, and she grimaced. “Is that... a problem?” She hadn’t thought about that, but with how little – practically nothing, really – she knew about how all this worked, maybe it was?

Her answer visibly appeased Hiccup though. He relaxed, shoulder slumping in relief, and he finally lay down next to her with a heavy sigh. “No, it’s not a problem. Not for me,” he clarified, expression relaxing into a soft smile now. “I just... well, I feared that I... had accidentally broken your maidenhead, even though I’d been sure to be careful enough, and...” He gulped, but then shook his head and burrowed deeper into their comfortable embrace. “But no, not a problem. Some women become overly sensitive during that time, sometimes even painfully so, but as long as it felt good for you, everything's fine.”

“Hmm… yeah, I’d say it felt good enough for me,” she hummed, making Hiccup chuckle.

“That’s all what’s important,” he sighed, and brushed his lips against her forehead.

For a timeless while, they lay in silence, lost in their cosy bubble of warmth and comfort, the only sounds coming from occasional light kisses or one of them humming happily.

“How was your day?” Hiccup eventually asked. His fingers traced an invisible line up her bare arm, and it made her giggle.

“It was good,” she replied, stopping his hand by carding her fingers through his. “But I'll miss these days. Once Daniel left, I don’t think I’ll be able to get away with so much free time anymore, and in a few weeks...” She trailed off, biting her lip until it stung. She didn't want to think about the months to come; Daniel would be in Westhill organising their defences, Dagur would return to
Southshore to learn how to keep nobility and overambitious merchants in check, and Eret would be back in Eastervale to take care of their horses—and Hiccup would leave with him. And then it would grow even worse when summer would arrive, when they’d all go to Westhill to actually fight, and leave her behind with no other option but to pray for their safe return.

The thought made her heart beat faster for another reason for once, and Hiccup seemed to notice the difference immediately.

“Hey, it'll be okay,” he murmured soothingly. “Everything will be fine. We’ll be careful, and between Daniel’s personal guard and the Gods apparently needing us for their plans… I’m not really worried anything will happen to us.”

Swallowing thickly, she forced a smile onto her lips, and nodded. “I know,” she breathed, almost inaudible. “But I'll miss you nonetheless.” She pressed closer against his chest. “Gods, I wish we could get married already. I don't want to be apart from you, ever.”

Hiccup sucked in a breath, his fingers at her back twitching. “Believe me, I know what you mean,” he muttered hoarsely. “But even then I’d have to leave to fight eventually.” He retreated, and curled his hand around her jaw, tilting her head upwards so their eyes met. “But it'll be worth it in the end. You'll see. In a few years, we’ll be sitting beside a warm hearth fire, wrapped in a comfortable embrace after the day's work, and laugh about all this.”

“Mmh,” Astrid hummed, closed her eyes and nuzzled against his hand. “I can’t wait.”

“Me neither,” he mumbled, then let his free hand drop to her chest, over her heart “But we'll never be apart, remember? Not really.”

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The following day was somehow boring and stressful at the same time.

Even though she’d again had an unbelievably restful sleep in Hiccup’s arms, it still had been barely more than a handful of hours. They’d talked a lot last night, about their future, how their life would be – and had completely forgotten the time.

Some things still made her smile whenever she remembered them, like how they agreed on hopefully having enough space to keep horses, as riding was something neither of them wanted to miss. But at the same time, she hoped their life wouldn’t be too pompous, too formal. She wanted to be able to literally spend nights rolling in the hay with her husband, just like they did now, without it being a scandal due to their high status.

Hiccup hadn’t been quite as forward with what he hoped or planned; instead, he’d agreed with and occasionally elaborated on her suggestions, rather than offering his own, and there had been something like a sad shadow crossing his face every now and then. But those never lingered, and he’d kept asking her questions and listened avidly to every single one of her – occasionally silly – lines of thinking.

“It’s not silly,” he’d said after she’d told him that she hoped for a relatively simple life, far away from politics and intrigues and fighting, that she wanted them to raise their children themselves, peacefully and without the rules of decorum demanding them to engage a governess. He’d cradled her face in his hand, one of her favourite touches by him, and had looked at her with so much warmth and love in his eyes that she’d thought she would melt then and there. “No, not silly at all… Gods, I can’t wait for this future to come true, the vision we had. You, with our son on your arms, our home…” He’d swallowed, and Astrid had been sure that he felt the same longing she felt
too, the sheer yearning for the years to hurry by until their life together would start for real.

But all that had been last night, had kept them up far longer than intended, and today, she almost regretted staying up so deep into the night.

No, that wasn’t true. She didn’t regret that they’d talked for hours. It had been wonderful, phenomenal, incredible. But that didn’t change how tired she was, how she was barely able to keep herself from yawning every now and then or her gaze and mind from drifting away from conversations and greeting their guests.

“What’s the matter, little sis?” Dagur nudged her arm with his elbow after she’d missed replying to some duke’s greeting. “You look tired, and not just today if I may say so. Is something bothering you? Keeping you awake?”

They stood in a neat row, the King, the Grand Dukes, Daniel and she, Dagur, and Erch, to greet and welcome all the highborn lords and ladies that had come to the capitol for the grand blot tonight. From experience, Astrid knew that this reception would go on for hours, which was why they’d already started in the morning.

Dagur’s question made her smile though, Hiccup’s warmth in her chest spreading at the memory. “Yeah, somehow I haven’t slept all that much lately,” she admitted, but then quickly changed the subject. “And this reception doesn’t exactly help with keeping me awake either. How much longer is this going to go on?”

Dagur grinned, and Astrid could practically see how he forcefully kept himself from cackling out loud. “I think we’re almost through.” He glanced at the ceiling-high windows to their left. “See? It’s already past noon. We should be through in another hour at the latest.”

Astrid sighed, and nodded. This year wasn’t the first time she’d participated in pre-blot ceremonies, including the grand reception, but the particulars of the rituals all tended to blur together for her, mostly because her part in them was only as a glorified accessory. Meanwhile, her brothers all had direct parts to play, and had since they’d been boys old enough to understand.

She remembered years when she’d sneaked into the hall and had hidden behind curtains or underneath tables, drawing faces at her brothers until they burst out laughing and she’d gotten thrown out. She almost wished she could do that now, too. Play some prank, leave the hall, and roam freely over the castle’s grounds. But she was part of the official party now, and no matter how much she wanted to just run and leave everything behind her... she couldn’t.

Sighing, she put back on her mask of a smile and greeted a baron and his wife whose names she’d forgotten already with a curtsey. Only one more hour, then food would be served and the afternoon would be filled with mingling and chatting, before they would all ride in a slow procession to the Temple for the grand winter blot.

Astrid sighed again. The holy ritual to pray for the return of light and warmth and to ask for a good harvest and peaceful times was actually one of her favourites. But all the pompous affectations around it made these days nearly unbearable.

.o O o.

Hiccup let out a groan as he stretched, and let his gaze wander over the small team of horses in front of him. With him having spent the day cleaning and scrubbing saddles and bridles – and working on Astrid’s music box whenever he had a spare moment – the day had flown by in what had felt like a heartbeat to him.
But now, it was all done. Six of his seven charges stood groomed to perfection, tacked in their polished and shiny saddles and bridles, ready to go, and his Midwinter gift for Astrid was wrapped in cloth and safely attached to Cassie’s saddle.

Not that he was actually allowed to give a present to the Princess as, customarily, only family members gave each other gifts. And he knew that, even though the King and Grand Dukes considered each other family, Daniel, Eret, and the rest of them didn’t really exchange any meaningful gifts either.

But this was different. The Crown Prince himself had asked him to do this, and if coincidentally he could give back the repaired music box to the Princess on this of all days… so be it. Nobody ever had to know that it was meant as a Midwinter gift to his future wife – or that there was a second, more personal present hidden in that bundle. Nobody but her.

Smiling, he walked from one horse to the other, patting their necks and humming to keep them all calm, while his thoughts whirled around nothing but her. As always.

Last night, she’d been amazing. He’d expected her to become more active over time when it came to their lovemaking, given her confident nature. Coaxing her into trying to seek her own pleasure last night had been meant as a first step toward the vixen he assumed she’d eventually become, confident in her own sexuality, with the scars of the past having healed and faded. But, Freya, the reality had been so much more overwhelming than he ever could have anticipated. He’d done barely more than teasing her a little before she’d bucked and ground against him, had positively ridden his hand, and watching her fall apart like that had been one of the most beautiful sights he’d ever seen.

It meant he would need to be careful though, if he intended to spare his clothes – sneaking out to jerk off instead of spilling into his trousers every time she came over. But that was a small price to pay if it meant he could watch her curiously and confidently explore her own body, could hold and kiss and cuddle her, could dream with her about their future – even though the picture she’d drawn of their dream life had made him melancholic. It had been an almost picture-perfect description of the life they could have had, if only…

Trembling, he chased these unwanted thoughts away, just as a small voice broke the silence. “Milord?” the boy said carefully, eyeing the Grand Duke’s stallion Hunter behind Hiccup with an undeniably scared expression. “We’re done cleaning up and are ready to go.”

Hiccup nodded at the boy, one of the sorry lads Lavo had sent over to help him today. “All right. Have you decided yet who gets to ride which horse?”

The boy gulped, eyes still fixed on the stallion, and nodded. “I lost.”

Hiccup had to suppress a chuckle at the boy’s expression, and instead decided to put his mind at ease as best he could. “You don’t need to be afraid of Hunter. I know you’ve learned how to treat these horses, or Master Lavo wouldn’t have sent you.”

The boy bit his lip, but didn’t seem convinced. “Yes, but… but Wulf warned us about Hunter. He said, since he’s a trained war stallion, it’s very likely that he’ll throw us off because we’re not his usual rider, and–”

The boy broke off as Hiccup couldn’t keep from laughing now after all, even though he fought to keep it quiet to not agitate the horses. He felt at ease between them, as always, but that didn’t mean that they couldn’t turn deadly at the right – or wrong – provocation. “And you believed him?” Hiccup asked, shaking his head. Wulf was an older stable boy in Lavo’s retinue, known to play...
pranks on the younger boys on every occasion he could. “Even I learned not to take everything Wulf says seriously, and I’d only been at the stud farm for a few months.” The boy’s face turned an entertaining shade of red, and, taking pity on him, Hiccup rectified, “Yes, Hunter is a war stallion, but a seasoned one. He’s used to different riders, as long as they know how to keep him calm. And between Crusher, who isn’t trained as a war stallion and by far not as aggressive, and Markor and Cassie, the only horses you’d need to be careful with are Squish and Trample – and I’ll be taking care of those. You don’t need to worry.”

The boy only looked partially convinced, but so long as he didn’t panic, everything would be fine. And Hiccup knew he wouldn’t. He’d been serious, after all; Lavo wouldn’t have sent him these boys to help if they couldn’t handle the horses.

A few minutes later, the three boys sat in their respective saddles, and Hiccup gave them the sign to start their way to the castle. Crusher and Hunter went ahead, probably the easiest to handle, while the third boy rode Cassie and led Markor on a rope behind him. It surely would have been easier to just place a fourth boy on Markor’s back instead, but as used to horses as these boys were, they were not used to ride on a side saddle, especially not one with decorations they could ruin with the tiniest motion.

“Don’t get too close to the stallions,” he warned the boy on Cassie’s back, signalling him to follow the others with a bit of a distance. “Markor gets a bit skittish around them sometimes.” The boy nodded, paling a little as he probably realised at that moment that he hadn’t gotten the easiest task after all.

Chuckling quietly to himself, Hiccup followed, riding Trample while leading Squish on a rope beside them, leaving a small distance as well, but still close enough to keep an eye on the boys and the horses. All in all, he was grateful to Lavo for having sent the boys, as getting all six horses to the castle for the parade all on his own would have been quite a challenge. But taking care of the boys in addition hadn’t been all that easy either. Although, it hadn’t really been Lavo’s idea anyway, and the main reason hadn’t been to help him with the horses either.

The slow ride to the castle was thankfully uneventful, and they arrived just in time, with the sun just beginning to set. By the front gates, Hiccup and several other grooms from the main stables stood ready with the horses for the Royals and their highest guests to lead the slow procession toward the Temple. He shifted a little uncomfortably in the formal outfit he had to wear, as he was to ride at his master’s side, but all in all, he was more filled with eager anticipation than with anything else.

During the last couple of years, he hadn’t really participated in any Midwinter festivities, but at home on Berk the ritual to pray for the sun’s return had been, like everything else, a relatively formless affair. Oh, sure, they observed the rites themselves, but beyond that, there had been lots to eat and drink, and by the time the sun set and everyone headed for the Temple hardly anyone was still sober. But from what he’d heard so far, here at the capitol, things went differently. It was a grand event; the long procession that would grow bigger the longer they rode through the city toward the Temple alone was worth it.

And the grand blot itself would be equally impressive, the beautiful plaza he’d admired the other day entirely filled with people and lights. It would surely be an overwhelming sight and worth being a part of at least once.

And then there was the fact that he would be able to celebrate this day with Astrid. Sure, he couldn’t be at her side, couldn’t hold her hand and show the world that he belonged to her. But as Eret’s squire, he at least could be near her, and that was worth every bit of discomfort he might feel
in these excessive clothes.

They didn’t need to wait long until the grand gates to the castle opened. King Osmond was the first, of course, with Daniel and the Grand Dukes right behind him, and many more following. It was a bit of a chaos, really. The place had been relatively full with countless horses and grooms before already, but now that the noblemen came in addition, all looking for their steeds, it was madness. Hiccup was just glad that, since he was in charge of the Prince’s and Grand Duke Eret’s horses among others, he had one of the more advantageous spots on the plaza, close to both the castle entrance and the gate.

“Thank you, Hiccup,” Daniel said after he’d held Trample for him to mount the horse, and was about to do the same for Dagur. “How was your day? Did everything work as planned?”

A smile tugged at Hiccup's lips, even as he fought to keep a professionally composed expression. It had been on Daniel's suggestion that Lavo had sent him some helping hands – to help with the horses, yes, but Hiccup guessed that, in the end, that had only been a beneficial side effect. As far as he understood, Daniel was intent on returning the music box mended and repaired to Astrid before he left on the day after tomorrow, and, as he wasn’t capable to do it himself, was more than willing to accept every help he could get. “Yes, your Highness,” Hiccup replied, formally bowing his head. “I got everything done. Thank you for the assistance.”

Daniel nodded, beaming, but before he could say more, Eret greeted him with a clap on the shoulder. “You should be thanking me for not insisting on you accompanying me,” he groaned. “Seriously, this day of socialising was the worst. I wish I could have helped you instead of spending all afternoon with the Countess of Whitevale and her daughters.”

“Well, you survived,” Daniel commented dryly. “And let’s be honest, when it comes to ridiculous and unwanted proposals, we all got off easy today.” Both Eret and Dagur snorted, clearly in annoyed agreement, but before Hiccup could place any question as to what had happened, Daniel shook his head. “Let’s just be glad it’s all over,” he sighed. Then his gaze flickered away, past them, and his expression grew tight. When Hiccup followed his eyes, he spotted Astrid standing next to Markor, her posture tense with shoulders drawn up, and clearly unhappy.

Daniel huffed quietly, the leather of the reins creaking as his hands tightened around them. He looked around the plaza, then from Dagur to Eret, and back to Astrid. “Hiccup?” he eventually murmured, an odd tension in his voice. “I normally wouldn’t ask you, but we’re all already mounted, and it wouldn’t be appropriate to…” He trailed off, and slightly shook his head, teeth gritted, before he went on. “Could you go assist the Princess with mounting her steed?”

Hiccup’s eyes widened a little, but he quickly fought not to show his surprise – or his nervousness. “O-of course, Highness,” he replied, bowed again, and retreated. Even with how formal he usually behaved, doing so now was different. It was real – had to be real. But luckily, it came rather naturally, because he wasn’t sure if he could have pulled off the act otherwise.

He was about to publically interact with Astrid, on an open plaza and surrounded and possibly watched by countless noblemen and the King himself, was even to touch her. And even though it happened on the Prince’s request, it still made him nervous.

“Your Highness?” It was weird to use this form of address for her, but the only appropriate one right now. As she turned – her gown of dark blue satin with silvery detailings woven into the fabric looking as if the night sky itself was flowing around her – he was once more struck by just how beautiful she was. And the way her expression softened slightly at his sight only added to that. But no matter how much her sight warmed his heart and her presence gave him reassurance, he was acutely aware of their audience. “Please excuse me approaching you, your Highness. But the
Prince asked me to offer you my help?” He let his words end in a question, asking her permission, as he indicated toward Markor behind her.

Astrid directly caught herself again, her usual mask in place as she glanced at her brother and then nodded at Hiccup. “Of course,” she replied, voice calm as if they were talking about the weather. “That is very kind of you.”

She took a step to the side to give him space, but Hiccup hesitated. For a moment, he considered offering her his hands or his knee to step on, or going to get a mounting block – there were a few around for the shorter people in the crowd. But that wasn’t how Daniel or Eret would do it, and it wasn’t what he wanted either. Not that he was too squeamish to get his hands or clothes dirty, or had forgotten that they weren’t alone... But frankly, he didn’t care what whoever was watching them thought. He knew that she wouldn’t mind his touch, and he acted on official request. Screw what anyone might think.

He heard Astrid’s breath hitch as he stepped closer and placed his hands on her waist. It took him barely more than a second to lift her lithe form up onto Markor’s back, their contact ending far too soon for his taste. As he retreated, he let his hand glide along hers, Astrid too surprised to pull back, then the moment was over. He took a further step backwards and bowed as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

“Thank you,” Astrid said formally, having caught herself quickly again. When he lifted his head, she wasn’t even looking at him anymore. She’d already turned away, overlooking the crowd, and gave a pretty convincing show of ‘business as usual’.

But Hiccup knew better. He noticed the slight rosy hint on her cheek, saw beneath her mask of composure. She had enjoyed the small contact just as much as he had. Smiling slightly to himself, he walked to where the last of Lavo’s boys still held Cassie ready for him, and, after climbing into the saddle himself, took his position at Eret’s side.

He’d just drawn up next to his cousin when Eret muttered quietly, “That was a damn bold thing to do.”

Hiccup glanced up at him. Between Eret’s own height and the height of his steed, there was quite the height difference, and Eret was looking straight ahead. It was clear, however, that he was talking to Hiccup, even if it didn’t look like it. “Bold and foolhardy. Odin, Hiccup, you can’t just– You’re lucky that Swanja is tougher than Daniel gives her credit for. Friends or not, he would rip your head off if he thought you made her uncomfortable. You better keep that in mind, I’d rather not stand between my family and my best friend...”

Hiccup didn’t say anything to that. What was there to say anyway? He was ready to do whatever it took...

But did that also include pulling others into the line of fire?

Chapter End Notes

So, here’s another important bit: I’ll be honest and say I expected this question to come up sooner. But now, finally one wants to say, the question about their age came up
(Over on FFnet). All information is woven into the story, but I also know especially Hiccup's age is not explicitly mentioned, so here are the ages of the characters.

Daniel: 23
Eret: 21
Dagur: 21
Hiccup: 21
Astrid: 17

Now, I expect there to be an outcry, calling me a paedophile and this story a horrible example for children and all that blah blah... And no matter what I write here, those outcries will come. Know that I will read them, laugh about it, and forget them. And for those who care about what I'm going to say about it:

In this world, the legal age for marriage is 16. It's only noblemen who have this custom of marrying their daughters off at 20. An age gap of four years (three actually if you take into consideration that Astrid is close to 18) is not 'problematic'. And this story isn't meant for children anyway ;p
I Am Strong When I Am On Your Shoulders

Chapter Notes

There's one announcement I almost forgot but is probably better to make. There won't be an update on the 1st of February. Why? Because I'll be gone over the (longer) weekend, visiting a friend in the UK, meeting more friends, and watching the film, of course. (It. Will. Be. Awesome! :D) Just so you know :)

This week's title, as well as that of next week, is from 'You Raise Me Up' (originally) by Secret Garden. It took me a while to pick these titles, but this song and lyrics embrace exactly what I want to convey with these chapters.

Riding on the ridiculous and uncomfortable side saddle, Astrid’s hands around Markor’s reins were tighter than was necessary, the leather creaking beneath her gloves, as she rode amidst the slow procession following the Fyrirs. After ritualistically lighting the holy fire in the palace’s sacred grove, the highest representative of each of the main Orders now carried their torch through the ever-growing darkness back toward the High Temple. It was an awfully slow ride, even with the elderly Fyrir Gothi being helped along in a sedan chair, her ten-foot-high torch being carried by her aid, and Astrid tried to focus on enduring rather than on anything else. This day had been bad enough already with the endless reception in the morning, and the socialising afterwards hadn't been any better. But now? She gritted her teeth, and for once didn’t fight to keep her mask from slipping into a scowl. That was one advantage of this ride through near-total darkness, after all. Nobody could see her, not with every light in the city doused in preparation for the blot.

It shouldn’t have surprised her. She knew that this was an official event, that today, she was even more of a royal adornment than on most other days. But it still had needed Eret’s smug grin as they were on their way to the horses outside to realise that, of course, she would have to ride on that ridiculous side saddle, like a proper Lady.

Astrid grimaced down at the uncountable glass beads which occasionally caught the light of the torches, then sighed and tried to focus on something positive. Like how there at least was no real danger of her ruining the dress or the saddle with how incredibly slow they were riding!

She wanted to scream.

Yes, of course, they couldn’t ride faster anyway. The only sources of light were the torches with the holy flame the Fyrirs carried, which were at the front of the procession, and those of the Stellari, the direct subordinates of the Fyrirs, who were scattered among their group. All other lights all over the city had been doused at sunset, celebrating the darkness, the end of this year’s cycle, and the coming return of the light. They didn’t even have the light of the moon to help illuminate the way over the cobbledstones, with the sky covered by clouds, and besides, their pace was limited to that of the Fyrir. It was a sensible reason to go at this slow pace, and that made it okay. And if she was honest to herself, what bugged her the most had been Eret’s smug grin anyway.

Although, there had been none of that when she’d glanced at him as they’d left the castle’s ground anymore. On the contrary, he’d looks stern, even troubled somehow. Petty as it was, she was almost glad that her threat from all those weeks ago had become true. That, if she actually had to
ride at a slow trot with this saddle, Eret would have to suffer the same agonising pace.

She tried to focus on that, on Eret, the saddle, the slow pace, the annoying day… anything if only it helped to keep her from thinking about what had happened just now.

Gods, she’d died a thousand deaths the moment Hiccup had touched her!

What had he been thinking? Getting so close, touching her so intimately, and in front of so many people? Her father had seen it, as had Daniel and who knew how many others? That surely hadn’t been what Daniel had asked him to do, judging by the stony and stunned expression on his face. But then…

Astrid inhaled deeply and then slowly let the breath out again. Daniel might not have liked it, but he also hadn’t done anything to punish Hiccup right away. Maybe it was because they had no time right now, with the procession and the grand blot, but she hoped that she’d been convincing enough in not minding the contact. Daniel looked more at ease now; not like he was about to order a death sentence the moment they got off their horses, at least.

And well… It wasn’t as if she’d truly minded the contact anyway.

Freya, it had been so good to feel him after this day, to feel his warmth, the ghost of his breath on her skin as he’d lifted her up, so easily as if she weighed nothing. She knew that he was stronger than he looked, had felt his wiry muscles move beneath his skin, but still. She’d been sorry when the contact had ended – far too soon – but she also knew that there hadn’t been another choice. Making him sit behind her on Markor’s back so that they could cuddle and whisper and kiss during this boring ride… that definitely sounded great, but wasn’t really sensible.

Sighing, she sat up straighter, her smile truer now. No, that wasn’t sensible at all – but she could dream about doing all that once they met at the stables tonight again. What were these boring hours compared to those of bliss and lightness she shared with him?

And, well, this part of the day wasn’t that bad anyway. Aside from riding on this uncomfortable saddle, she quite enjoyed this ride through the darkness. It was so quiet and peaceful, the only sounds being those of the horses and the torches. The city itself was eerily dark and quiet too, with most people having gathered at the smaller temple buildings all over the city where the only sources of lights would be tonight, all waiting for the darkest hour and for the ceremony itself. It always had been something mysterious, this calm darkness, and Astrid enjoyed it greatly.

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With a grateful nod, Astrid accepted a glass from the serving girl’s tray, and took a sip of the light wine. It’s sweet tasted rolled over her tongue, making her close her eyes, to fully enjoy it – and the brief moment of solitude it brought her.

“And this is a good friend of mine, Baroness Corrine of Blackshire,” the Countess of Whitevale continued her introduction. “Her son Jake, the heir to his father’s barony, rose to the position of a captain in the Royal Army this year, isn’t that right, my dear?”

“Oh, yes, it is,” Lady Corrine affirmed enthusiastically. “He is such a good boy, and we are so proud of him. And handsome too, if I as his mother may say so. I’m sure you would like him if you met him, your Highness.”

Astrid’s smile felt more artificial than ever as she gave a slight nod. “I’m sure I would,” she replied politely, then added not quite as courteous, “but I hope you’ll excuse me now.” She nodded at the
Countess and her friends who all curtseyed before her, clearly disappointed about her leaving them – *escaping them* – already.

This was another part of the Midwinter festivities that *used* to be bearable, but by now was only dreadful. The hours between nightfall and midnight were traditionally dedicated to forming new connections, new friendships. People introduced friends to one another and new ties were built for a new beginning once the sun returned. Or at least that was the *idea*. As a child, she’d liked these hours when she’d met so many other children and had been allowed to play with them. But none of those *friendships* had ever lasted longer than these hours, and by now, forming new ties mostly meant people wooing for her favour to support their agendas or to advertise possible future husbands to her. And she’d *definitely* had enough of that today already.

It was practically customary; the dark and cold winter nights without much fighting or fieldwork to distract them seemed to make many a man think about marriage, and these days of official mingling always called forth those who thought addressing her directly – in addition to an official proposal sent to her father, of course – would give them a better chance.

During the last years, she’d been annoyed at this. As if *she* had any say in who her father would choose! No matter how much thought a young man put into proposing to her, her opinion wouldn’t matter much.

But this year, things were different. This year, she’d accepted their fine words, their gifts to win her favour, and the exaggerated manner in which some of them proposed – because, by Frigga, they’d been *ridiculous* this year – with nothing but a polite smile, knowing that all their efforts would be in vain anyway. Although she had been amused by that one southern countess who had introduced her son as a potential groom, with the *incredibly* unsubtle bride price of a fleet of trading ships and the contents therein. What her father would even *do* with fifteen ships laden with silks, spices and tea was beyond her...

She looked around the dimly lit room, searching for the one face in the crowd that would settle her nerves, when a highly *unwelcome* person approached her.

“Good evening, Milady.”

The voice alone made her groan inwardly. Quickly, her eyes darted around, *finally* finding Daniel, Eret, and the others, but they were busy talking to a larger group of noblemen at the other end of Odin’s Hall. Too far away to flee to without making a scene, and she couldn’t do that. Not here and not now, not during these peaceful hours of forming bonds.

So she turned, slowly, and said in as composed a voice as she could muster, “Good evening, your Grace.”

Duke Thuggory smirked. “Why so formal, Milady? We’ve been friends for so many years now; don’t you think it’s time for you to leave the stiff titles aside?”

“I wouldn’t say that we are *friends*, Duke Thuggory,” she said in a low voice, so quietly that nobody but him would be able to hear her.

It only served to make Thuggory laugh, however. “You’re very right, Milady Astrid. *Friends* is surely not the right word to use. But thinking about it… I wouldn’t mind my wife to show proper respect, so feel free to continue addressing me by my title. And if you’re good, I might even support your love of riding by allowing you to ride me,” he added with an insinuating smirk.

Astrid’s eyes squinted at the last comment, not able to make any rhyme or reason to it, but quickly
decided that now was not the time to think about it. Instead, her hands balled into fists at her side. “I will never be your wife,” she hissed. “What makes you even think—”

“Oh, but I think my chances aren’t so bad. The Crown needs strong alliances to keep the Kingdom stable. And isn’t that what you want, too? To support your father and brother in their goal to care for the people?”

Astrid’s mouth clamped shut, her teeth gritting, as she forced herself to stay composed. “This is not about what I want,” she brought forth, surprising even herself with the calmness in her voice. “My Father will, with the Gods’ advice, decide who I’m going to marry, not me.” It was a safe thing to say, better than that the Gods had already chosen. That she already knew who her husband would be one day. She almost laughed as, in that moment, she finally understood what Hiccup had meant a while back. It was part of the Gods’ plan that they belonged together, and nobody, not even Thuggory, would be able to change that – and that gave her a good feeling.

However, her words only made Thuggory laugh again, low and patronising. “Oh, don’t underestimate your… power, Princess. If you said you wanted to marry me, that would have quite an effect on the King’s decision.”

“And why would I ever do that?” Thuggory had to be delusional, if he really thought she would...

“I am a very powerful and influential man, Princess. Agree to marry me, and with my support, the Crown would gain more strength than you can ever imagine. But make me an enemy, and you will bitterly regret it. It’s your call, Your Highness. Think about it. I’d certainly be of more value to you than the Houses that already stand loyally to you, or any of those other sorry milksops that were scraping before you today. And don’t even get me started on that cute admirer of yours.”

She had endured his monologue with a stony expression, intent on not giving him the satisfaction of reacting at all. But the last words made her frown in confusion. Cute admirer? What was he talking about?

“That boy earlier,” he elaborated, seeing her confusion. “I can hardly tell them apart. Somehow, they all look the same. You seem to have a type, I’d say.” His grin grew menacing. “Will we see him dangling off Odin’s Tree soon, too? Or have you gotten tired of that show by now, and have something more drastic planned for him?”

Astrid blanched as she understood what he was talking about. He’d noticed… Thuggory had noticed! He knew about Hiccup, knew–

“But he really is cute, in a puppy-like way,” Thuggory went on, unperturbed. “And so in love.”

Astrid’s heart was racing, but she knew only one way out of this. “I have no idea what you’re talking about,” she stated nonchalantly as she chanted inwardly, Play ignorant. Throw him off. Nobody can know...

And it seemed as if her efforts were successful.

“Oh, you haven’t even noticed?” Thuggory jeered. “The poor boy. He obviously has such a huge crush on you. Always has his eyes on you wherever you go, and you didn’t even notice…” He chuckled, but it didn't sound friendly at all. “But then, that's probably for the best, given your… history, Milady. And luckily for him, he’s not bold enough to just take you like a man, even though I almost thought he would try. Did you know that he’s been seen frequenting an Ástir who’s impersonating you? He really must have it bad for you.”
Suddenly feeling a little calmer, Astrid took a deep breath and let it out as a sigh again. She wasn’t sure what Thuggory had intended by saying these words, but whatever it was, it wasn’t working. On the contrary, if the general impression was that Hiccup had an unrequited crush on her… then that wasn’t so bad. As far as she knew, that was true for many. She also couldn’t quite grasp what the sense behind mentioning Cami had been, but Hiccup had told Astrid all about her; who she was, what she did, and how she ultimately was responsible for the wonderful nights she’d been spending with Hiccup lately. No, if Thuggory had meant to make her feel uncomfortable, then he’d failed – and that knowledge made her feel even better.

“I’ve heard Ástir impersonating me are quite popular these days,” she commented offhandedly. The thought was weird, but… well, that was how things worked. Even if she wanted, she couldn’t change it, and it didn’t really affect her anyway. Especially since she knew that those close to her who had interacted with Cami had other reasons to do so. “Maybe you should visit one too, given your fixation. But you’ll have to excuse me now, Your Grace. I have more pleasant company to seek.” She curtseyed again with an almost mocking smile, then turned and left him standing.

It was a good feeling to do so. She was strong enough to stand up against Thuggory now when she’d barely been able to do so a week ago, and it brought a confident smile onto her face as she strode through the dimly lit Hall. She hadn’t even thought about where she was going, but her smile widened when she spotted her brothers laughing and beckoning her over when they saw her – and Hiccup who stood a little to the side. His eyes were gleaming when they fell on her even though his expression stayed the same as before.

Thuggory’s words crossed her mind again, about Hiccup obviously having a crush on her and her not even having noticed. Oh, if only he knew how wrong he was. But the fact that he didn’t know – and nobody else either – brightened her mood even further.

Astrid took her place among her brothers with a smile and a polite nod at the strangers they were talking to, vividly aware of Hiccup’s presence only a couple of steps away from her. She wasn’t fooling herself, knew exactly where her strength and confidence was coming from. It was him, his support, his trust, his love glowing in her chest, and the dream of their future. He made her strong, and that feeling was indescribable.

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When the time for the grand blot had arrived, Astrid followed her father out of Odin’s Hall to where the Fyrirs already waited at the centre of the sacred grove. Daniel was walking at her side, and once they’d taken their places in the first row, more noblemen flowed out of the Temple buildings, the plaza filling rapidly until every last bit of space was occupied. Astrid knew that even the road outside the temple would be packed with people, all waiting for the holy fire to bring back the light into their world.

The Fyrirs stepped forward, their torches the only light on the dark plaza, and Astrid felt a shiver run up her arms. Not because of the cool night air, but because this moment always captivated her. On an invisible signal, all Fyrirs – or in case of the mute Fyrir Gothi, her highest Stellari – began to speak, reciting words as old as the oldest stories, their voices weaving into one another until they seemed to become one single voice that carried far over the assembled people.

“The old year is coming to an end. A new year begins.
May it be full of light, of justice, of truth, and of happiness.
May it be full of new life, of good crops, of laughter, and of love.
May it be victorious, so that it ends in peace.”

Then the torches holding the holy fire were thrown onto the pyre behind them. The wood, partially
soaked in lamp oil, began to burn instantly, and only moments later the bonfire calling back the light into their world burned high into the night sky. More speeches followed, each of the Orders giving individual blessings for the new cycle. Then the sacrifices were brought forward, a bag of corn, a basket full of fruits and vegetables, a barrel of mead, and a goat. Astrid didn’t enjoy watching the animal get killed, but Fyrir Throk was skilled about it, not causing unnecessary pain, and it was over quickly. Each Fyrir picked one of the offerings and gave it over into the flames, before the rest got carried away, being brought to the kitchens in Freya’s Temple as Astrid knew. Nothing would go to waste.

After that, the ritual five minutes of silence followed as the offerings burned and each and every person would be sending their individual wishes and prayers to the Gods. Astrid shakily let out a breath she hadn’t realised she’d been holding. As always, she prayed for a merciful year that wouldn’t take anyone dear to her away from her. In previous years, she’d felt a little sad at the thought that, before her grandfather had reestablished the old beliefs, these words and ritual hadn’t been held here for many years. It had made her melancholic, but also proud that now the light of the Gods was brightening their land again where it had drowned in darkness and corruption before.

But this year, she also felt something different. The words of the ritual rang through her mind once more, making her feel a far more personal connection to these words. *A year of happiness, love, and peace*... Yes, she prayed with all her heart that this would come true.

When Daniel touched her arm, she looked up, dazed and overwhelmed. “Let’s go over there,” he murmured. “And give the people more space.” He indicated to the slow procession of people, commoners mostly, who came forward to light their torches on the bonfire. Most of them directly transferred the flame to a candle or lantern to safely carry it back to their home, to light their hearth with it. To bring back light and warmth into the world.

Astrid nodded, and followed Daniel to where a couple of stone benches formed a slightly secluded bit of space amidst the sacred grove. When she looked around, she realised that nearly her entire family was waiting for them. Her father and Daniel, but also Dagur and Eret with their fathers, a couple of servants along with her governess to watch over her, and, of course, Hiccup. Rachel and Timothy were missing, as were Uncle Spitelout and Snot. But she would see the twins later tonight, and she knew that her other honorary uncle and brother couldn’t always make it to the capital for the Midwinter festivities. The people of Westhill needed them, needed to know that their Grand Duke would always stand with his battered people. But that didn’t change that almost everyone she cared about was gathered here, and that only heightened her feeling of solemnity. It was, indeed, a good start into the new year. Into a *good* year, hopefully.

Her eyes flickered over Hiccup where he stood halfway behind Eret. As if knowing the perfect moment, he looked up just in time to meet her gaze, the briefest of smiles gleaming in his eyes before he lowered them again and the other men stepped between them. Both she and Daniel were hugged in turn by their father, a rare gesture, before he turned to speak to them all.

“My friends, brothers, family. It is, as always, an honour and a pleasure to spend this special day with you. Let us celebrate tonight, both for the beginning of a new cycle and for those who can’t be with us tonight.”

There was approving murmuring from everyone, before they exchanged their gifts, meant as good wishes and lucky charms for the upcoming year. Astrid received a new necklace from her father, with fitting bracelets and earrings from the Grand Dukes. The jewellery was remarkable, heavy gold with countless stones in varying shades of blue set into intricate patterns. The set surely was more valuable than most of her other pieces; the men had clearly outdone themselves.
In return, however, Astrid felt self-conscious as she handed her gifts to her father, uncles, and brothers. Not being able or allowed to get them anything meaningful or personal, her governess had – like every year – insisted upon her making pretty good luck charms, stripes of valuable cloth she’d embroidered with traditional motives over the year. It always pained her to gift these, it wasn’t what she wanted to gift to her family, but everyone thanked her nonetheless.

It was a blessing really that her brothers knew about her pain. It meant they’d stopped getting her any extremely valuable things in return too to not make her feel left out. Instead, they usually got her small things, practical or sometimes self-made things – or sometimes something especially inappropriate, just to annoy her governess. Like the relatively small and light, but incredibly sturdy composite bow Eret gave her, with a simply decorated quiver full of fitting arrows from Dagur. Astrid accepted both pieces with a wide grin. She probably would never get the chance to use them, but they would make for a wonderful decoration for her rooms, and the horrified expression on her governess’s face alone was the best gift anyway.

“Wait, there’s something else I have for you,” Dagur announced as Daniel was about to speak, and waved a servant over with a heavy-looking wooden box. “Technically, this isn’t a gift though, not really. It’s just a replacement for your previous coffer. I’ve heard someone broke it.” He winked, and threw a short, falsely-dark glare at Hiccup, knowing perfectly well what had happened, that Hiccup had broken the lock on purpose.

“Oh, that’s great,” she chuckled. “Very practical to carry everything back to the castle,” she announced cheerfully, and unceremoniously let the cushioned box of jewellery and the bow and quiver fall into the coffer as if it was nothing but a simple carrier box.

“Very practical indeed,” Daniel agreed with a twinkle in his eyes. “But I hope you’ll be a little more careful with my gift, and won’t just dump it in there like that. Because that might render a great deal of work useless, and that would be a real shame.”

Astrid raised her eyebrow at her brother. “You put a lot of work into making me a gift?” she asked, a little disbelievingly. Smart and talented as Daniel was, anything including delicate craftsmanship and dexterity wasn’t really his thing.

And sure enough, he immediately backpaddled, rubbing the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Well… No, I didn’t, but… I arranged for it, and… well, I hope it’ll make you happy.” He beckoned to someone behind her, a servant she assumed, but was pleasantly surprised – and little startled, to be honest – when Hiccup stepped toward them.

He bowed deeply, appropriately for this setting, and murmured a low, “Milady,” in greeting. Then he held out his hands that held a bundle of cloth.

Astrid hesitated, and threw a puzzled look at Daniel, but he just smiled encouragingly and nodded. With slightly shaking hands, she reached to pull the bundle Hiccup still held open. It wasn’t that she was nervous about the gift; she had an idea what it might be after all. But she was acutely aware of how close her hands were to Hiccup’s and how her brothers were all watching them. Act indifferent!, she reminded herself.

As expected, amidst the protecting cloth appeared her music box. It looked just like it had when Hiccup had taken it from her rooms, but she knew that it would be mended. He wouldn’t give it back to her if it were otherwise. “It’s working again?” she asked nonetheless, just to say something and with an undeniably hopeful tone in her voice.

“It is,” Daniel confirmed in Hiccup’s stead, and shrugged. “Which is entirely to Hiccup’s credit though; I only made sure he had the time and means.” He gave her a – completely atypically for
him – self-conscious smile.

A little overwhelmed, Astrid threw her arms around Daniel’s neck. “Thank you!” she sighed, unsure how else to convey just how grateful she was.

Daniel chuckled, and returned her affectionate hug. “You’re welcome,” he murmured back. “I know how much it means to you, and I wanted to know you have it back before I leave – before we all leave you alone here again.”

She hugged him tighter, snivelling slightly, then pulled back to beam at him. Daniel returned the smile, and no further words were needed between them. Having her music box back was the greatest gift of all, more valuable to her than the bow and even the jewellery – and Daniel knew that.

“And thank you to you too, Hiccup,” she said after turning toward him and the box again, looking at him with all the gratitude and love she felt, for once not afraid what those around her would think it weird. They’d write it off as her joy over the gift, and she thrived in the moment.

“You’re welcome, Milady,” he murmured, smiling happily over her apparent joy. When she reached to testingly wind it up though, he pulled back to do so himself, and a moment later, the tiny dancer began to move. Over the noises of the bonfire and the people not far away, the melody was inaudible, but Astrid's mind provided it easily in time with the dancer's movements. Humming quietly, she watched the figure until, entirely on reflex, her arm rose as the dancing pattern reached the point where it would get stuck – except it didn’t.

With wide eyes, Astrid stared at the figure as it easily swirled and turned around, back and forth in to her unknown ways. Her mind was completely blank, unable to form coherent thoughts or provide the melody anymore. Then her head whipped up, and she gaped at Hiccup. “You repaired it!” she gasped, finally grasping the full meaning of those words.

Hiccup frowned slightly, and shrugged. “Yes, I did?” he acknowledged, hesitantly.

Before she could think twice about it, Astrid all but leapt forward, threw her arms around Hiccup’s neck in an equally enthusiastic hug as Daniel’s before, and gasped a breathless “Thank you!” into his ear. Hiccup froze in her embrace, his breath leaving him with an audible gasp, and – too late – Astrid realised what she was doing. She pulled back in an instant, but the damage was done.

Panic rose inside her, and she pressed one hand over her mouth as she first stared at Hiccup, seeing sparks of longing and fear dance behind his eyes, then at Dagur and Eret, who stood frozen solid and looked completely flabbergasted, before her eyes landed on Daniel. He had a stony, unreadable expression on his face, that tightened even further the moment their gazes met.
You Raise Me Up To More Than I Can Be

Chapter Notes

... How did this chapter get this long? xD But it for once contains everything I wanted to put into it, so it's okay... Hope you'll like it, I certainly do. ^^

The title is, as mentioned last week, from 'You Raise Me Up' from Secret Garden', and I feel like it suits this chapter perfectly. ^^

And then I want to thank you all for the overwhelming responses to the last chapter. They were awesome!

Unable to move, Hiccup felt as if he couldn’t breathe. His heart was thrumming in his throat, and the one breath he had been able to suck in had been filled with her mayweed scent, and it had momentarily left him dazed.

In that moment, there was nothing he wanted to do more than to close his arms around Astrid, to pull her closer and let everyone around them see the truth. That he loved her, that he was hers beyond any doubt, that he’d give his life for her. But Eret’s words still rang through his mind. There was that fresh reminder to not do anything that would put Daniel off. Hiccup possibly wasn’t just risking his own life, and before he could even think about reacting in any way, the moment was already over.

Astrid pulled back as if she’d burned herself, the shock in her eyes showing traces of panic as she looked from him to those around them. Feeling like his thoughts were stuck in mud, Hiccup slowly followed her gaze toward her brothers. Dagur and Eret were standing completely still, faces stunned and worried, with their attention on Daniel too, trying to gauge his reaction. Somewhere behind him, Hiccup could hear the King and Grand Dukes laugh and chat. They apparently hadn’t noticed what had just happened, which was a blessing. But it also meant that everything depended on Daniel now.

Hiccup barely dared to look at him. He didn’t want to see anger on his friend’s face, didn’t want to watch those friendly eyes – eyes he’d so often seen spark with excitement during their conversations – grow cold. Because Eret had been right; friends or not, nothing would stop Daniel when he thought someone had gotten too close to his sister.

For a few seconds, it was awfully quiet between them, the creaking sound of Daniel’s leather gloves as he balled his hands into fists seeming to be only marginally drowned out by the noises of the bonfire and the people out on the plaza. Chancing a glance up after all, Hiccup swallowed at the stony and unreadable mask of Daniel’s face. It was funny, a detached part of him thought. By now, he was so easily able to read Astrid’s emotions, no matter how much she tried to hide them. But he couldn’t even guess what the Prince might be thinking. All he could tell was that he certainly wasn’t happy.

It was Astrid who eventually broke the silence. “Uh… So… Yeah, thank you. Both of you.” She made an attempt at reaching for the bundle Hiccup still held in his hands, but he quickly pulled back. He still couldn’t risk for anyone to spot the other gift he’d hidden in the cloth – even though he wasn’t sure if that could do any more damage right now – so he quickly dropped to his knees,
and carefully stowed the bundle away in the wooden coffer Dagur had bought for her.

He stayed there, kneeling on the damp ground and with his head bowed; partially to show that he posed no threat – but *mostly* because he felt, more than ever, as if this was the only appropriate place for him. No matter how happily the others included him and no matter how much he wished it was otherwise, he *didn’t* belong with them.

“You’re welcome,” he finally heard Daniel say, his voice sounding strained and throaty. There was another tense pause, and Hiccup held his breath as he waited for whatever verdict Daniel might speak. But he didn’t. “I think it’s time for us to go back inside,” he eventually stated, and with these words, he turned, abruptly, and marched off.

Hiccup’s shoulders slumped in relief, but when he lifted his head to glance after his friend, he noticed that Daniel’s hands were still clenched, and there was a certain tension in his shoulders, a tension that usually wasn’t there. The sight gave him a bad feeling, and for the first time since Astrid had told him why she’d been so afraid, he wondered whether she might have been right. So far, he’d never really considered Daniel would have a problem with them being together, but now he wasn’t so sure anymore.

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For the following hour, Hiccup didn’t *dare* to do more than stand mutely at Eret’s side and stare at the floor. Earlier today, both Eret and Daniel had assured him that it would be okay for him to accompany them, both officially as Eret’s squire and unofficially as their friend. They wanted him to be there, they’d said. But now, he didn’t *feel* welcome anymore. It wasn’t that they treated him differently in any way. But Daniel was still acting strangely, tense and subdued somehow, and it kept Hiccup from feeling at ease, too.

Over and over, he replayed the two incidents in his mind, always running in circles but unable to find a solution or to stop himself.

He still couldn’t say that it had felt *wrong* to help Astrid up on Markor’s back in the way he had. He didn’t *regret* doing it, not really. But by now, he could see that it hadn’t been a *wise* idea, and Eret’s warning didn’t exactly help to calm his nerves either. It had been bold, yes, and foolhardy and stupid too, no matter how much he’d enjoyed the short contact. But if he could go back and change what he’d done… He couldn’t say whether he’d do so or not.

And Astrid’s embrace at the bonfire, in front of her entire family... For a moment, it had felt like a dream coming true. Not hiding anything anymore, openly standing by what they were to each other. But the moment had ended, and now the cold reality was even harder to bear.

Because in his dreams, he’d hoped that especially Daniel would be supportive, despite Astrid’s fears. That he would accept Hiccup, his friend, at his sister’s side, might even be pleased to see them together, support them. But in reality, he hadn’t looked *pleased* at all. He’d looked remorseful, pained, *regretful* even – and Hiccup couldn’t imagine why, except that the Prince apparently didn’t approve of him after all.

But that didn’t change anything, he told himself. Not really. Hiccup had known that things wouldn’t be easy, that he would need to work hard to earn his place at her side. This was only a reminder that he still had a lot of work to do to convince Daniel of his worth. It meant the coming two years would be stressful, *exhausting*, but it would all be worth it. *Astrid* was worth it.

Hiccup hadn’t known how grim he must have looked, not until a familiar figure approached him and called him out on it. “That’s an awfully long face for this happy day,” Cami’s cheerful voice
suddenly stated, and he wasn’t the only one instantly turning toward her.

“Cami!” Eret exclaimed happily, and pulled her into a broad hug. When he pulled back, one arm still on her shoulder, he had a huge grin on his face. “How great to see you!” He turned slightly, waving his hand around from one person to the other. “Daniel, Swanja, this is Cami. I told you about her, remember? She’s a good friend of mine from Eastervale. Cami, let me introduce you to Crown Prince Daniel and Princess Astrid.”

*Oh, this could get interesting…*

Cami turned, and bobbed an elegant curtsey. “Your Highnesses, it is an honour to meet you,” she greeted them, the broad smile on her face as infectious as ever.

Daniel spoke first, as was customary, even as he looked completely flabbergasted. Well, at least he didn’t look *angry* anymore, Hiccup contemplated inwardly, so that was an improvement.

“You are Cami?” Daniel exclaimed, stunned. His eyes flickered around, from Astrid to Eret and Dagur, and back to Cami again. “I-I didn’t… know…” he stammered, shook his head in obvious confusion, but then seemed to catch himself again. “Well, it’s… it’s nice to get to finally meet you, Cami. I’ve already heard a lot about you,” he added, giving her a true if still a little startled smile.

If Cami noticed his bewilderment, however, then she didn’t show it. “Oh, don’t believe a word he told you about me, your Highness,” she said, winking mischievously at Eret. “He tends to understate. Be assured, I'm much worse.”

There was a second of silence as everyone processed her words – which got interrupted by Astrid’s laughter of all things. “Oh, I like her,” she chuckled. “I’m happy to meet you, Cami. And my brother is right, we have heard a lot about you. Only good things though.”

Hiccup suppressed a sigh of relief as the tension around them seemed to fade a little, both from Cami’s appearance and the remainder from earlier. Or maybe it had just been him anyway. Either way, Cami’s presence and especially Astrid’s reaction to her made a smile tug at his lips. *Of course*, Astrid had heard about Cami, he’d told her everything that had happened after all. That it was thanks to her that they could spend their nights relatively unrestrained. Truth be told, he’d imagined Astrid’s reaction to her a little differently, but this only highlighted to him how incredible and how much at ease she was.

Beaming, Cami turned toward Astrid. “I’m not sure whether to be glad or indignant to hear that,” she said, her words making both women chuckle again. “But to be honest, I’d hoped to meet you here, your Highness. Would you mind answering a few questions? Just so that I can improve my role.”

“Only if you take part in a parade in my place every once in a while,” Astrid replied. *That would give you a true impression of my life.* To Hiccup, she seemed a little overly enthusiastic, but if so, nobody else seemed to notice, and her smile as she led Cami off to the side to talk was genuine enough anyway.

“Aaand that’s Cami for you,” Dagur snickered. “Always straight to the core…”

Daniel again shook his head, clearly puzzled as he looked from Cami and Astrid to Dagur and Eret and back again. “Was she… Did she look like that before too, when you knew her in Eastervale?” he eventually asked. There was a frown playing around his eyes, small but undeniably *there.*

The meaning behind that seemingly nonchalant question was obvious, but Eret directly appeased
him. “No, she didn’t. Believe me, seeing her like that was a shock to us. But, well… she’s still Cami, if you know what I mean. It doesn’t matter what she’s wearing.” He shrugged, and Daniel nodded, even though his frown didn’t fade.

“Yeah, she’s definitely still Cami,” Dagur chimed in, grinning. “I’m not surprised to see her here instead of her having picked a favourite. No, not at all…”

Hiccup bit his lip at that reminder. Tonight, after the lighting of the bonfires, was a celebration of light and life and joy and plenty in the midst of the darkest winter. All of the Temples of the city and in the entire Kingdom would be hosting parties around their newly lit bonfires, parties that would last until dawn, done in thanks for the blessings of the gods, and to gain their favour for the future. Freyr’s temple would be having a banquet, Thor’s and Tyr’s temples would be having a tournament, Frigga’s temple would be packed with children playing games until they fell asleep and were put to bed, Odin’s temple would be hosting a combined drinking and poetry contest... and Freya’s temple...

Well, the Ástir traditionally scheduled no appointments for the days around the grand blot, and their Temple’s party officially was just a drinking party, in mirror of the great feasting and drinking at Fólkvangr, the Goddess’s hall. But that didn’t mean that was all this party was about. It was an unofficial but universal tradition that, on these days, it was the Ástir who choose their partners. Some would choose a favourite and take them up to their chambers on this night, while others who didn’t have favourites would pick out men from the general crowd to bestow their charms on. While the former technically didn’t have to mean anything, it was often considered a sign of true affection if not even a confession of love or outright proposed marriage. The latter, however...

Hiccup took a deep breath, remembering past years. For the latter, it was essentially an orgy, especially when the male Ástir from the Order of Freyr joined in. Between the Ástir and their chosen guests, they would fill the whole of the private portions of Freya’s temple, a chaotic and unrestrained party of writhing flesh, with couples and groups occupying every niche and semi-private corner. From what Hiccup had pieced together, it had been at such a party a few years back when Dagur and Eret had stopped denying their mutual interest.

It was funny; once, he’d wanted nothing more than to be picked to participate, to give in to the heat of the night and the stimulating incense. But this year, he was hoping that he wouldn’t have to reject an offer of any kind and be able to sneak away instead.

So his heart sank a bit when Cami came up behind him and placed a kiss onto Dagur’s cheek. “Well, I have chosen a favourite for tonight,” she emphasised, grinning impishly. “Three, to be honest. Unless you have other plans?” She looked around from Dagur to Eret and then to Hiccup. “We had so much fun the other night, and I wouldn't mind a repetition, not at all,” she practically purred.

Daniel choked a little on his mead, but otherwise it was relatively quiet for a moment. Hiccup was too surprised to say anything, and Eret and Dagur apparently felt the same.

“I think that’s my cue to leave then,” Astrid broke the silence, one corner of her mouth tilting upwards in a crooked smile.

“And where are you planning on going?” Daniel asked protectively, momentarily forgetting his concerns about Cami.

“Oh, I’m not sure yet. I’m debating between Odin’s hall to hear the poets before they get too drunk, or just straight home so Timothy and Rachel can go out and enjoy themselves,” she said, and smiled at her brothers, a playful glint in her eyes. “I wish you all a lot of fun.”
As she turned, her gaze landed on Hiccup, for the first time since her hug. It was just for the briefest of moments, just in passing, but Hiccup saw right through her anyway. There was something like a promise in her eyes, but he also knew that she was serious. She’d been genuine in including him in her wish for them to have fun, and not just because it would help throw anyone off their track.

“You were right, Eret,” Daniel muttered when she disappeared through a side door that led to the Temple’s stables, her servants right behind her.

Eret snorted in light amusement. “I usually am. But what do you mean exactly?”

Daniel’s face tightened for a moment before he relaxed, sighing. “She really is stronger than I gave her credit for. That’s good, I suppose…”

The tone in Daniel’s voice made Hiccup look at him after all, frowning. Astrid being strong was a good thing… wasn’t it? Why then did Daniel sound pained and remorseful again. It didn’t make any sense.

But before either of them could say anything, Daniel already went on. “Anyway, I believe you have an invitation… Don’t let me hold you back.”

Everyone shuffled slightly, not wanting to leave Daniel just like that, but also eager to get away, even if it was for other reasons than Daniel thought. However, none of them anticipated Cami’s next words. “You know, Highness, you’re welcome to come along. More people means more fun.” She grinned cheekily, apparently not noticing – or deliberately ignoring – how everyone around her stiffened. If Daniel came along…

“Erm… I, uh… Thanks, but no, thanks,” Daniel replied hastily, a little flustered. His eyes glided over her appearance, her intricately braided hair, the elegant dress, and he shook his head. “You go and enjoy the company you already know, and I—I’ll just…” he trailed off, shrugged, and then something like a pained but honest smile crossed his face. “Maybe I’ll visit Thor’s hall for a bout or something. I’m good. Need to think through a few things for now anyway.”

“As you wish, Your Highness,” Cami accepted his refusal with a smile and a curtsey. “Have a good Midwinter’s Night then.”

“You too,” Daniel replied, nodding at Eret, Dagur, and Hiccup behind her. “See you tomorrow.”

Hiccup felt a bit of tension leave his shoulders as Daniel included him in his farewell. Whatever bad mood the incident earlier had triggered in Daniel, it didn’t seem as if he hated Hiccup now.

They all murmured their own farewell before Daniel left, and without the wish to linger any longer, the four of them headed off to Cami’s rooms, passing several groups on the way up the stairs.

“So, do you care to explain yourself?” Eret asked bluntly the moment Cami closed the door behind them.

She let her eyes wander around from one to the other, looking incredibly smug. “I think I saved your sorry asses,” she commented, and walked past Eret and Dagur to let herself fall into one of her cushioned chairs. “Because, if I remember correctly, you wanted to keep your relationship hidden for now. So as not to cause drama and chaos over your successions until you find a solution?

Eret sighed. “There is no solution…” he muttered, and Dagur grunted gloomily.

Hiccup looked away so that they wouldn’t be able to see a hint of pity or any other emotion on his
face. He loathed the thought of leaving Astrid soon, of having to wait until he could finally be with her, of not being able to tell anyone. But at least he knew that, eventually, the waiting would be over. Eret and Dagur didn’t have that. If they weren’t willing to throw half of the entire Kingdom into one big succession war, they could never be together openly. And once their fathers arranged marriages for them, they wouldn’t even be able to meet in secret anymore. Marriage was a sacred bond; and they wouldn’t dishonour it, themselves, or their future wives by breaking it.

“You never know what the future might bring,” Cami said. “Even though I agree it doesn’t look good.” She sighed, then gave them both encouraging smiles. “Either way, it makes appreciating the present much more important. So consider this night a gift. Because, sure, most people will have other things on their minds – and other body parts – back here, someone would notice that you two spent the whole night together. Especially when peeling the pair of you off of each other would require a pry bar and a team of horses, and that’ll make tongues wag for sure. So I’m giving you cover. Again. You can thank me later.”

Dagur and Eret shared a look before Dagur shrugged and said, “She has a point. It was hard enough the last few years already.”

“Of course, she has a point,” Eret replied, throwing his arms up in the air. Then he turned his attention back to Cami. “But that’s not what I meant. I understand that you invited Hiccup along so you wouldn’t be bored, but… Loki, why did you invite Daniel, too? What do you think we should have done if he’d agreed? Gods, that would have been—”

“Oh, calm down,” Cami snorted. “I knew exactly what I was doing. Haven’t you seen the look in his eyes? I knew that he wouldn’t accept my invitation; I only added it to make your cover more believable. And now, off with you two. Have a blessed night of joy and pleasure in the hall of the Goddess.”

“With each thrust, a prayer of thanks,” Dagur replied sardonically, taking the usual blessing and twisting it, making Hiccup and Cami both snort in amusement. Eret mumbled something about how he was glad at least Swanja knew better, then let Dagur drag him to the other room, leaving Hiccup alone with Cami.

Hiccup waited for Cami to say anything, but she didn’t and just got up and rummaged about in her cupboards and shelves. “… could ask you the same question, you know,” he eventually said quietly. “Why did you do it? Inviting me too, I mean. Because we both know I’m not here to… to entertain you.”

Cami had a sly smirk playing around her lips. “Oh, are you not?” She made a pause to take in his reaction, but then went on before he could actually say anything. “I don’t know about that. We could play cards, you know? Or talk. You could tell me how your latest meetings with your Lady Love went…”

She made another pause, and Hiccup blanched slightly, not sure whether he’d be able to talk about Astrid without revealing anything. Gods, if he ever got started talking about her, he might never stop again. But Cami apparently had another plan altogether.

“Or you can sneak out in an hour or so, and meet your girl without anyone knowing.”

Hiccup’s surprise over her words had to be clearly visible, because now, Cami’s expression shifted into a soft – for her at least – smile. “Hiccup, this is the night of new beginnings. Of presenting your love to the Gods and hope for their blessing. I could see it on your face, you know. You didn’t want to stay for the party, not the public or private parts.” She nodded at the closed door that led out of her rooms. “And I can only guess, but I assume your girlfriend would like to spend this night
with you too. Besides, wouldn’t that be the perfect opportunity to hand her that gift?"

“Oh, she already has it,” he murmured, absently smiling to himself for a moment. Then he became more serious again, and asked, subdued, “But what about you? If I leave now, then you really have nothing to do but stay here and be bored. And what would you tell Eret and Dagur?”

“Oh, don’t you worry about me,” Cami laughed. “That’s why I said you better wait a short while. Until most people downstairs will be too occupied to notice, yes, but also that if someone noticed, I can say that we’re already done and you headed back to your duties. That’s what I would tell them—” she waved lazily to the other room, “—too, should they even notice you’re gone. I offered to cover for you, remember? And I meant that. And as for whether I’ll be bored… Well, I intend to go down there again in an hour or two. And in case anyone asks, I’ll say that you three are already done and spent, sleeping, but that I’m not done yet. Just imagine what that’ll do for my reputation.” She laughed once more, but quickly became serious again. “But I mean it. Don’t worry about me, I’ll get my fun tonight.”

He hesitated for another second, then crossed the room in a few quick strides, and threw his arms around her. “Thank you!” he mumbled into her hair.

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An hour or so later, Hiccup rode up to the outer stables, that had become something of a true home to him during the last weeks. And he felt weirdly nervous, unsure what to do. Yes, he wanted to see Astrid tonight, hoped she would come here… but would she really do so if she had to assume he’d spent most of the night at the Temple anyway? And how in Odin’s name could he let her know that he was back, waiting for her?

All those questions whirled around in his mind as he rode back without him being able to find a solution. Although at least he’d managed to convince himself that taking Cassie back to the stables would be workable instead of walking. Her not being at the Temple’s stables come morning would be much less noticeable than him walking back in the morning to retrieve her...

But as for getting to see Astrid… He still couldn’t ride up to the castle and ask for a note to be delivered to her, much less ask to see her. And no matter how much he tried to concentrate, he couldn’t reach her through their bond either. Whatever that weird something had been he’d felt before, he apparently couldn’t replicate it just like that. By the time Cassie was back in her stall, quickly rubbed down and tended to for the night, Hiccup was ready to accept the fact that he actually couldn’t contact her. But as it turned out, he didn’t need to.

When he entered his sleeping stall, Astrid was already there, wrapped in his blanket and deeply asleep. Hiccup halted; he hadn’t expected to find her here at all, much less so deeply asleep. Honestly, he was surprised she hadn’t roused; he hadn’t been that quiet just now after all. But obviously, the noises hadn’t woken her.

For a moment, Hiccup just watched her. She looked so soft and peaceful, completely at ease here amidst the straw, even as she could be lying among silk and linen instead. As quiet as possible so as not to wake her Hiccup lay down beside her, careful not to rouse her. He didn’t need to wake her, didn’t need to talk and certainly not to make out with her. Just being with her was enough. So he just carefully wrapped his arm around her waist, snuggling up against her back, and enjoyed the potent mayweed scent on her hair as he closed his eyes.

He wasn’t sure for how long they both lay there, whether it had been merely a couple of minutes or an hour, but eventually, she stirred in his arms, made a surprised noise, and then turned toward him.
"Hey," he murmured, brushing her fringes out of her face.

"Hey. You’re back," she breathed, sleepily blinking up at him. "How… how late is it? For how long have I slept?"

Lovingly, he caressed her cheek. "Not long. Cami smuggled me out so that I could come here as soon as possible."

A soft smile spread across Astrid’s face. "She did? Mmhh… I like her. Tell her thanks from me next time you see her."

Hiccup chuckled. "I will." Maybe he would have said more, but Astrid apparently didn’t feel like talking. She tugged him down into a kiss, soft and not demanding, but irresistible nonetheless. The first kiss turned into a second and a third until he gave in completely, pulling her closer against him. It was slow and soft, unhurried and unpressured, wonderful. His lips moved with hers, his tongue stroking the inside of her mouth winning him a beautiful moan. A noise he returned when she buried her hands in his hair, her fingernails scraping over his scalp sending sensations like lightning bolts through his entire body. Gods, he could go on like this for the rest of his life, just holding her, kissing her, loving her.

It didn’t take long before they started to undress each other. Astrid made the first move this time, her hand gliding beneath his tunic and over his skin until she pushed it further upwards, her intentions clear. Hiccup hesitated – though not because he was unsure but to tease her a little, to challenge her. He wanted her to thrive in her confidence, wanted her to know that he was hers, that he would only do what she wanted to. After another minute though, he obliged her, tugging at his clothes and pulled the tunic off with one swift motion. When he turned back to her, she was already fiddling with her cords, tugging open the bow and knots until she could wriggle free of the top half of her dress.

She didn't give him much time to admire her; instead drew him back toward her, to kiss and to feel him, and Hiccup had no complaints whatsoever. Again, they moved slowly with each other, sensual, her hands gliding up his arms and around his back while his curled around her waist and felt for the dips on her lower back. Just hands on heated skin as their mouths kissed and nipped. Only soft exploring and even softer moans.

"What do you want from me tonight, Milady?" he muttered after a while, palming one of her perky breasts and enjoyed how she gasped. Even with how slow they'd moved, they were both breathless by now, the fire within them glowing hot. Her cheeks were flushed, her eyes blown and dark, her body moving against his, searching. And he was all too willing to give her whatever she wanted.

"I... have a question," she began, moaning as he brushed over her swollen nipple with his thumb. He nodded, curiously waiting for her to go on. "What... what does it mean to ride someone?"

Hiccup nearly choked as he bit back an outburst of laughter. "That's what you want to know?" he asked, mumbled against her neck, as he leaned in to nuzzle her. "Not that I'm complaining, but I'm dying to know where that question is coming from." He wasn't surprised that she was interested in this particular practice, not at all. But the way she'd asked... How had this ever come up in a conversation?

Astrid’s face tightened, but only for a split second before she moaned softly as he nipped at her throat. "I-I heard someone saying it. And... well, it sounded as if it was meant in a sexual way. But from what I’ve learned so far, that doesn’t make much sense, so...“ she trailed off, keening, her hands tightening on his back.
Humming, Hiccup continued his exploration, tasting her skin and making her squirm. “Yeah, riding can be used in a sexual context, especially when it’s about riding someone. And I think you’d like it.” He chuckled again. Yeah, he was sure she would like it. A lot! Gods, he couldn’t wait for when they could do such things for real.

“Can you show me?” She sounded eager now, curious, and it made him chuckle even more.

He nodded, but kept teasing her a little more, greatly enjoying how her little moans grew in volume. He always had to be careful to not leave a visible mark on her porcelain skin, but, Freya, she responded so beautifully.

When she was wound up enough for his taste, he let his hand glide down her side to wrap her leg around his hips. She gasped and then giggled, fidgeting closer, as close as her hiked-up skirt would allow, until every little movement made them grind into each other. Hiccup loved how confident and eager she was; it really made up for a lot of her lack in experience. He moved with her for a bit, groaning against her skin when their fooling around called more and more blood south.

Forcefully pulling himself together, he firmly held her leg and her torso and then flipped them around so she lay on top of him. Straddling him. It didn’t help his concentration that her soft breasts suddenly pushed against him, that he could feel her heat pressing down on his groin. But this was about her. She’d ask, so he would show her.

Astrid yelped at the sudden switch. Panting, she pushed herself into a sitting position, her hands on his bare chest for stabilisation. Bewildered, she questioningly looked down at him. But Hiccup offered no explanation, just gave her a supportive smile as his hands wandered to her waist – and then bucked up against her.

Reflexively, her toned thighs tightened around him to hold her in place – and then she understood. Watching him carefully, she began to move, slowly, rolling her hips like she would to balance out Markor moving beneath her. It made her press and grind against him in an interesting new way, one that gave her more control.

Pausing for a second, she fought to pull away all of the layers of her wide skirts, gathering them around her waist until she could feel him more directly, only his trousers and her undergarments between them. Then she continued to move, watching him closely even as the potent sensations clouded her mind.

At first, there was a proud smile on his face as she quickly got the hang of what she was doing. Gods, this felt so good... But soon, she noticed something else. The more she moved, searching for that wonderful sensation, the more it seemed to affect him too. His expression became slack, eye fluttering and shifting out of focus. His breathing became heavier, his chest heaving. His heart hammered against her hand as she kept grinding into him.

Watching him like this made her heady. She was doing this. He reacted to her, to what she did, and it gave her a thrill to know that she could do this to him. That he seemed to enjoy the contact just as much as she did.

It didn’t take long before he couldn’t hold still anymore. His hands gripping her hips more firmly, he moved with her, intensifying the friction, and it made her dizzy. Soon, they were both panting and groaning, his back arching up as her fingernails scratched over his chest. It felt so good!

But she wanted more. Overwhelmed by both her curiosity and her arousal, she let her hands glide
down his stomach. She was aware of the one line they mustn’t cross, but they were still far from reaching that point, weren’t they? And she wanted to know, to see, to feel. A little nervous, her fingers trembled as they reached the hem of his trousers, as they tugged at the cords there, eager to touch him like he’d touched her the night before.

Then, suddenly, the room around her spun, and she found herself lying on her back a second later. Hiccup was above her, propped up only on one forearm as the other was between her legs directly. His lips on her neck and her ear drove her insane. Whimpering, she clung to him, one hand clenched in his hair, the other in his back, as it took him a ridiculously small amount of time to tip her over that edge. The buildup, his fingers rubbing that sensitive spot, his heavy gasps against her skin, it was all too much.

His mouth over hers swallowed her cry as she writhed beneath him, body twitching and twisting without her doing as the waves of sensation flooded through her. A minute later, she lay lax and panting amidst the straw, feeling boneless, with Hiccup above her covering her neck, shoulder, and upper body in dozens of light kisses.

“Mmmh, yep,” she hummed, giggling shakily. “Another form of riding I like. But why did you stop me?” There was no accusation in her voice, only curiosity. Maybe it would have taken longer to ride them both toward bliss, but she’d been under the impression that he’d enjoyed it, too. Or had she mistaken his reactions?

Hiccup didn’t answer, however, not really. He shifted upwards to look at her, his eyes dark and dilated. His lips were moving, but he didn’t say a word. He just looked at her with a weirdly intense expression, then shook his head, slowly, before he rolled off her and scrambled to stand up.

“I… I’ll be right back,” he gasped, his voice rough and heavy. “Get us some water.”

He stumbled out of the stall, leaving Astrid to gaze at where he’d disappeared, frowning slightly despite the pleasant little waves that kept rushing through her every now and then. Somehow, he acted weird, but she couldn’t say what it was. She didn’t know how all this was supposed to work. Maybe she just had to get more accustomed to being… intimate. But she couldn’t shake off the feeling that Hiccup had just fled from her.

It took him several minutes to return, far longer than simply filling a bucket at the well should take, but when he returned with two earthen mugs in his hands he seemed more like himself again. The smile he gave her along with the mug was warm and genuine, and the cuddling and kissing after they’d drunk a few gulps was just as comfortable and loving as it always was. Maybe she had just misinterpreted his behaviour after all, was still too inexperienced.

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“Should we talk about what happened? Earlier, I mean?”

Astrid lay in his arm, her head resting on his shoulder and her hand splayed over his chest. After their heated make-out – that had almost made him ruin yet another pair of trousers – and more loving cuddling afterwards, he’d been absentmindedly caressing her bare back now, close to drifting off into sleep. So her question caught him off guard. “Earlier?” he asked, a little puzzled. “What do you– Oh, you mean at the blot?”

“Uh… yes. Yes, that’s what I meant.”

He blinked a few times, willing the tiredness away, and tried to form an answer. Sure, he’d already thought about all that a lot, during the festivities, the hours of uncertainty. But by now, his worries
had settled again. “I’m not sure what there is to talk about,” he eventually replied. “I mean… I get now why you insist on being careful; Daniel didn’t look exactly happy.” He chuckled weakly, trying to ignore the small sting he felt at those words. “But it’s not as if we could change what we did. I can’t make lifting you up on Markor’s back undone, and neither can you hugging me. It happened. We can only be glad that… well, that nothing else happened.”

In his arm, Astrid tensed, trembled. “And hope that Daniel didn’t just delay enacting his law for after the festivities…”

Hiccup sighed, and continued rubbing her back, soothingly now. “I don’t think he will,” he said quietly. “He might not have been happy, but he at least wasn’t angry, either. Or he didn’t seem to be angry at me…” He sighed again, and shook his head. “No, I think we’re good for now.”

Still tense, Astrid nodded. “But let’s not push it, okay? Just one more day, then Daniel will be gone. I mean, I don’t see when or how he would be able to observe us in that time, but still…”

“Yes… we should be more careful,” he agreed, reluctantly. It went against his heart to hide, to even deny his feelings for her. But trying to be public wouldn’t do them any good right now either. Apparently, he really would need those two years to earn Daniel’s good will…

But that was not a good topic for this night. It should be one of joy and happiness, and Hiccup scoured his mind for something else, something more cheerful. Something that would make her smile again.

“So… did you look through your gifts already?” he asked, and couldn't keep a small grin from tugging at his lips. The change of topic was already enough to brighten his mood, at the very least.

Astrid, however, seemed to be more confused by the question. “My gifts?” she asked. “No, I didn’t. I was too busy pretending to be tired so that I could come here as soon as possible. And why would I have looked through them anyway? I didn’t get that many gifts so that I can't remember them all. The jewellery, the bow and quiver, and the music box.”

His grin widened. “Didn’t you wonder why I wouldn’t let you take the box out of my hands?”

Astrid paused, then sat up to better look at him. She didn’t say anything, but the puzzlement on her face was enough of an answer.

“There’s something else for you hidden in the wrapping,” he explained, smiling. “I mean… after seeing how you reacted to the music box, I fear everything else could only be a disappointment, but…” He shrugged, a little self-consciously now.

“What is it?”

“Don’t you want to see for yourself?”

Astrid paused, but then shook her head. “Whatever it is, I already know I’ll love it. Because it comes from you.” She gave him a warm, loving smile. “I’d rather share my joy over it with you, because I doubt you’ll be there when I look for it in the morning.”

“Fair enough,” he nodded, then sat up too, cuddling her head to his chest and playing with her hair ever so gently. “It’s… actually, it’s something I originally didn’t get for you. But I was thinking about you when I got it, the whole time, and the person it was meant for… Well, Cami rightfully pointed out that it would be more sensible to give it to you. It’s a small wooden figurine of a horse; it even looks like Markor from the grain of the wood.” Astrid didn’t say anything, so he continued on, “It’s not much, I suppose. But it’s something… personal? Something to remember me by when
I can’t be here with you anymore.”

The words hurt, stoking the painful thought about how they would have to separate and how they could only hope to see each other next winter again. But that made this gift all the more important, so that she would have something to hold on to.

“Only Eret and Dagur know that I bought it, and they think it broke,” he babbled on just to fill the silence. ”So if you place it somewhere they won’t notice it directly, then you can even display it openly, and nobody would ever know I gave it to you.” She was still not saying anything, and his heart was starting to hammer. He’d given her some offence, somehow...

Turning to look her in the face, Hiccup braced himself, but he certainly hadn’t been prepared for her eyes to be glassy with unshed tears, for her to bite down on her quivering lip, and for her face to turn into a mask of sadness before she averted it.

“Uhm… Uh, okay, well, if you don’t like it, I–” he backpaddled, self-consciously rubbing the back of his head, but she interrupted him quickly.

“Astrid, I– It’s… it sounds beautiful, it’s… perfect!” She turned back toward him with a pained smile before letting her eyes wander around, looking anywhere but at him. “It’s just… I didn’t get you a gift. I wanted to, but I–”

“But you did!” Now it was on him to interrupt her, smiling again as her words took a load off his mind. Reaching for her hands to wind his fingers through hers, he said, “Astrid, you got me the greatest gift in the world.” She looked confused, so he clarified, “You! You just being here with me... is the only gift I need.” He pulled her toward him, and she immediately snuggled into his soft embrace.

“How come you always know the right words to say?” she asked, somehow chuckling and sniffling at the same time.

He shrugged, and pulled her a little tighter. “They’re just the truth,” he muttered, feeling the weight of just how true the words were pressing down on him. Gulp. He let go of her to look her in the eyes again, to convey just how sincere he was. “Astrid… I don’t think you understand how much you’re doing for me, simply by existing. My life ended over two years ago, died along with my family. Since then, it had no meaning. I had no purpose anymore except senselessly seeking revenge. And then I lost even that when Eret took me in. I had nothing left, nothing but an empty future. And then I met you.” His features softened, and he lifted his hand to lightly caress her cheek with the back of his fingers. “You gave my life meaning again. You gave me a purpose, a goal. No matter what I’ll have to do to gain the favour of your father and brother, I will do it. I’ll do whatever it takes, and I know that I can do it. Because you give me strength. I love you, Astrid. For everything you are, for who you make me want to be.”

There were still tears glistening in the corner of her eyes, but aside from that, they were gleaming with joy. She all but jumped him, leaping forward to throw her arms around his neck and kiss him, and he barely registered anything except her lips and her hands, her bubbly laughter. “I love you too, Hiccup,” she gasped in-between. “Gods, I do. And you are my strength, too. Because of you, I can face my fears and feel confident again. You make me dream of more, of things I never even dared to imagine.”

Feeling as if his heart was flowing over, he pressed his lips back to hers. He sent prayers to the Gods, thanking them for guiding him toward her, for forging their lives together. He didn’t care about the reasons they might have had, just that it had happened, that he was allowed to be with
her. He held her tighter than he’d ever dared before, clutching almost desperately, but she still pressed even closer, gripping and pulling, making them roll around in the straw in their efforts to be as close to each other as possible. Hiccup felt drunk, on their kisses, on their closeness, on the joyful laughter bubbling up inside them both every now and then, and he couldn’t get enough...

...until Astrid suddenly stopped. She pulled back, a frown on her face. He wanted to ask what upset her, but she wasn’t looking at him and rather past him – toward her hand buried in the straw beneath them to hold her up. A spark of disbelief flickered across her face, before she laughed again, short and surprised.

Hiccup tried to turn his head, to see what made her react like this, but before he could utter even one word or question, she already pulled her hand back up. And from her fingers dangled a small key on a thin golden chain.

They both stared for a second, then broke out into another fit of laughter. “I can’t believe it,” he chortled. “Now it shows up again?”

Astrid sat up fully, and a fond smile spread across her face as she gazed at the key. “Well, I guess it served its purpose,” she whispered, and looked back up at him. “If I hadn’t lost it, you wouldn’t have learned about my music box, wouldn’t have repaired it – and I wouldn’t have those reminders of you to keep you close.”

A sad shadow spread across her face again, and Hiccup sat up too, closing his arms around her again, if more lightly now. He knew all too well where that shadow was coming from. It felt as if they already knew each other for years, as if they’d always been together, and always would be. But the truth was that it had only been a few weeks, and no matter how long those had felt on the one side, they’d also flown by in a heartbeat on the other. And they only had a few more weeks before they would have to separate for months, not just without being close like this, skin on skin, but without seeing each other, without talking, without being able to exchange even the smallest of notes. Lately, even not seeing her for one day had felt like too much to bear – how were they supposed to endure months? It was a daunting prospect, one that seemed to grow heavier with every day it came closer.

“It’ll be all right,” he murmured into her hair, encouragingly, even though he barely felt any better. “Just always remember what we saw, our future.”

Astrid notably gulped, and nodded. Then she reached for his hand, pressing something into it, and when he glanced down, her key and the thin chain rested in his palm.

“I want you to keep this, so you have a reminder too,” she whispered, her cheeks flushing slightly. “It’s not much. But it’s all I have, all I can give you.” She looked up at him again, with soft eyes and an even softer smile on her lips. “So you don’t forget me.”

As if he ever could...
Okay, when we originally considered putting this part into the story, it was meant to be a joke. A bit of relief from tension and feels. Pure fun. And then the boys decided that, nope, we’re gonna do it like this. And this. And this too. *shrugs helplessly* So don’t blame me for anything, it was all them!

Also: Early update here, because reasons ;)

As it turned out, carrying four big mugs of beer at once wasn’t easy, but Eret thought he managed it sufficiently. That being said, the mugs were heavy, solid pewter with a lid on top, which was the only reason he’d avoided splashing anyone as he had to dodge other customers in the big tavern’s room. They’d dressed down for this pub crawl, which had the pleasant advantage of not having everyone bowing in obsequiousness – but also the distinct disadvantage of having the people around him not exactly putting in much effort to make way for him. But it wasn’t more difficult or exhausting than reining in one of his House’s untamed horses either, even less so if one considered that the mugs weren’t actively fighting against him. So, all in all, he didn’t think that getting drinks for them had taken that long, but when he returned to their table in a calmer and slightly detached niche, Dagur already awaited him eagerly.

“Oh, thank the Gods, you’re back,” he exclaimed, and directly reached to claim one of the big mugs. “These two are driving me insane!”

Eret’s eyes wandered to the other side of the table where Daniel and Hiccup sat side by side, their heads bowed over a notebook on the table between them. A relieved smile tugged at his lips at that sight; they were obviously deeply engrossed in yet another technical-looking sketch, and didn’t even react when he placed their mugs down in front of them. That was a good thing, he mused as he sat down in the last empty chair. Last night, during the festivities for the grand blot, Hiccup’s bold move to help Astrid on Markor’s back had worried him, and then there’d been Astrid’s hug and Daniel’s strange reaction to it… For a moment, Eret had honestly been afraid for his cousin. The war had hardened Daniel noticeably, and with the repeated assaults on Astrid, his sense of protection for his little sister had hardened as well.

And Hiccup… Well, Eret would vouch for Hiccup’s integrity. Tyr, he had! But no matter how well his cousin fit into their group and how fond Daniel seemed to be of him, none of that would matter when it came to Astrid. So it was good to see them like this again, with the tension from last night entirely gone. They were just getting excited over scholarly crap, together, once again, and even though Eret hadn’t thought it possible, the sight gave him a good feeling.

But it was too much fun to tease Dagur, so he let out a theatrical sigh. “Welcome to my life. They’ve been like this ever since my accolade, drifting off into technical conversations no sane person can follow. You’ve only endured this for a week now, but believe me, it’ll only get worse the longer they talk.”

Dagur cackled, amusement sparking in his eyes, and with Daniel thoroughly distracted he felt safe
enough to throw his lover a warm smile. It wasn’t like they deliberately wanted to keep Daniel in the dark or lie to him… But they knew the Prince well enough, knew his sober attitude toward love and marriage. He wouldn’t get angry at him and Dagur for loving each other. But he also wouldn’t understand it, would only lecture them on how they couldn’t keep their relationship up forever. The good of the Kingdom was more important. And they knew that! But they didn’t need to be reminded of this fact every day again…

For another minute or three, they watched Hiccup and Daniel, how they kept bouncing ideas back and forth, both having a pencil in their hands now to simultaneously add to their sketch. It was funny in a way, though not why anyone visited a tavern.

“And here I thought we’d come here to have fun tonight,” Dagur commented after a while, disbelievingly shaking his head. “You know, after spending nearly the entire day at the Temple to help tidy it up again, I thought we’d earned a reprieve now. Laugh, chat, get a little drunk…” He paused, shaking his head again. “Is this going to keep going on like this? Or is there a chance they might reach another topic at some point?”

“If you can provide an interesting enough topic, that’s possible. But otherwise? Nope. It only gets worse.”

Dagur gave him an almost comically pleading look. “And if we just… leave? I mean, not necessarily to you-know-what. Just, I don’t know... Do something else? Maybe join the men over there? I’m pretty sure I’ve spotted some of this year’s recruits; we could teach them a lesson. I mean, beating them in an arm-wrestling match won’t make as much of an impression as Swanja’s performance with her bow would have made, but it surely would be better than nothing?”

Eret glanced over into the main room. Dagur was right, in all points. There were some recruits out there, also revelling in their liberty before heading off for war, and teaching them some respect surely would be helpful for their further training. Some of them were insufferable this year. But he let out an exasperated snort, and shook his head. “No, we can’t leave,” he said dryly, then nodded back to Daniel and Hiccup. “We can’t leave them alone. Believe me, it’s better to keep an eye on them before they go overboard. Again!”

“What, you think they’d slip away when we turn our backs on them? Maybe run riot?” Dagur laughed again, loud and true. “Oh, wait, I get it. Maybe they’ll go over to the armoury and test their theories from the other day. Which angle and distance is best to tear down a wall.” He laughed again at his own joke.

Eret just raised his eyebrow though, and gave Dagur an ‘Are you certain this is just a joke?’-look that made him choke on his next laugh. Sure, they hadn’t torn down any walls. Not yet! But it certainly wouldn’t be that much of an escalation to previous experiments either…

Leaving Dagur to get a grip on his laughing fits on his own, Eret reached for his beer and took a big gulp. Dagur was right, however. As happy as he was to see Daniel wasn’t against Hiccup… this was their last night before they’d all meet up in Westhill come summer. And selfish as it might be, he’d rather they would all chat together.

He was just scouring his mind for something – anything – to change the topic to, when a boy in the uniform of a courier appeared at their table.

They all looked up at the boy, wearing the sash and badge of the king’s messengers. He appeared to be a little self-conscious in the loud tavern, where a lad his age would normally be shown the door, as he glanced from one to the other. “Sir Eret?” he eventually muttered, settling to look at him. “I have this note for you. From your father.” The boy handed him a sealed letter, and Eret
accepted it reflexively, even as a frown formed on his face.

A note from his father? That was strange. What would be so important that it couldn’t wait until the morning? “Thanks,” he said to the courier, and made attempts to stow the letter away into the pocket of his vest for later.

But the boy shook his head, looking highly uncomfortable as he raised a hand as if to stop him. “I-I’m sorry, Milord,” he stammered. “But I have orders to wait for your answer and deliver it back to his Grace directly. Just… just something about whether you… approve or not?”

Eret’s frown grew deeper, and he noticed that his friends around him all had looks of equal confusion on their faces. Even Daniel and Hiccup had interrupted their conversation for now. “All right,” he sighed, and got up. “Then I’ll see whether I can find a more private place to read it, and get right back to you.”

The boy nodded and stepped to the side, making way for Eret to leave their niche. He looked around, then decided to go outside to read. The light falling through the windows would be sufficient, without the noises of a full tavern to distract him.

Inside the letter were two pieces of paper. One was just a short note, the other another formerly sealed letter addressed to Grand Duke Eret of House Jag’r. Blinking in confusion, he first read the note, written in his father’s messy handwriting.

Son,

This letter from Eastervale arrived an hour ago, and I want to send back a reply immediately. But, as the future head of our House, it is your right to give your opinion as well.

His father wanted his opinion on a matter that affected their House? What could it be, some new trading contract maybe? Frowning even deeper, Eret read the note again, but couldn’t make any more rhyme or reason to it than the first time. Since when did his father need his opinion on such matters?

Shaking his head in bewilderment, he turned his attention to the letter. The seal was broken, but since it had been addressed to his father, that wasn’t surprising. What surprised him, however, was that even though it was broken, the seal was easily recognisable. It was the same as the one on the note the courier had just given him: The seal of a family member of House Jag’r. Even more confused, he opened the letter, and read it.

Dearest Father,

I send this letter to you in the hope that it might reach you soon. If my calculations are right, then I hope you had a wonderful Midwinter’s Night yesterday.

You might be wondering why I’m sending you this letter now instead of waiting for your return in a few weeks. You see, there’s been a development during the last weeks, and even though I know that the final decision only can be made once you’ve returned, I’m eager nonetheless to know your opinion on the matter.

Isku, Baron Hammond’s second son, asked me to become his wife. I know that his father already sent an official proposal, and that it is not my decision to make. But dearest Father, I want to let you know that, if it were my decision, I would gladly say yes.

So I’ll be waiting to hear from you, hoping for your approval.
In love,

Ester of House Jag’r

Gulping, Eret stared at the letter, and let his fingers glide over his sister’s name at the bottom. This didn’t come as a surprise, not really. Baron Hammond’s second son, Isku, had been a regular visitor during the summer months and had been one of the few that hadn’t been a nuisance but a real help instead. His genuine interest in Ester had been an open secret, and even though she’d tried to hide it, Eret had noticed that the interest was mutual.

No, this letter didn’t come as a surprise, and there was no real question whether their Father would approve of the union either. Baron Hammond was an influential and loyal vassal, and tying them tighter to their House would only strengthen them both – even if Eret the Elder would whine and complain about how it was a less than optimum dynastic union, given that Isku was only a second son, and the Hammonds were already vassals, and they should have held out for a first son of a Duke.

But the irony... Eret shivered. His sisters would marry out of the House. Ester would join House Hammond if this was approved, as the law stated.

And Dagur’s siblings were all in the Temple. Even though they were acknowledged by Oswald as his children, they were still Ástir-born bastards, meaning that, by law, none of them could inherit in Dagur’s stead. So, for both him and Dagur, the ‘line of succession’ was a noose around their necks, strangling their love. This letter was just a reminder that nothing had changed. No, if anything, it made everything more real.

He couldn’t tell for how long he stood out there staring at the letter, his thoughts chasing around and around. But when his fingers started to turn numb from the cold, he returned back inside. “You can tell my father that I approve,” he said to the still waiting courier, who nodded and then hurried out of the tavern. Eret gazed after him, then sighed.

He was happy for Ester. Marrying for love was a rare luck, and he was glad to know that at least one of those around him would have that luck. Without his help, his eyes wandered through the crowded room, to their niche, to Dagur. Yeah, it was rare luck indeed, one he himself would never have.

With a heavy heart, Eret weaved his way back to their table, hoping to find some comfortable distraction among his friends – but paused in his steps when he finally noticed the change. Daniel and Hiccup had stopped talking about their sketch, as it seemed. In fact, they weren’t talking at all anymore, and instead laughing cordially. All in all, that wasn’t that much of an unusual sight, except that something about them seemed off.

As if–

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With a satisfied grin, Dagur leaned back in his chair and watched the other two men laugh about the silly joke he’d just made. Yep, this was definitely more fun. Not that he begrudged Daniel and Hiccup having this common interest, not at all. But this was their last day together, so this was really not the best time for such discussions. In addition, a tavern also wasn’t the right place for it, given that who knew who might be listening in on them discussing defence plans and such.
“What in Loki’s name happened to them?”

Dagur turned at the exasperated tone in Eret’s voice, and grinned up at his disbelieving expression. “Oh, I just got tired of all the technical terms. So I… helped them to relax a bit. See things in a different light.” It sounded good in his own ears. Sophisticated.

But Eret wasn’t fooled. His eyes turned into slits, then he leaned forward and sniffed at Hiccup’s beer. The big mug was half-empty by now, but with how people outside of Southshore brewed their beer for taste and not alcohol content, that didn’t mean much. Or… usually wouldn’t mean much.

“I can’t believe it,” Eret muttered. “You–” He broke off, then hastily rounded the table to take his seat, but pulled it closer to Dagur to speak quietly. “Are you out of your mind?” he hissed. “Please tell me you didn’t lace their beers with your Gods-damned Skullcrusher.”

Attempting to look innocent, Dagur schooled his expression and reached for his own beer. “I didn’t lace their beers with my fantastic self-brewed booze,” he repeated dutifully. But Eret knew him too well, obviously wasn’t buying it, and it only took a couple of seconds before Dagur broke. “No, it’s true,” he snickered. “I didn’t lace them. It was more of a liberal swig. Very liberal. But look how good it did them.” He pointed his round chin at the two men on the other side of the table, still laughing about Odin-knows-what. “We’re here to relax, Daniel specifically. And I understand that he enjoys talking about all this theoretical stuff. But he gets enough of that. Today, he should let go. Only the Gods know when he’ll get the chance to do so again.”

Dagur knew that he was right, but Eret still didn’t seem convinced. “Maybe,” he grumbled. “But this was still not a good idea. You do realise that their alcohol tolerance is not quite as high as yours or even mine, right? Freyr, you only would have needed to wait maybe another half an hour, and the beer alone would have been enough already. Now we can only hope that Daniel won’t suffer from a hangover when he starts his journey tomorrow. And we better make sure Hiccup safely gets back to the stables and doesn’t end up in some stream.”

Okay, maybe Eret had a point. But Dagur wouldn’t let such neglectable facts deter him. “I still say it’s more fun this way. But don’t worry, my Skullcrusher doesn’t cause hangovers, it’s too good for that.” Eret snorted at the blatant lie. The drink was aptly named, after all, for all that Dagur had named it after Eret’s uncle’s horse when the poor beast had been returned from the Tribes two years ago. “And as for Hiccup; stopping by the stables to make sure he gets there isn’t even much of a detour, so that shouldn’t be a problem either. Calm down, Chippy. Relax! We’re here to forget all worries for a night, remember?”

He could practically see how the anger flowed out of his lover, though whether it was due to his reasoning or to the use of his usual nickname – short for Chipmunk, a reference to his striped chin – Dagur couldn’t tell. Maybe he would have gotten an answer to this question as Eret was about to reply, his mouth already half-way open. But he never got the chance to actually say anything as his return had apparently finally soaked into Daniel’s alcohol-laced mind and the Prince looked up at him, beaming.

“Heh, Eret! When did you come back?” he asked cheerfully. His voice was a little too loud and there was a slightly glassy shimmer in his eyes, but in Dagur’s opinion, that wasn’t cause to be worried yet. “What did your old man want that couldn’t wait?”

Eret threw him a last meaningful look, but then turned toward Daniel. “He wanted to ask my opinion,” he explained, immediately catching Dagur’s interest too. “About… well, it’s not really a secret anyway, I guess. Apparently, my sister is getting married.”
There was a tightening on Eret’s face, Dagur noticed, and, knowing where it was coming from, he wished he could reach out and squeeze his hand to offer comfort. But that would have given away too much... Sometimes, Dagur really hated having to keep secrets.

“Your sister is getting married?” Daniel and Hiccup asked almost simultaneously.

“Ester or Mirja? Wait, how old were they? Aren’t they... still toddlers, or something?” Daniel looked positively perplexed, frowning as he tried to remember. His question made Dagur snicker. With all his additional duties that had come with growing up, it obviously had been a while since Daniel had been to Eastervale.

“’s got to be Ester,” Hiccup muttered, voice slurring heavily. “She turned seventeen a few months back. And Mirja is almost fifteen, by the way. Hardly t-toddlers anymore. So did that–” he frowned a little, “–uh... son of a baron ask her after all? Wha’ was ‘is name? Isker?”

“Isku,” Eret corrected, nodding. “And yeah, apparently he did,” he added with a grimace.

“And... that’s not good?” Daniel asked hesitantly, reacting to Eret’s tense posture. “Didn’t you say something about how you wouldn’t mind–”

“Oh, it is good,” Eret interrupted quickly. “Isku is a good man. Reliable. Digilant. Not above getting his hands dirty. And he truly cares for Ester. No, I couldn’t hope for a better man, for her and for the stud farm in Sunhill alike. It’s just...” he trailed off, eyes cast down at his hands. He took a big gulp of his beer, and didn’t even grimace even though Dagur was sure he must have noticed the Skullcrusher he’d put in there too. “It’s just... weird, I guess? It’s as if we’ve really grown up now, you know? I mean, sure, we’re knights now and all, but this...”

“Yeah, I get what you mean,” Daniel muttered as Eret trailed off. He took a swallow of his beer as well, before gesturing around from one to the other, starting with Dagur. ‘Heather is married, but she’s older anyway, so it’s not that strange. But now Ester marries, and...” And it makes one wonder where we will end up, doesn’t it?” He laughed, a little shakily, then shook his head. “I mean, could you imagine getting married anytime soon?”

Next to him, Eret chuckled and shook his head, and Dagur was quick to follow. No, he couldn't imagine it, didn’t want to imagine it. There was only one person he wanted to spend his life with, but it could never be. Having to actively fight glancing at Eret, he turned his head into the opposite direction – and halted when his eyes landed on Hiccup instead.

A bemused expression crossed his face. He wasn't sure what kind of reaction he'd expected to Daniel's question from the boy. No, Hiccup wasn't a boy, Dagur reminded himself. He was just as old as he and Eret, and it was just his slighter build and serving demeanour with the underlying humour that made him seem younger. But that wasn't the point.

Dagur cocked his head. Hiccup's eyes had an undeniable glassy gleam in them, the alcohol clearly affecting him more than Dagur had anticipated. But what really drew his attention was the fact that Hiccup was grinning like an idiot. His lips were stretched, teeth showing a little, and his eyes were unseeingly cast to the table between them. There was an absent-minded and dreamy look in them that somehow fit to the way his left hand rubbed a spot at his chest.

“Hah,” Dagur laughed out loud. “Maybe you can’t imagine that, but it looks like there’s someone here who can.” Both Eret and Daniel looked at him in surprise, then turned toward Hiccup when Dagur nodded at him.

“Uh... what?” Hiccup muttered. When he looked up at them all staring at him, he had an
undeniably caught look on his face, yet the dreamy grin was still there somehow.

“Hiccup?” Daniel asked, disbelievingly. “Don’t tell me, you–”

“Oh, don’t dare to deny it,” Dagur interrupted Daniel gleefully. He propped himself up on his elbows and leaned over the table to look at Hiccup more intently. “That look on your face just now said it all.”

Hiccup made an unintelligible noise somewhere between a whine and a groan as he looked from one to the other.

Dagur grinned. “So? Tell us everything about her. Who is she? I guess it’s a ‘she’? I want to know everything!”

Hiccup, having finished looking around the three of them for rescue and finding none, let his shoulders slump. But then a shy but dreamy smile once more spread across his face. Again, his left hand reached for his chest, and this time it looked as if he was toying with something beneath his tunic. A charm maybe? Glancing at Hiccup’s neck, Dagur noticed a leather cord peeking out at the hem, one he was relatively certain hadn’t been there before. So he actually already wore a token of his love? Oh, this should be interesting.

“You’re right,” Hiccup eventually muttered, not meeting anyone’s eyes. “There is someone, and she’s…” he trailed off, shrugging helplessly.

The show was highly amusing to Dagur, but Daniel seemed more confused. “I thought… Didn’t you say something about never having been in love like that not so long ago?”

The smile on Hiccup’s face grew a little sheepish now as he looked up at Daniel. “Was the truth back then,” he affirmed. “But… So many things happened since then, and–”

“No humming and hawing now, Hiccup,” Dagur probed further. “We want all the details.”

When Hiccup turned his attention toward Dagur, there was a bright spark of excitement in his dazed eyes. He’d apparently made a decision, and it seemed as if he’d only waited for an opportunity like this, because once Hiccup started to talk there seemed to be no end. “She’s amazing!” he began. “I only met her after we got here, but it already feels as if we’ve known each other forever. She’s so beautiful, her eyes gleaming as bright as the sky, and her hair… her soft skin, and those sweet lips. I could spend all day kissing her. But she’s so much more than just beautiful, also kind and funny, witty and smart, strong and brave. So brave…” he trailed off for a moment, his eyes gazing into the distance as he kept playing with the charm beneath his tunic. “And I love her. Gods, I do. I love her so much.”

A fond grin played around Dagur’s lips as he listened to Hiccup’s outburst. When he and Eret had found him all those months ago in that roadside tavern, he’d been wrecked. There was no gentle way to put it, really. He’d been shattered and broken, both physically and mentally, more dead than alive. Later, during the weeks Dagur had met him in Eastervale and during this last week here at the capitol, he’d seemed better, healthier, but still so calm and cool, detached. But this now? This was undeniably a new spark of life, and Dagur was happy to see him like this.

He glanced at Eret, knowing that his lover cared deeply for his cousin and that he had been worried about Hiccup’s welfare too. It surprised him then when, instead of a fond smile, he saw a tense frown on Eret’s face. Was he still thinking about Ester and her marriage? He wanted to give Eret a nudge, maybe a questioning look, something subtle, but before he could actually do so, Daniel drew his attention again.
"That sounds great, Hic," he said, placing a hand on Hiccup’s shoulder. "Honestly, I’m happy for you. Surprised you didn’t say anything before though." Hiccup shuffled a bit, mumbling incoherently, but Daniel didn’t seem to notice. "So I was wrong after all... Are you really thinking about marriage already, even with how short a time you know each other?"

At that, Hiccup laughed, a little giddily. "Yes," he gasped with a measure of confidence that surprised even Dagur. "Yes, I am. I want to marry her. And I will marry her one day. She’s the one for me, I know it."

“So she feels the same?"

Hiccup turned to look at Daniel again, a sincere expression on his face now that only barely got dulled by his obvious state of drunkenness. “Amazingly, she does.”

Daniel nodded. For a moment, Dagur thought he noticed a rueful, almost sad expression crossing his face, but it was gone before he could be sure, replaced by an honest smile. “Then you shouldn’t wait. You never know what the future brings; you should go and ask her father for her hand right away. If you’re sure then there’s no point in waiting.”

“It’s… not that easy,” Hiccup muttered, his shoulders slumping. “First, I… I have to convince her father of my worth. And her brother, too…” The last words were barely more than a whisper, and Dagur wasn’t quite sure whether he’d understood them right.

“Oh, but why wouldn’t they?” Daniel went on cheerfully. “You’re a good man, Hiccup, and if they fail to see that then they’re stupid. If you think you need time then so be it. But know that I’ll be supporting you if that helps.”

Hiccup was quiet for a minute, and just stared at Daniel. “Thank you,” he eventually breathed, the gleam in his eyes almost looking like a hint of a tear. “That… that really means a lot to me!”

“Anytime,” Daniel grinned back. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Very true,” Eret chimed in, and lifted his mug. “To friends who stand up for each other. Which reminds me, I haven’t heard much from Snot in a while. Do you know what he’s up to lately? Last I heard was that his crush on Swanja’s maidservant got thoroughly destroyed by his father. The poor man. But seriously, what did he expect? As if Uncle Spite would let him marry a servant.”

“Also true,” Daniel laughed. “But to be fair, Rachel had already done a lot of destroying that crush by that time. No idea what her type is, but it certainly wasn’t Snot. Besides, from what I heard, he’s already well over her anyway.”

Grinning to himself, Dagur leaned back in his chair. Maybe Eret had been right and adding Skullcrusher to this party had been a little over the top, but he didn’t feel like it was doing much damage either. The atmosphere was definitely more to his liking now. He took another gulp of his own beer, by far the strongest mix on this table, then joined the others as they discussed Snot’s latest exploits. Yep, this was certainly more fun.
*hides under rocks and enjoys the company there*

Here's a reminder that there won't be a new chapter next week. However, there might be another bonus, possibly uploaded separately. Keep your eyes open :)
When she heard the voices of her ‘brothers’, Astrid was up and awake in an instant.

*Shit!*

What were *they* doing here?

Hastily, she sat up, perking up her ears. Could she’ve been wrong? There was nothing now, only the silence of the night. Had it just been her fears that had made her imagine those voices? Maybe it had just been a dream altogether? But no, there it was again. She knew Eret’s voice and Dagur’s cackling laughter *too well* to be wrong.

And judging by their volume, they already were *close.*

Within only a second, she was on her feet, frantically looking around for a place to hide, but came up empty-handed. The back of Hiccup’s sleeping stall was packed with straw bales, but they were stacked too tightly to hide between them, and it was too late to leave the stall and look somewhere else.

With her heart beating in her throat, Astrid wrapped herself into Hiccup’s blanket -- even as something like a desperate hysterical laugh bubbled up inside her. *Yeah, right.* Hiding the fact that
she’d been lying in Hiccup’s bed, half-naked, would totally help if they found her here.

Praying to all the Gods she knew, she pressed herself into a corner of the stall, the last one that would be visible should someone look in here. Maybe they wouldn’t even come in at all? Maybe they’d just drop Hiccup off and leave?

The sound of the door opening was audible, and Astrid reflexively held her breath as definitely more than one pair of feet entered the stables. Oh, please!, she prayed. Please don’t let them find me!

“All right,” came Hiccup’s voice. “You’ve accomplished your goal and got me here without an accident. Thanks, guys. Really. But now, I’ll be okay. Shoo. Off with you.” He sounded… strange somehow, but Astrid didn’t have the nerves to further think about that. Not now!

“Are you sure?” Eret sounded worried, and Astrid pressed herself closer against the wooden wall to her back. Why couldn’t he simply leave?

“Yes, I’m sure,” came Hiccup’s dry reply. “You don’t need to tuck me into bed.” He sounded closer now, almost at the entrance to the stall, and apparently, Eret had followed him there.

He’d come closer too, stood only a few feet away from her now. If he opened the stall door, there was no way… “Hic, don’t underestimate this stuff… It’s–”

“Seriously, I’m fine!” Hiccup interrupted him. “And I can take care of myself. See you guys tomorrow.”

Astrid didn't even dare to breathe. She could even see Hiccup now, standing in the open door with Eret apparently directly in front of him. If Eret only so much as made one more step…

“Come on, he's fine,” came Dagur's voice, and Astrid almost sobbed in relief. “Leave the boy to his pleasant dreams. We have another one to get into bed, after all.”

It felt like an eternity before Eret answered, Astrid shaking like a leaf, but eventually, he gave in. “You're right, both of you. All right, see you tomorrow, Hiccup.”

“Sleep well,” sounded Dagur's cheerful voice toward them, followed by an unintelligible grunt that sounded awfully like Daniel. Still not daring to move a single muscle, she listened anxiously to Eret’s receding footsteps, to him and Dagur exchanging a few words that were too quiet for her to understand. A minute later, the door to the stables finally closed, leaving her and Hiccup in relative silence, except for the snort of a sleeping horse. Astrid was still too tense and anxious to relax and approach Hiccup, when his sudden laughter caught her off guard. It started quietly, just a low chuckling really, but quickly grew into a full body guffaw.

“Oh, Gods,” he gasped in-between. “I was sure that they would spot you!” He turned toward her, apparently knowing exactly where she was hiding, and pulled her into a tight hug, blanket and everything.

Still stunned, Astrid was hardly able to react in any way, not even when he kissed her, giggling against her lips. “Tha-that was awfully close,” she eventually gasped, still shaking. Countless ‘What if…’s were whirling around in her head, and she still felt as if she couldn’t breathe freely.

“I know!” Hiccup was still chuckling, leaning heavily against her. “That would have been…” He broke off into another laughing fit. “Gods, can you imagine? That would have been hilarious!”

Hilarious? Well, that wasn't the word Astrid would have used! Alarming, maybe. Or terrifying. But
then, Hiccup’s behaviour was odd, not really like him, but more–

“Hiccup, are you drunk?” she blurted out, a little incredulously, smelling the beer on his breath. The question wasn't necessary, not really. In fact, now that she thought about it, it was fairly obvious. But the words were out before she could think about them.

“Mmm,” Hiccup hummed into her hair. “Maybe a little? Apparently, Dagur thought our beers needed *improvement*, so...” he chuckled again, shaking his head against her neck.

Gulping, Astrid nodded. “I see,” she mumbled. That explained why Eret had been so concerned; Astrid had heard enough stories about Dagur’s brews to be a little worried now too.

But then, Hiccup seemed to be all right. *More* than all right, actually. He wasn’t sick or delirious, nor unstable in any way she could detect – and having been around drunk nobles since she was a little girl, she’d seen a *lot* of men and women who acted poorly under the influence of drinks. No, all that was different from his normal self was his obvious giddiness and how unrestrained he was. His hands were roaming over her body, never holding still; up and down her back, her shoulders, caressing her neck, her sides, pushing the blanket aside to brush along the edges of her bare breasts. The feeling very efficiently distracted her from all worrisome thoughts.

It felt a bit odd, the rough fabric of his heavy cloak and the cold leather of his vest beneath against her bare skin, but she couldn't say that it was *unpleasant*. On the contrary, his almost playful touches and giddy laughter every now and then finally made her relax too. Eret had been *awfully* close to discovering her, but what mattered was that he *hadn't*. So she made an effort to deeply breathe in and out, let the tension flow out of her, and leaned more comfortably into Hiccup’s embrace. Being close to him, kissing and feeling him, always made her feel better.

“You're in quite a cheerful mood,” she eventually pointed out, gasping as he nibbled his way down her neck. And he really was, with the continuous giggling and grinning. She was happy to be with him too, but this still felt like something *else*. “Did you have a good night out?”

Again, he began to chuckle. “Yeah, we had. I...” he paused, almost choked on another laugh, then added, “I told them about you.”

Astrid froze, and her gut seemed to drop down into her feet. “You– *What*?” He couldn't be serious now, could he? No, surely not. Surely, he hadn't–

“Don't worry,” he interrupted her approaching panic attack, still grinning and giving little giggles but somewhat steadier now. “I just told them that I am in *love* with the most wonderful woman on Midgard, how beautiful and smart and brave she is, and that she loves me too.” He paused to place a lingering kiss just below her ear. “I didn't mention your name, they don't know I was talking about you, but… Gods, Daniel, he–” Hiccup broke off, his arms around her tightening. “He said he’s happy for me. Encouraged me to marry her– you as soon as possible. That he would support me if needed...”

Astrid felt a kind of pressure around her chest, as if a corset was being closed by Ruff in one of her *moods*. “But Hiccup,” she interrupted him. “I don't doubt that he said that, but... but he didn't *know* you were talking about me, that *he* is the one who–”

“I know,” Hiccup sighed. He retreated slightly until his eyes met hers. There was a strange expression in them; an odd mixture of hope and despair, all covered by a light haze that probably came from the alcohol. “I know that he doesn't know that I was talking about you and I know that that fact would certainly change his opinion. But...” he broke off, and swallowed before a small almost shy smile played around his lips. “But it gave me hope, you know? The hope that he'll
come around? Last night, I thought that hope was lost for good, so… Yeah, it was good to hear that he doesn't think I'm a complete failure.”

Astrid features softened, and she reached up to brush a few fringes out of his face. “You're not a failure,” she whispered. “Where is that idea suddenly coming from?” She remembered how Eret the Elder, the old goat, had spoken about Hiccup in that way, and how Hiccup had reacted when she’d repeated those words. But that was ages ago. It had never come up again since then, so why did he mention it now?

But he just shrugged, and averted his eyes. “Doesn't matter,” he muttered, then pulled her closer again until his face was thoroughly buried between her hair and her neck. “All that matters is that you're here. Freya, Astrid, I– I love you. So much!”

Chuckling weakly, Astrid turned her head until her lips touched his skin. “I love you too.”

She couldn't really say how they ended up rolling around on the straw-covered ground a few minutes later. All she knew was that there was something unrestrained and wild, almost feral even, about Hiccup's actions. The way his hands roamed over her skin, searching and exploring, intense, his kisses hot and almost demanding. It left her dizzy and wanting, especially when he focused all his attention on her breasts. She'd never known how sensitive that part of her body was, but, Freya, every time his work-roughened hands palmed her, fingers brushing over or pinching her nipples, she couldn't help but moan and writhe beneath him. And when she felt the damp heat of his mouth, his wet tongue stroking, the suction, his teeth nibbling and biting, all she could do was scream.

“Quiet, you'll scare the horses,” he mumbled against her skin as she floated down from one of those intense explosions. A part of her wanted to chide him for the clearly audible smirk in his voice, but the by far bigger part didn't care.

“Y-your fault,” she panted, chest heaving. “Freya, how are you doing this? How… what…” she broke off when her words kept incoherently tumbling out of her mouth. She needed better words!

Hiccup, the intensity of his touches not dwindling in the slightest, chuckled. “It… has many names. But the most common would be an ‘orgasm’. Or a climax. Or I've even heard ‘little death’ for the really good ones that just knock you flat. And as for how… I'm amazed myself how… responsive you are.” He lowered his head, and drew another loud moan out of her by ardently playing her nipple with his tongue. “Seriously, I could do this all day and never get bored.”

“Uhh uh…” Astrid made, already feeling the tingles of another orgasm, as Hiccup had called it, pooling in her belly when his hand wandered down her body and beneath her skirts. Clutching at his shoulders in a desperate attempt to anchor herself was all she could do when his hand between her thighs stroked that fire within her once more. It took only a few minutes until a second orgasm wrecked her body, leaving her stunned and trembling, unable to comprehend much beside Hiccup placing soft kisses all over her skin.

“Gods, you're so beautiful like this,” he whispered, his voice low and rough. “As if you were glowing…”

His breath tickled, making her giggle giddily, and she reached out with weak arms to pull him up and into a kiss. He complied easily and eagerly, his unusual intensity still not dulling in the slightest. Astrid wouldn’t complain, she loved how tactile he was, how his hands – his whole body, really – wouldn’t stop moving, exploring. It made her want to do the same, to feel him.

Barely ever stopping kissing him, she managed to get Hiccup out of his tunic, with his cloak, vest, and shoes having already been shed. It didn’t take much for her to get over her initial hesitation, to
explore him with the same eagerness he showed, hands running over muscles and scars, gripping and stroking. Their kisses grew more heated and distracted, and everything around them seemed to fade away. There was nothing else anymore, nothing but him. And she wanted all of him.

Humming against his lips, she led her hand glide down his front, over his stomach, until she felt rough fabric. There was a last spark of shyness, but she quickly brushed it aside. This was Hiccup, and there was no reason to ever be shy or hesitant with him. She wanted to move on, to feel him, this last part of him she didn’t really know at all. She wasn’t even sure what she’d planned, whether she wanted to feel him through the fabric of his trousers, more aware of the sensation than when they were making out, or whether she wanted to let her hand slide beneath the fabric, to feel hot skin and more, things she barely knew anything about.

But before she could do either, his hand was around her wrist. With an almost pained groan and a shake of his head, he pulled her hand away, his fingers entangled with hers as he resumed kissing her with renewed vigour. The way he moved, grinding against her, and his groans and grunts quickly distracted her from wondering again. It all simply felt too good to bother, to think, and all she wanted was to follow where he led her. Especially when it made her body throb so wonderfully, made tension coil tight before it burst and washed through her in thrilling waves. It felt as if she could never get enough.

“Oh, f– A-astrid!”

She barely registered Hiccup’s muffled groan against her shoulder or how his body coiled tightly only to shudder and shake a second later. In fact, she didn’t register anything, basking in an incredible rush that left her dizzy, until Hiccup slumped down onto the straw next to her. Right now, she could completely understand that ‘little death’ nickname for this feeling. He was panting, his eyes on her still dazed as he reached out to brush her sweaty fringes out of her face.

“I still have no idea what I ever did to deserve this – to deserve you,” he mumbled, voice slurring heavily.

Astrid wanted to reply that it was the same the other way around, but when she finally managed to make her eyes focus on him, he seemed to be half-asleep already. Well, the last couple of days had been busy, it was late, and he wasn’t exactly sober anyway.

For a few minutes, she just watched him with a lazy smile on her lips. He looked beautiful, so peaceful and relaxed, the corners of his mouth tugged up in the slightest of smiled. And yet…

And yet, there had been something earlier, something that bothered her more the more she thought about it. Slowly, her smile faded into a frown. Why had he done that, not just tonight but last night, too? Everything else had been wonderful, perfect even, but this…

For some while, she went through one possible explanation after the other in her mind, not really liking any of them. And it was futile anyway. She should simply ask Hiccup what that had been about, hoping that the explanation wouldn’t be–

No, none of that anymore, she chided herself. She needed to ask Hiccup, everything else wouldn’t get her anywhere. But gazing at his sleeping face, she had to acknowledge that now clearly was not the right time to do so.

With a sigh and a slight grimace, she pushed all these confusing thoughts aside in favour of getting at least a little sleep tonight, reached for the blanket behind Hiccup to cover them both, and then snuggled against his warm chest. Tomorrow, she thought to herself. Tomorrow, I will ask him. Whenever I get the chance…
Fighting to keep a pained groan inside, Hiccup reached up to rub his temples and simultaneously cover his eyes from the ray of sunlight which was breaking through the clouds occasionally. Being here as part of the farewell-party for the Crown Prince was an honour, even with the official explanation simply being that he was bringing Trample, and he didn't intend to embarrass himself by letting his hangover show too much. He knew that Daniel wasn't feeling any better, but the Prince somehow managed to appear composed, so Hiccup could do the same.

And appearing composed was important in more than one regard anyway. After their fun night out last night, Hiccup was confident again that it was more than just this official reason that allowed him to be here. But it was still an official occasion – and the last one where Daniel could notice anything, no less – so Hiccup made an effort not to even look at Astrid. But he still couldn’t help but listen.

“Promise me to be careful, okay?” Astrid’s voice as she tightly hugged her brother easily reached Hiccup’s ears where he stood next to Eret, even with how low and muffled it was.

“I’m always careful,” Daniel replied, smiling encouragingly at his sister as he retreated. “You’ll see, I’ll be back before you even noticed I was gone.” Something in Daniel’s voice sounded off as he said that, but Hiccup had no time to pin down what exactly it was. It might just be him being tired anyway.

“I certainly hope so,” Dagur chimed in, his trademark grin plain across his face. Nothing seemed to be able to dull his bright mood, not even one of his friends heading off into a war zone. “Because it’s all getting real now, you know? And I can’t wait to be a part of it all this summer. Thor, it feels like forever until then!”

Daniel grimaced slightly, but didn’t comment further. He accepted Dagur’s goodbye hug with something of a forced smile, then turned to Eret. As they hugged too, Hiccup heard murmured words he wasn’t sure he was supposed to hear.

“Promise me to keep an eye on her for me.”

“I always will,” Eret replied, voice equally low. “Don’t worry. As long as we stay here, nothing will happen to her.”

Again, Hiccup noticed a grimace crossing Daniel’s face, but it was gone in the blink of an eye. He just nodded, lips tight, then turned toward Hiccup. Giving him a hug too seemed inappropriate, and with him holding Trample it wasn’t practical anyway, so Hiccup simply reached out to shake Daniel’s hand. He was relieved when Daniel returned both the gesture and his honest smile.

Apparently, all his worries from the night of the grand blot had been for nothing after all – at least in regards to their friendship. “Have a good journey,” he said. “And good luck with Redpeak. I hope it all works as planned.”

Hiccup wasn’t sure how, but that seemed to have been the wrong thing to say. Daniel winced, confusing Hiccup with a strange look and a slight shaking of his head, but it was too late to take his words back.

“Redpeak?” Eret inquired, clearly surprised. “That again? I thought you couldn’t go to Redpeak this winter.”

Hiccup threw Eret a confused look. He and Daniel had talked about little else lately, including planning the last details last night in the tavern. Where else was Daniel supposed to go? “Why
shouldn’t he?” he asked, clearly puzzled, then turned back to Daniel. “I thought it was your plan to get it usable for this summer? Wasn’t that why you asked to pin down which alterations would be manageable in the short time?”

Now it was on Eret to look confused, and even Dagur leaned in. “But… weren’t you lamenting about how you won’t be able to work on Redpeak only one week ago?” Dagur asked. “I clearly remember it. It was my accolade, and…”

“And you said you can’t change the plans anymore,” Eret added, nodding. “Something about logistics, and basic material already being on its way?”

Dagur nodded, too. “And that Uncle Spite would skin you alive if you postponed the repairs to his outposts. I mean, I remember how desperately you wanted to change your plans, but I didn’t think you’d be willing to risk that.”

Eret grunted in agreement, and all three of them gave Daniel confused looks.

“Erm…” the Prince made, biting his lip. He shifted his weight from one foot to the other, clearly uncomfortable, but then nodded. “You’re right, all of you,” he sighed, shoulders slumping a bit. “It’s just… something else came up, something… important. I don’t have as much time as originally planned after all, so going to Redpeak instead became more sensible, as it’s much closer to the city of Westhill than Loki’s Teeth.”

“Something so important that you can risk aggravating Uncle Spite?” Eret asked with a raised eyebrow. “That’s got to be quite something. Is it something you can tell us?”

Daniel looked definitely pained now as he shook his head. “No, I can’t tell you. Not yet. But you’ll learn about it soon enough, don’t worry.” He sighed again. “All I can tell you is… well, let’s just say I highly expect to see you all again long before summer, before you all return home even.”

“So, you’ll be here for Swanja’s birthday?” Eret asked, clearly surprised. “That’s new.”

It was a reasonable question, Hiccup supposed. He already knew that Astrid’s birthday at the end of the winter usually marked the day House Jag’r’s herd returned to Eastervale. It was a day he dreaded, knowing it would be the last before they had to part. But he also knew that the Princess’s birthday wasn’t an important enough occasion for Daniel to interrupt his campaign preparations. Or, usually not, at least.

But against his expectations, Daniel shook his head. “No, I won’t be back by then. But I’ll be back not long afterwards. There’s—” He glanced to the side, and abruptly interrupted whatever he’d meant to say. “Uh, where is Swanja?”

Upon his question, they all turned as well to where Astrid stood behind Dagur. Or at least where she had stood until a minute ago. Now, the space was blatantly empty, and Hiccup wondered how he’d missed her leaving. Sure, he was tired and hungover and had actively tried to not overly pay attention to her. But apparently, that had worked better than he’d expected.

“Uh, I don’t know. She’d been here just now, hadn’t she?” Dagur looked utterly confused, and Hiccup had to bite back laughter at the sight. Astrid’s disappearance could be alarming, but he actually wasn’t worried. Not really.

And as if he’d been able to read his thoughts, Eret snorted in amusement. Or maybe it was just that he, too, knew Astrid well enough. “Well, if she managed to slip away, there’s only one place where she’d go. We’ll pick her up once you’re gone and make sure she’s all right. Don’t worry, we'll keep
an eye on her.” The last words were clearly directed at Daniel who nodded gratefully.

“Thanks, Eret. I know I can count on you.”

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Hiccup couldn’t really complain about the company, he mused as Eret and Dagur accompanied him back toward the stables. It was only logical that Astrid would go there when she got the chance. According to Eret that was what she always did, and Hiccup supposed he was right. It had been what had let to their first meeting, after all.

Besides, spending time with these two was always fun, and even with knowing where Daniel was heading, their mood wasn’t down in any way. The area around Westhill and the Western Mountain Range was undeniably a war zone, but Daniel had the best protection imaginable, and winter wasn’t exactly the time where the Malarians – used to their warmer climate in the West – were most active anyway.

So it wasn’t really surprising that they were in a high spirit, possibly even more light-hearted than they had been during the past days. Because now, there was nobody around anymore from who they had to hide. It was a bit strange though, he mused as he walked ahead of the other two and tried not to be too obtrusive. They had to hide their relationship just like he and Astrid did, but for other reasons and with very different perspectives for their future. Right now, he felt a little jealous at how freely they bantered, their comments much more telling then they had been with the prince around. It stung that, even with Daniel gone, it wouldn’t be possible for him and Astrid to do the same. But on the other hand, he also couldn’t really begrudge them their time, limited as it was. At least he knew that his fate, ordained by the gods, was far better than what theirs would be. So Hiccup kept himself entertained with thoughts of their future, by remembering the images he’d seen of Astrid standing in the doorway to their home and with their son in her arms. Someday, he reminded himself. Someday, that image will become the truth. The thought brought a smile to his lips. A smile that vanished when he entered the stables.

Astrid was nowhere to be seen, but he knew by now that didn’t have to mean she wasn’t here. His eyes directly flickered to the end of the corridor, and, just like last night, he noticed that the door to his stall stood slightly ajar – despite him knowing that he’d closed it properly. His heart skipped a beat before it began to pound hard in his chest. Last night, Eret and Dagur had only been here to make sure he got here. Eret had been worried, but it also had been relatively easy to persuade him to leave. Now, however? Now, they were here to search for Astrid. If she’d just been here, for Markor or to wait for them, that wouldn’t have been a problem. But if she was in his stall, that meant it was on Hiccup to make sure they wouldn’t find her.

“Milady Astrid?” he called, loud. “Are you here? We’re all looking for you.” He could only hope that would be enough of a warning, enough for her to not come out of his stall and make Eret and Dagur wonder why she’d been in there in the first place. And to his relief, everything stayed quiet.

“Huh, that’s strange,” Eret muttered, looking around the hall. “I would have vouched for her to be here.” He made a few more steps forward, before he called, “Swanja? Where are you?” But again, there was no answer.

Hiccup almost hoped Eret would leave it at that and go look someplace else, when instead he went on toward the stalls. For a moment, his blood ran cold, but he quickly caught himself again. He had to do something, or Eret would surely find her.

“Maybe she’s in the tack room?” he suggested, words directed at Dagur who nodded.
“I’ll take a look,” he said, and left for the door to the attached room.

Hiccup quickly hurried forward to where Eret was peering into Markor’s stall right now.

“Well, she’s not in here either,” Eret stated needlessly, a clear frown on his face now. “I really could have sworn…”

“Maybe in one of the other stalls,” Hiccup suggested, making a snap decision at that moment. It was bold, but certainly better than to have Eret look everywhere on his own. He stepped toward the next stall on this side of the stables, Cassie’s, even as he was still turned toward Eret. “Let’s have a look; I’ll take this side and you the other one?” He indicated to the other row of stalls, where Hunter, Crusher, and Chomp were housed. Yes, bold indeed. What if Eret instead stayed on this side, to search Squish’s stall and the empty stalls in-between? Hiccup would be too far away to intervene, to maybe stand in the way so Eret wouldn’t spot her or to insist upon searching his sleeping stall at the end of the row himself. What if–

“All right.” Eret nodded, turned to hurry over to the other side, and Hiccup bit his lip, painfully, to keep a relieved gasp from escaping him. He was keenly aware that the danger of them practically catching her in his bed wasn’t fully averted yet, but at least it wasn’t as immediate anymore either.

They went on in silence until Dagur returned from the tack room. “I’ve searched the entire thing, even looked behind shelves and everywhere. Swanja isn’t in there.”

“And she’s not here either,” Eret replied tensely as he closed the door to the last stall in his row. “Hiccup?”

Hiccup could see part of Astrid’s dress peeking out from behind the straw bale where she was hiding. “No, nothing,” he called back, firmly closed the door to his stall, and, after giving himself a second to compose his face, turned toward the other two.

Dagur gave him an amused look. “Did you expect Swanja to be in there?” he asked, nodding at his stall behind him. It was obviously meant to tease him, and luckily, Hiccup didn’t need to pretend anything to react appropriately flustered.

“Well, I don’t know,” he said, blushing. “I mean, maybe she was tired and didn’t want to go back to the castle to do whatever is on her plan for today? There is a bed in there after all, and…” he trailed off, swallowing whatever other nonsense he could blurt out. “Anyway, it looks like she’s not here after all.” He was a bad liar, and he knew that. People had told him so on several occasions. All he could do was hope that this time would be different. That they would believe him.

Eret frowned, but then nodded. “All right. Maybe she knew we would look for her here first. I mean, I don’t know why she felt the need to run off, but it’s obvious that she doesn’t want to be found easily.” He sighed, then grimaced. “But we have to find her. I promised Daniel to keep an eye on her. I mean, I know she can take care of herself, but…” He trailed off, and rubbed his tattooed chin in thought.

“I know what you mean,” Dagur sighed. “She hasn’t really been herself lately.”

Hiccup rubbed the back of his neck in an attempt to appear unperturbed. He felt bad for lying to them, and even worse for leaving them worried; they meant well, after all. But even if he told them where she was, there was no way he could explain why he’d lied in the first place. Besides, Astrid hadn’t wanted them to find her, and he respected that. So he stayed silent.
“Okay, let’s see if we can find her anywhere else,” Eret eventually resigned. “Maybe she went for a walk in the forest, or sits at the swan lake. Or she might be visiting Fishlegs and Heather.”

“I hope not,” Dagur muttered. “I could go without the icy glares Heather gives me lately.”

Nodding, Eret laid his hand on Dagur’s upper arm in a comforting gesture. “I’m sure she’ll come around. But maybe we don’t need to even go there.” He turned toward the exit, but then paused to look at Hiccup. “Are you coming too?”

Hesitantly, Hiccup shook his head. “No. You know better where she might be, and I could only follow you anyway; I’d just get lost if I were to search the castle and its grounds on my own. I’ll stay here in case she shows up after all. Tend to the horses…” He shrugged. Again he hoped that the lie wasn’t too noticeable on his face.

Apparently, it wasn’t. Eret nodded in agreement, and after they’d left the stables and the door closed behind them, he let out a heavy sigh of relief. Gods, he couldn’t wait until they wouldn’t have to hide anymore…

He wasn’t surprised at all when, upon turning away from the stable’s entry, he found that Astrid had already left his stall. He had to be more smashed than he’d thought, as he hadn’t even heard the door. What surprised him, however, was that she stood a few steps away from him. His first instinct was to go to her and take her into his arms, but there was something in her expression that kept him from doing so. It also explained why she’d come and hidden here in the first place. It seemed as if she had more on her mind than simply already missing him.

“Hey,” he began, unsure what else to say. His mind still felt sluggish. “That was… pretty risky.”

Astrid, however, didn’t say anything and just nodded. She bit her lip, obviously chewing something over in her mind, so Hiccup decided to just keep on talking until she’d made up her mind about what was bothering her.

“I mean, what if Eret had seen you? Sure, Daniel isn’t here anymore, but I didn’t get the impression that telling Eret or Dagur was what you wanted either. And surely you knew they’d come here first. I mean, not that I’m complaining. I love to have you here, and–”

“Do you?”

Hiccup broke off, and gave her an incredulous look. Where was that coming from? Scouring his mind for what he might have done to make her doubt him and coming up empty-handed, he couldn’t help but make a hesitant step toward her. “What? Of course I do!” Gods, his mind was too slow, he shouldn’t have drunk anything last night.

Astrid looked at him for a moment longer. Then she moved toward him, oddly hesitant, and stretched to brush her lips over his. Hiccup still had no idea what to make of her behaviour, so he just went along, returned her kiss and pulled her closer when she pressed for more contact. It felt wonderful, right and perfect, just like always – except that Astrid still seemed strangely tense. Or maybe he was just imagining things? His mind really wasn’t as quick as it usually was. Eventually, he gave up pondering, and pushed all distracting thoughts aside. Astrid wasn’t afraid to speak her mind, so if something bothered her, she surely would say so.

With a low moan, he gave in completely, letting her take the lead to wherever she wanted to go, returned her kisses and let his hands roam over her body when hers did the same. Gods, he loved the feeling of her small but sure hands on his skin, the light scraping of her fingernails over his abdomen, tickling, teasing, wandering further and further down until–
Grunting, Hiccup’s hand shot down to catch hers as she was about to loosen the cords on his trousers. Freya, just the light brush of her hand over his bulge had already felt amazing! But this… this was the one line he wouldn’t… couldn’t cross, the one rule he couldn’t break.

Caught between wanting to let her continue and reasoning why he couldn’t, it took Hiccup a moment to realise that Astrid had pulled back from him. But when he did, he spotted a pained expression on her face, just before she turned away from him, arms defensively crossed in front of her.

“I-I think I should go,” she mumbled, making a hesitant step away from him. “Eret and Dagur might be back any moment or… or…” she trailed off, and Hiccup could imagine all too well how she would bite her lip right now, even as he couldn’t see it.

“Astrid, wait,” he said, not really knowing what else to say. What had just happened? “What…” He reached out for her, but dropped his hand again before he could touch her. Somehow, she seemed to need space right now, even though he honestly couldn’t say why. “Why are you so upset? Did… did I do something wrong?”

For a minute, Hiccup thought she wouldn’t answer. She just stood there, back toward him and arms so tightly wrapped around herself that it looked as if she was actively trying to hold herself together. When she eventually began to speak though, her words didn’t make much sense to him at first.

“No, you didn’t,” she whispered. “It’s just… I love it when you touch me. It’s… indescribable. I want to feel you, everywhere and all the time. I can’t get enough.”

Despite the weird tension between them, a smile was tugging at Hiccup’s lips. He’d hoped that she would enjoy their physical contact and was thriving on it when she reacted like last night, but actually hearing her say it was a welcome reassurance. However, her words certainly didn’t explain her behaviour. “And… that’s bad?” he asked carefully.

Astrid shook her head, still not looking at him. “No, it’s not. It’s just… I-I want to… to make you feel the same,” she eventually burst out. She sounded strange, vulnerable. “I mean, I know I have no experience. This… it’s all so new and confusing, and I don’t know how any of this works. All I know is that you make me feel so amazing, and I just want to return that feeling. Unless… unless you don’t want me to. If you don’t want me, then…” she broke off as her voice grew more brittle with every word.

At first, Hiccup could do little else but dumbfoundedly gape at her. She thought he wouldn’t want her? That was… ridiculous! “Whether I…” he began, bewildered. “What gave you that idea? That’s completely–”

“Then why won’t you let me touch you?” she interrupted him, sounding even more vulnerable than before. “I know that I’m not any good, but I’m willing to learn. I just…” She shrugged awkwardly with her arms still wrapped around herself.

“You think…” he whispered, unsure whether she could even hear him. Was she serious? She thought that he didn’t want her to touch him? Feverishly, he tried to come up with a way to explain, to make her understand, but he could only come up with one sensible solution. It was still a stupid one, one he shouldn’t pick. Because he wanted her too much. But Astrid was hurting over this misunderstanding, and if that was the only way to explain himself…

With two quick steps, Hiccup approached her and took her into a tight embrace. So far, he’d always tried to be as careful as possible with what exactly he let her feel of his body, both because he
hadn’t wanted to spook her and because he already wanted her more than was good for him, even without her body pressing and rubbing against his cock with every other movement.

But this time was different. This time, he deliberately pressed his crotch against her back, letting her feel just how much he wanted her. The unexpected contact made him twitch in eager anticipation, something Astrid apparently felt too, judging by her hiccupy intake of breath.

However, he didn’t want to upset her further, in any way. “Silly woman,” he murmured softly against her neck. “Of course I want you. Gods, Astrid, you have no idea just how... appealing you are to me.” He paused, trying to think of how to explain himself. “I... don’t know what exactly the Temple taught you, but—”

With a harsh snort, she bit out, “Assume that they taught me nothing!”

Hiccup blinked at her tone; he’d heard her annoyed, even angry, but that sounded like ages of frustration finding a target. However, as she settled back against him, she felt less tense, so that was good. It meant she wasn’t angry – or at least not angry at him!

Swallowing against the heat coursing through his body, Hiccup nodded against her hair. “Do you feel this?” he asked in a rough voice as he pressed himself a little closer, the friction making him twitch again. Astrid nodded. “When they’re aroused, men get... hard. And that's what you can feel right now, me being aroused beyond being able to make sensible decisions.” He chuckled shakily. “And it's all because of you. You ask whether I even want you to touch me? Freya, yes, I want that. More than you can imagine.” Oh, yes, this hadn't been a wise idea, Hiccup thought as a shudder ran through his body. Gods, he wanted her so much... And Astrid shifting in his arms and further rubbing against him didn't exactly help either.

“What would you want to do?” she asked again in a small voice, at complete odds with her tone a moment before.

Gasping out another desperate laugh, Hiccup let his forehead drop until it rested on her shoulder. “Because I don’t trust myself,” he mumbled, the embarrassing truth of those words making him glad that she wasn’t looking at him right now. “We both know that we can’t have sex just yet, but I fear that... that if we get too close, neither of us will be able or willing to stop. So it is my responsibility to make sure. And this is the rule I gave myself; that I would always keep my trousers on around you. If I don’t take them off, nothing can happen.”

In his arms, Astrid noticeably relaxed, further leaning into his embrace. “I wish you’d told me about that,” she breathed, laughing nervously. “That would have saved me quite a few hours of distress. Or the whole charade of sneaking away and hiding here, for that matter.”

“I’m sorry,” Hiccup murmured, gulping. “I know it’s my task to explain everything to you, but I’m not really doing a good job, am I? I... I’m just trying to go slowly, to not overwhelm you. There are many things we haven’t talked about yet, but I thought we would do so when they come up. But be assured, me holding back has nothing to do with not wanting you. Gods, Astrid, the things I want to do...” Hiccup trailed off, his whole body trembling with just thinking about the options. Those would be two horribly long years...

“What would you want to do?”

Distracted as he was by the images in his head, Astrid’s question caught him a little off guard. “Excuse me?”

She hesitated, then wiggled in his arms until she’d turned around to face him. There was a mix of
curiosity, excitement, and anticipation gleaming in her eyes, and Hiccup already knew that it would be tough to turn down whatever she wanted. “If we could do whatever we want to... what would you do? Right now, I mean. Can you tell me? Or show me?”

“Astrid...” he began, pained, but she didn’t even let him really start his complaint.

“I get that restriction, that rule you put up, and I respect it,” she said, smiling up at him so prettily that Hiccup felt like he could fall in love with her all over again. “But I’m so curious, want to know how it all works.” She shrugged. “So I thought, maybe at least talking about it is okay?”

Hiccup bit back something like a desperate groan. Simply talking could already be enough to make him combust and soil yet another pair of trousers. But she had a point, and not talking would only cause more confusion. “You’re right,” he said in a low voice, nodding. He took a minute to think, but then decided he just as well could stop minding having to wash his clothes more regularly. This was all they could do for now, so they better made the best of it as long as they had the time.

More content now with their situation, Hiccup somewhat regained his confidence. “You want to know what I’d like to do if we could?” he asked in a rough voice.

Astrid, who apparently had noticed the change in him, just nodded mutely, eyes shining brightly.

He moved, gently guiding Astrid backwards until she hit a pile of neatly stacked straw bales. Fighting down a last flicker of nerves, he lifted her so that she sat on those bales, at just the right height. “If we could,” he murmured, his hands sliding down her legs to hoist up her skirts. “Then I’d like to take you like this.” His eyes never left hers as he stepped between her parted legs, always looking for a hint of uneasiness or discomfort. But there was nothing the like, only joyful anticipation. He made another step so that their bodies touched, his bulge against her crotch. Even through their clothes, he could feel her heat, could tell by the slide that she was wet, aroused. It made the heat inside himself burn even hotter; having blood in his head to help him think was not a priority anymore.

“If you’d let me, if it were possible,” he went on, hands gliding around to settle on her hips. “Then I’d push into you now, slow and deep, savouring.” He pressed himself closer against her which drew a beautiful little gasp from her. The sound made him buck forward, making her yelp in return and left them both gazing at each other through dazed eyes. He bucked again, deliberate now, and Astrid’s moan was almost enough to undo him on the spot.

“I would want you to feel me,” he muttered in-between panted breaths as he kept moving back and forth. “And to feel you in return, your tight heat. I want to hear you, want to taste you.” He leaned in to dip his tongue into her mouth, even as they were both too distracted to kiss properly. Astrid’s hands were on his shoulders now, clutching, pulling him closer.

Hiccup let his head drop to her shoulder as he increased the pace of his movements. One arm was around her waist, the other around her back, holding her tight as he kept grinding their bodies together, her sweet moans in his ear. “I want to mark you,” he mumbled against the bare skin of her shoulder. “And to be marked by you. I want to be one with you in every possible way. Gods, I love you, Astrid. And the day you become my wife will be the happiest day of my life.”

Astrid’s response was little more than a string of whimpers, gasps, and moans. He could tell that she was moving with him by instinct, intensifying the friction even more, and he knew that, if someone were to come in now, he couldn’t have cared less in that moment. All that mattered was Astrid, how she clutched him tightly, rutting against him until the most sinful of moans left her.

Her orgasms were always beautiful, thrilling, the way she shook as pleasure consumed her. And just like last night, it was more than enough to let him tip over the edge as well. Muffling his
desperate howl against her skin, he came, shuddering, pressed against Astrid as tightly as possible.

His mind had barely begun to work again, when her trembling laughter reached his ears. “Mmmh, yeah,” she hummed. “I can’t wait for when we can do this for real either.”

Hiccup couldn’t help but laugh, free and liberated, and it only took a second or three until Astrid chimed in as well. Gods, how was it possible that he was allowed to be with her?

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Feeling much lighter than she had this morning, Astrid left the stables a few hours after she’d hidden herself there. When she reached the top of the small hill, she couldn’t help but turn to look back one last time. But just as they’d agreed upon, the doors were already closed, Hiccup not standing there to gaze after her.

It was a miracle that nobody had barged in on them, all things considered; they couldn’t risk blowing their cover now just by prolonging their farewell. It wasn’t for long anyway; she’d be back in a few hours. The thought made her smile, despite the prospect of being found by Eret or Dagur at any moment, and of getting scolded by a whole lot of people for sneaking away.

But it had been worth it. After last night, when even in his drunk eagerness Hiccup hadn’t let her touch him, she’d felt so confused, conflicted. It wasn’t that she’d really doubted Hiccup’s feelings for her… But she had wondered, had feared what his reluctance could mean. She’d wanted to give him everything, but hadn’t been sure whether that would be enough.

Now though? Now, she was appeased. Hiccup’s explanation had been logical and practical, enough to make her see reason too while at the same time letting every single one of her troubled thoughts evaporate. But it was even more than just that. She’d learned another lesson today; the lesson that she could ask Hiccup everything. And she would. They only had a few weeks left, but she intended to get as much out of those as possible, to spend every moment she could with him and to learn whatever she could.

“Thank Odin, there you are!” called suddenly a voice from behind her, and Astrid turned to give Eret a sheepish smile. “We’ve been looking for you forever. Where have you been?”

Astrid shrugged nonchalantly. “Oh, I’ve been just walking around in the woods,” she said matter-of-factly. She’d already planned ahead what she would tell him after all, had even taken a large detour on her way back to the castle to hide where she’d actually been. “The moment I return to the castle, my governess regains control over my life again, and I wanted to avoid that as long as possible.”

“Yeah, I thought so,” Eret sighed, and she could tell by the grimace on his face that he didn’t really blame her for sneaking away. “And I understand. But I’d still prefer if someone knows where you are if you need to hide. You know I’d even cover for you, right?”

“Thanks, Eret.” The smile she gave him, though be it an honest one, still felt like a lie. She believed him; he would cover for her, had already done so in previous years. He was trustworthy, more so than almost everybody else she knew. And yet, she couldn’t let him know the truth. She wasn’t even sure whether he would actually betray her trust when it came to her relationship with Hiccup. But if she told him her secret, she would effectively force him to lie to Daniel when they met come summer, and that was a burden she didn’t want to place on her friend. So she just wound her arm through his in a familiar gesture as they walked back toward the castle. “I appreciate the offer, and maybe I’ll even take you up on it. But for today, I think my time is up.”
The walk back to the castle was filled with companionable silence, a last reprieve before life came crashing down on her again. But even having her governess scold her for her sudden absence wasn’t able to make her regret or feel bad in any way. *Everything* was worth it when it meant she could spend time with Hiccup.

The rest of the day went just as she’d expected. After the scolding came lessons, but in what Astrid couldn’t remember, her governess’s words not even registering in her mind. Eating dinner felt... *different* though. It wasn’t quiet or boring with the Grand Dukes, Eret and Dagur keeping her and her father company. But Daniel’s absence seemed to hover over her like a dark cloud. It wasn’t that she was worried for him, not really. But with him gone...

At the end of the day, she let herself fall into the soft cushions of her bed, sighing deeply. It sounded theatrically, even to herself, even though it was only halfway exaggerated. Turning her head, she glanced at the wooden horse standing on her bedside table. Ruff had seen how it had been a part of her gifts and probably assumed it came from Eret – and Astrid hadn’t corrected her. It meant that Astrid had felt free to place the figurine into her bedchamber, that she now had a physical reminder of Hiccup right there next to her bed. Which was good.

Now that Daniel had left, her life would return to its usual routine of lessons in embroidery and etiquette, painting and socialising. Maybe she would be allowed a free afternoon with Eret and Dagur every now and then, but that would be it. It was a depressing prospect, and if it weren’t for the nights with Hiccup, she might have screamed.

But at least she *had* those nights – for now at least.

~ The End Of Part 2 ~

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah... Again the reminder that I’m on hiatus now until April 5th. If you have questions or want to talk to me or other readers, feel free to join us on athingofviking’s Discord server (Invite link can be found on his Tumblr.)
And There's Tears We Cry, But Those Tears Will Fade

Chapter Notes

WHOOOHOOW! We're getting started again! I'm so excited! :D It feels like it's been ages, even though I probably needed the break. But on a sidenote: It's been almost exactly a yeah now since this story started! That's CRAZY!

This week's title comes once again from Walking The Wire by Imagine Dragons.

I feel like I should warn you though... Remember how I said I'd use the time to write a buffer for the summer? Yeah... well, that didn't happen. I fell into a bit of a motivation hole and barely wrote anything during these two months. In the end, I managed to write one and a half chapters for this story, which means that after posting this, I'm back to the usual slightly stressful pressure of writing one chapter per week... In addition to that, my life outside of fandom became more complicated too, which in the end means that I can't promise to keep up the weekly schedule. I'll do my best! But if it doesn't work, then it doesn't work. For more information, check out my Tumblr blog shipmistress9.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“I don’t want to go…” Hiccup murmured against her neck, and a light shudder ran through Astrid's body.

It wasn't the first time these words passed between them lately, not at all. In the two months since Daniel had left for Westhill, they had been a near-daily occurrence. Sometimes, like now, they came muttered against her skin or her hair, sometimes they were filled with desperation when they clutched each other close, or sometimes it was her who said them, a pained, pleading 'I don't want you to go...'.

And yet, there was nothing either of them could do about it. With every happy day they shared, the impending separation came closer and closer. It was only two days until her birthday now, and the day after that House Jag’r would return to Eastervale. Their time was almost up.

“I know,” she murmured back, awkwardly turning in Hiccup’s embrace to seek his lips with her own. Their kiss was harder than she’d intended, but then even that wasn’t uncommon lately. What had been intended as relatively harmless cuddling turned into heated kissing in the blink of an eye, her hands clutching his hair just as fiercely as his clutched at her waist.

Only with great effort did Astrid manage to pull back again, to give them both at least the tiniest bit of space to catch their breath and to calm down. This wasn’t the time to get carried away, even though Astrid wouldn’t deny that she’d enjoyed it. She threw Hiccup a soft but sad smile over her shoulder before she leaned back against his chest, basking in his warmth, and tried to push away all heavy thoughts.

It was an early spring day and the sun shone brightly through the stable's windows. It was possible that the chill would return before summer truly broke through, but for now, the weather was nice enough. And, as so often during these last two months, her father had allowed her to spend the sunny day with Dagur and Eret outside instead of with her governess in a stuffy room. Maybe he'd
seen how gloomy she’d become after Daniel had left, had seen that spending time with her brothers was the only thing that was able to cheer her up, and had decided that, as long as they were here at the castle, she should spend as much time with them as was possible. Astrid hadn’t contradicted him; he wasn’t wrong, after all. Spending time with Eret and Dagur was always good, even though that was only part of why she always was in a better mood after those days.

With her and Hiccup not being the only ones dreading the upcoming separation, it had been easy to convince Eret and Dagur to leave her with Hiccup at the stables so that they could… spend some time alone. It only had needed her to assure them that she wasn't uncomfortable with Hiccup keeping watch over her in their stead, which Eret was far quicker to accept than Daniel had been. Sometimes the thought about what bad chaperones they were to each other made her laugh, but she surely wouldn't complain. On the contrary, being able to spend nearly every second day with Hiccup at the stables, more or less unobserved and in addition to being here every night anyway, had been a far better way to spend those two months then she'd expected.

During the days, they never retreated to Hiccup's sleeping stall; the temptation to fall asleep during lazy cuddles and the accompanying risk of missing Eret’s and Dagur's return was simply too great. But she didn't feel as if they were missing out. While she greatly enjoyed their nights of solitude, of being free to explore each other in every way imaginable, the days of connecting in other ways were wonderful too. At first, it had worried her that they never knew when the others would return. But with Dagur never being quiet and always laughing or joking and them just having to shuffle a bit away from each other instead of putting clothes back on, it was easily manageable.

With a contented sigh, Astrid shuffled out of Hiccup's embrace and reached for the book she'd dropped next to the straw bale they sat on. She'd taken over Daniel's habit of bringing interesting books for Hiccup from their library, and more often than not, she and Hiccup ended up looking through some of them together. And she loved it. It didn't matter whether she'd picked a theoretical book about metallurgy which Hiccup was more than happy to explain to her, or whether she'd chosen a storybook for them to read to each other and enjoy together. Every second she spent with Hiccup was precious, and with every day she got to know him better, she felt as if her soul was getting more and more complete.

Even though every day brought them closer and closer to their separation.

“So, what did you bring today?” he asked, the effort of forcing his attention away from the topic of leaving audible in his tone. He peered over her shoulder, hands lightly resting around her waist.

Humming, Astrid shuffled a little closer again, enjoying his warmth against her back, before she directed their attention to the book in her lap. “‘The Exotics Of The South,” she replied, indicating the translated subtitle, glad that Hiccup couldn't see her half-hidden mischievous smirk as she turned over the first few pages. “It sounded interesting, to say the least. I've never been to the Southlands, but the stories Dagur occasionally tells from the Southshore traders and sailors are intriguing. Have you ever been there?” She paused at a page that showed a foreign landscape that seemed to consist of nothing but sand. Like an endless beach, except there seemed to be no lake or ocean anywhere. There was a description, written in a foreign tongue, with a scribe’s translation written in small letters under it. But between the size of the letters and the scribe’s dialect, it was difficult to make out what the scribe had written in the subtext.

Chuckling lightly, Hiccup shook his head. “No, I haven't. I’ve never left Volantis, always hoped…” he trailed off as she turned the next page.

The picture there was stunning; a forest, but not like anything she’d ever seen before. The trees seemed to reach up endlessly into the sky, and every bit of space between them was filled with
other plants, with huge leaves and colourful flowers everywhere. They gazed at the picture for a minute in awed silence before Hiccup reached around her to flip to the next page. It showed a market, but again everything seemed to be bigger and more colourful, fuller as if every tiny bit of space was stuffed with goods and wares and people. There were weapons, rolls of cloth, and an endless variety of objects Astrid couldn't even guess what they were supposed to be. And the scribe’s subtext translation was useless, as Astrid opined, but that just made it more fun, as they could try to make up their own explanations.

“I agree, it’s an interesting book,” Hiccup commented cheerfully after Astrid had suggested that the giant wavy sword was clearly for slicing bread. But then he sobered up again and stroked the page almost reverently, looking at an image of an exotic banquet. His eyes were darting back and forth, trying to take in every detail. “I’d like to see more of the world one day, visit these places, see them with my own eyes. Maybe we can see them together one day.”

Astrid hummed in agreement, her fingers caressing the back of his hand where it rested on the page. “I’d like that.”

The book was full of more pictures, every single one just as wondrous as the others.

The chapter about foreign animals was entertaining, and the scribe’s subtext was at least marginally useful as in they at least could read the headlines. They’d both heard of lions before, but the gigantic beast with a ridiculously long nose and ears called an elephant just baffled them both. However, trying to explain the different kinds of food in the following chapter was nigh on impossible. Astrid spotted something that looked somewhat like Heather’s pastries, but that was about it.

There were more chapters, about clothing, buildings, and strange objects that apparently were part of daily life, and Hiccup and Astrid worked their way through them with much laughter and interest, always trying to come up with an explanation that was either sensible or as ridiculous as possible. It was fun even though Astrid was eager to get to the last chapter. She had, after all, flipped through the book before, and no matter how interesting the other chapters had been, this last one was the one that had really piqued her interest and prompted her to bring the book. Why she’d been allowed to have access to the book by her governess, she had no idea; probably the woman hadn’t spotted those last few pages...

Innocently, she turned the page, and behind her, Hiccup sucked in a breath at the first picture of that last chapter. Astrid felt him shift slightly behind her, his fingers on her waist twitching.

“Well, I’d say that looks interesting,” she commented merrily, intently eyeing the picture. It showed two people, a man lying behind a woman, both naked. In fact, it didn’t look that different from how she and Hiccup often slept, with him curled around her back and their knees bent for comfort. But judging by the expressions on their faces, the people on this picture weren’t sleeping. No, not at all.

“Yeah,” Hiccup breathed. “Interesting…” He swallowed audibly, then turned the page with shaking fingers.

Astrid wondered idly what he’d hoped to see, but the low groan he made told her that it probably wasn’t this. Another picture of two people, with the man somehow kneeling over one of the woman’s legs while her other was lifted up and resting on his shoulder. Feeling a by now familiar tingle in her belly, Astrid tried to appear unperturbed as she flipped to the next page. “Oh, wow,” she commented, disbelievingly. “This looks… is that even possible?”

“It is,” Hiccup muttered, voice low and hoarse.
Astrid mused that, without her heavy dress cushioning his grip, there certainly would be finger-shaped bruises on her hips tomorrow with how tightly he gripped her now. But she honestly didn’t care. Their explorations of each other had continued during the last two months, up to the point where he now at least allowed her to feel and touch him with her hand. However, he was still adamant about his rule, about not going too far. And although Astrid agreed, it was still fun to tease him, to try and get to him. And judging by something hard pressing against her rear right now, she’d been successful by bringing this of all books.

She was about to turn to the next picture, wondering what else they would show and how Hiccup would react, when Dagur’s booming laughter sounded through the wooden wall toward them.

With a muttered curse, Hiccup hastily jumped off the bale. “You’re horrible!” he groaned, even as he bent to place a quick kiss on her cheek. He obviously had no illusions about Astrid having brought this book by accident, but the twinkle in his eyes told her that he didn’t mind. Not really at least.

Chuckling, Astrid closed it and put it at the bottom of the small stack of books she’d brought today, while Hiccup apparently decided that his state of enthusiasm demanded for him to hide in one of the stalls for now.

It was good that they had some semblance of routine by now, Astrid thought as she brushed off straw and dust from her skirt and shuffled back on the straw bale as if she’d been sitting there all on her own. The first few times, she and Hiccup had been nervous, sure that Eret and Dagur would notice something. But they didn’t, and with that nervousness gone by now, it was easy to act as if nothing had happened. As if they hadn’t spent the last couple of hours as close as they dared during the day, exchanging caresses, kisses, and soft words.

Just to look as if she was actually doing something, Astrid reached for an apple from their picnic basket, right before the door opened and Eret and Dagur came back in.

“Stop whatever you’re doing and act normal. We’re back,” Dagur called jokingly, which drew a chorus of groans and practically audible eye-rolling from everyone else.

“You know, Dagur. The first time, this was a little bit funny, but by now, it’s only boring,” Astrid deadpanned. She didn’t even need to act to sound accordingly bored. Sure, the first time hadn’t been funny either, but at least the boring part was true by now.

Dagur, however, snickered nonetheless. “Well, you never know,” he said as he led Squish back into his stall. “But even with nothing interesting happening here; Hiccup, you still better not tell your girlfriend that you once again spend the whole day alone with the Princess. We wouldn’t want her to get jealous now, would we?” He laughed at his own childish joke again, but this time, Astrid couldn’t help an amused smile from playing around her lips.

“I can assure you,” she replied, trying to sound as unperturbed as she could, “there is no reason for his girlfriend to be jealous.”

Dagur nodded. “I didn’t think so anyway,” he said, winking. “I vividly remember him swooning about her in that tavern. I have no doubts; he wouldn’t risk anything that might have him lose her.”

From the background, Hiccup called over, “And it wasn’t even ‘the entire day’ this time anyway. It’s barely past noon.”

But Dagur didn’t react to Hiccup’s attempt at changing the subject. Instead, he turned more serious all of a sudden. “I was just thinking that she’d certainly like to spend these last days with you too. It
can’t be easy for you to be separated for so long.”

“Woah, Dagur, way to kill the mood,” Eret mumbled, saying exactly what Astrid was thinking.

She ducked her head, glad that nobody was paying her any mind anyway with them all being busy with their horses. The last hour of teasing and laughing with Hiccup had effectively wiped away those gloomy thoughts, but now, it all came crashing down on her again. Only three days, and then Hiccup wouldn’t be here anymore. Three days before the months of separation where they wouldn’t even be able to exchange small letters or notes. Once more, she feverishly tried to think of any way that would allow Eret and therefore Hiccup to stay just a little bit longer. But, as always, she came up empty-handed.

“I guess we better get going,” Eret said as soon as Crusher and Squish were cared for. “There’s still a little time, but I promised Ruff you’d be back in time, and I really don’t need for them to play some last prank on me just for letting them wait. Besides, there’s a party waiting for us.”

With a sigh, Astrid nodded. Snot’s accolade was a good-enough reason to leave the stables, a happy occasion, all in all. Yes, she’d rather stay here with Hiccup, spend as much time with him as possible while they could, but she was also looking forward to meeting up with yet another of her adoptive brothers and to celebrate his big day with him. And the knowledge that she’d be here with Hiccup in only a couple of hours again made parting easier.

“I wonder what stories the Snotman will try to sell us this time,” Dagur wondered as they made their way back to the castle. “It’s always too funny to compare his exaggerations with what really happened when Daniel tells us about it later.”

“Or watch him flirt excessively,” Eret added, chuckling. “He’s hopeless.”

They all burst out into laughter, and Astrid felt the tension in her body lessen. It wasn’t all bad, she reminded herself. Her eyes wandered to the little pond as they passed it, to her beloved swans. But the surface was empty except for a handful of ducks, and, a little disappointed, her mind drifted back to the conversation.

“Ah, I think you’re a little mean,” she gently chided her brothers. “He’s allowed to flirt, remember? Just because you don’t feel like it doesn’t mean he can’t. And he’s polite enough about it anyway; I have yet to meet someone who complained about him.”

Laughing with good humour, Eret and Dagur agreed.

“Yes! The Snotman never gets complaints!” Dagur said.

“He’s too suave and debonair,” Eret commented, and with that, they continued on up to the path to the castle.

.Dressing for the accolade took a while; her outfit for the night featured a gown of black satin with silver detailing, and was accessorized with a silver version of her swan coronet and a delicate silver brooch of a bear. But eventually she was deemed sufficient to outshine any of the other noblewomen in attendance and Tuff escorted her to the throne room. On her way, she mused about how different she felt compared to the other times she’d been about to reunite with one of her brothers lately.

For Eret’s accolade, her head had been filled with wayward thoughts about that stable boy she’d met, mourning about how she would never see him again. And later, she’d feared Hiccup might do
something stupid, exposing himself during Eret’s accolade. And with Dagur at their reception, she’d been so afraid what could happen to Hiccup if Eret had seen them touching, and then there’d been Harold—

With force, Astrid pushed that thought out of her mind. She didn’t want to think about Harold, not ever again. He didn’t matter.

Taking a deep breath, she instead focused on what lay ahead of her. Snot’s accolade, the last big social occasion for a good while. Knowing that Hiccup wouldn’t be there tonight saddened her a little, but she knew that he was still avoiding bigger gatherings of noblemen if he could in order to not get recognised. She still hadn’t gotten around to actually ask him who he’d been before. But there had never been the right moment, and somehow, it didn’t really matter anyway. She knew who he was right now, knew that he was her future, and that was all she needed. Especially now with their separation looming over them.

A little while later, she sat in her usual smaller throne, next to her father and surrounded by the Fyrirs, and watched as the relatively short procession from Westhill entered the throne room. Off to the side were Sir Eret, Sir Dagur, and the Grand Duke of Eastervale – with Grand Duke Oswald currently convalescing from a debilitating but thankfully not life-threatening illness. While they were not part of the official witnesses, they were certainly more important than the other visitors of lower rank. When Snotlout came into view, wearing a black satin tabard with House Jorgenson’s bear embroidered in silver threads over a silken black shirt and silver chainmail, Astrid couldn’t help but grin. Both Eret and Dagur had looked rather funny in their exaggerated outfits, but for Snot, it somehow worked. He’d always been focused on how he looked, after all, and today he looked splendid.

Reaching the foot of the thrones, he went to one knee and bowed his head.

Try as she might, Astrid found herself losing focus as Snot recited the formulaic oaths. She’d heard them so many times before, after all. Instead, she found herself wondering how Hiccup would sound when he knelt where Snotlout was right now. Would she be able to keep a straight face when Hiccup swore before the gods to always defend a lady’s honour? The rest of the oaths, though, yes, she could see him managing those parts with panache. Always telling the truth... well, he could bend it like a pretzel, but he didn’t lie. Devoted to the gods, his lord, and the Temple? Definitely. Act with honour and charity and kindness? She managed to keep from scoffing and disrupting Snotlout’s accolade only because her princess mask was on. But the thought of Hiccup acting unkindly or with dishonesty... no, it was rightly absurd. And the rest of it – oaths detailing preparedness for war and courage on the battlefield, and more? There was no doubt in her mind that he would excel.

Her father tapped Snotlout on the shoulders with Astrid’s grandfather’s sword – still sharp enough to shave with, according to Eret – and the newly minted Sir Snotlout of House Jorgenson rose back to his feet. He had a proud grin on his face, which grew even wider as he received similar gifts as Eret and Dagur had gotten before him, the traditional helmet and the additional sword and scabbard ornate with a bear and a swan in black and silver.

“Congratulations, man,” Eret greeted him with a slap to the shoulder after the stiff formation was loosing up.

"Yes, yes, thank you," Snot grumbled. "Just don't break my shoulder right away, all right? I still need it, you know?" His words held no venom though, and a moment later, another grin spread across his face. "Oh man, it's really good to see you again. I didn't think it possible, but I actually missed you guys. It's good to see a couple of familiar faces in-between the thousands of nameless
ones passing through Westhill these days."

"Aww, we missed you too," Dagur crooned and took Snot into an exaggerated hug. It made Snot protest, though not for long, and they all ended up laughing freely.

"It really is good to see you, Snot," Eret eventually agreed after they'd calmed again. "It's been too long. Two years now?"

Snotlout nodded. "Aye. I wish we could have come last year, but it's all chaos. The number of bandit and raider groups is growing, outposts are falling apart, and everybody, soldiers and residents alike, are losing their will to live. This war is going on for far too long now."

"Well, then it's up to us to change that, I guess," Dagur threw in, grinning. "But what about Daniel? I assume you met with him? How are his repairs of the outposts going? And what was the name of that other place? Redpeak?"

Snot nodded. "Aye, I've seen him, but only briefly; we barely got the chance to talk for longer than an hour. The repairs though..." he paused, frowning, then went on, "Well, it was quite a surprise to learn that he wouldn't see to the repairs of the outposts this year after all. Father was furious. Although, there seemed to have been a good reason for the change of plans, because once Daniel and Father talked about it, my old man was far more agreeable. Do you guys know anything about it?"

"Not much," Eret said, shrugging. "Only that he wanted to alter Redpeak instead of the repairs, because something important came up, leaving him with less time than originally planned for. But I assume that is a good enough alternative, from the little I understood?"

Snot nodded again, even though he was still frowning. "It is. If he manages to make Redpeak usable, that would truly be an invaluable asset. Father's change of mind still surprised me though. Didn't think he'd take another delay so lightly. Ah, well, his actions rarely make sense to me anyway, so whatever." He shrugged the topic off, then turned with a grin and a twinkle in his eyes toward Astrid. "But I'm sorry, I forgot my manners. Fair Lady, please excuse me for not properly greeting you directly. May I say that you became even more beautiful since the last time we met? Seriously, your beauty is dazzling. If only we could bottle it and release it onto our enemies; they would stop fighting immediately and freeze in awe."

From nearly anyone else, words like these would have annoyed Astrid to no end. But this was Snot, and she knew well enough how to handle him. "Oh, stop that, you idiot," she snorted, and gave him a light punch to the shoulder. Certainly not suitable behaviour for the Princess, but they all knew how to take it, and Astrid didn't care much what others thought.

Snot burst out laughing, then took her into a friendly hug. "It's good to see you again, little sis. But I mean it, you did become more beautiful."

He winked at her as they parted, and, with a fond smile, Astrid rolled her eyes at him. Snot was and always had been a gigantic flirt. That was just who he was, but Astrid knew just how to take it. His compliments came freely, but they were honest, and even with his braggy and sometimes over-confident behaviour, he never crossed the line toward being obtrusive. He just loved the ladies, and more often than not, the ladies were quite fond of him too.

Still shaking her head with amusement over how Snot would probably never change, it surprised her when suddenly an unfamiliar voice spoke up, more closely than she'd expected for any stranger to come.
"Um, sir? How long am I supposed to wait here?"

Frowning, Astrid turned toward the source of that voice, just like Dagur and Eret did, while Snot let out a low groan. Behind him stood a boy, which he then led forward with a hand on the boy’s shoulder.


Snot waved his hand from one to the other, and Astrid inspected the boy with a guarded expression. Even though the boy didn’t look anything like Dagur’s former squire had looked, meeting him still brought back memories of Harold. But just like before, she fought them down immediately, and once again wished that Hiccup was here. Even as she knew that he wouldn’t be able to do much – certainly not hold her, claim her, and keep other men from approaching her – him just being here, near to her, would have been good.

"How did you manage that?" cut Dagur's amused snicker into her thoughts, and Astrid focused on him instead of her dark mood. She threw Dagur a questioning look who was looking at the boy with clear amusement. "Where did you find a younger and even shorter copy of yourself?" Both he and Eret were visibly fighting laughter, and Astrid threw another look at the boy Gustav. And had to bite back a giggle too.

Even though he was much younger and, indeed, shorter than Snot, Gustav looked eerily similar to his master. Not as if they were related though, but more as if the boy actively tried to look as much like his master as was possible. Which was confirmed as the boy began to speak again.

"I’ve been looking up to Lo– Sir Snotlout for all my life," he declared, beaming. "I always wanted to be just like him, a great warrior, beloved and admired wherever he goes, and I’m so grateful that he agreed to take me as his squire."

"'Beloved and admired wherever he goes'... Is that what you told him?" Dagur was barely able to keep himself together anymore.

"Hey, it's the truth," Snot shrugged, grinning. "I'm a hero, and everybody loves me."

Astrid felt as if a good smack on the head would do her brothers good, all of them, but before she could say or do anything else, Gustav turned his attention toward her.

"And I agree with my master. Highness, you really are the most beautiful woman I've ever seen," he said, grinning, bowed, and reached for her hand to place a kiss on its back.

There was a moment of tense silence, Dagur and Eret momentarily sobering up again. But before either of them could say anything, Snot beat them to it. "Woah, Gustav, back off. I know you don't know better so I'll leave it at that. But for the future, no hitting on the Princess. She's like a sister to me, so that's just creepy."

Gustav looked clearly puzzled. "But you–"

"I know her since she was born," Snot interrupted him sternly. "And she knows it was just for fun. But I don't want to see anything like this ever again. Understood?"

"Yes, master," the boy said, obediently and clearly remorseful. "Please, excuse my bluntness, Your Highness. I-I didn't mean to be disrespectful. I’ll retreat now, if I may?"
"Yes, you are dismissed," Snot waved him off, not without a reassuring hand on the boy's shoulder, and then Gustav disappeared into the crowd.

"I'm sorry for that," Snot said with a light shrug. "He tries to be just like me, but doesn't know yet when to say something and when to hold his tongue. Something like that won't happen again."

Astrid nodded, arms wrapped around herself. She felt as if she ought to say something, but didn't know what, couldn't find her voice.

"You better make sure it doesn't," Dagur muttered, voice more serious than it had been all evening. From the corner of her eye, Astrid noticed him and Eret exchanging a quick glance, then Dagur pulled Snot to the side, talking in quiet voices. She could imagine all too well what Dagur was telling him, but she didn't want to think about Harold again. Instead, she focused on Eret's hand on her back as he led her to one of the high tables and gladly accepted the glass of wine after he'd waved over a servant.

"Are you okay?" he asked, concerned.

Astrid took a moment, but then nodded. "Yes, I am," she murmured. "I'm over what happened with... with Harold. I'm fine." She glanced up at Eret and gave him a weak if true smile. And she meant it. Sure, Gustav had woken unpleasant memories, but she wouldn't let them rule her.

And to her relief, Eret believed her. He nodded, a faint smile on his lips. "Okay. But promise me to tell me if something's bothering you after all, okay? You only need to say it, and we'll take care of it, whatever it is."

His words made her laugh, warming her from the inside even though she knew he wouldn't be able to keep that promise. "Thank you. Really. But Gustav is not a problem."

Eret nodded again, but his expression became serious nonetheless. "Then what is? Because I can see that you're not happy."

Astrid's smile turned a little sad, and she averted her eyes. Eret knew her too well. She contemplated shrugging his concerns off, but she didn't feel like lying again, especially not to him.

"I'm not," she admitted. She hesitated, then nodded toward an empty sitting corner near a big window. They walked there, and once they'd sat down, Astrid continued. "You're right, I'm not happy. But even though I appreciate your promise to 'take care of it', I fear you won't be able to."

Eret frowned, so, after biting her lip, she went on, at least telling him all she could tell him. "I wish you wouldn't have to leave," she said with shaky laughter. "I-I got quite used to... all your presence during the last few months, and I fear how it will be once you're all gone again." It wasn't a lie. It wasn't just that the thought of being separated from Hiccup was tearing her apart; she would also miss Eret and Dagur, and Snot as well, and feared falling into a hole of loneliness once they were gone.

Eret grimaced, and soothingly rubbed his hand up and down her back. "Yeah... You're right, there’s not much we can do about that. I don’t think we can put off returning much longer. The weather is warm enough by now, and the herd needs to return to our pasturage lands." He sighed, but then perked his head up with a wide grin. "But how about you visited us? You could come as guest of honour to Ester’s wedding? I'm sure your father would support such a show of allegiance, and my sister would be honoured to have you there. Maybe you could stay a couple of weeks, keep Mirja company so she doesn’t feel too lonely at first. And we could go on rides through the countryside; I could show you the lands and the people." He gave a little shrug. "What do you say?"
“That would be wonderful!” Astrid agreed, a hopeful smile on her face. “And yes, I’m sure Father would allow that. That’s just the kind of representative duty I’m supposed to undertake as Princess, isn’t it?” She could literally feel her mood rising higher and higher the longer she thought about Eret’s suggestion. Getting out, getting to see more of their Kingdom, their people, spending time with Eret and his family, with the horses – and with Hiccup! If her father agreed, then they wouldn’t be separated for months on end after all. Sure, they would need to find new ways to meet in Eastervale, but that certainly would be manageable. A part of her wanted to jump up and ask her father right away, but she knew tonight was not the time. However, she would ask him as soon as possible.

“I’m glad I was able to lighten your mood,” Eret mused, smiling. “This is supposed to be a party, after all. Come on, let’s find Dag and Snot, and celebrate.”

Astrid spent the rest of the party in a surprisingly good mood, surprising to her at least. Despite the happy occasion and finally seeing Snot again, she hadn’t expected to really feel happy until she met up with Hiccup again later. But with the prospect of Eret’s suggestion and the cheerful company of her brothers, the night was filled with laughter and joy.

They spent hours reminiscing on fond memories and catching up on what had happened to all of them lately, and eventually – on Eret’s suggestion – crashed the party by turning it into a ball once more. At first, Snot had been reluctant, worried about how his father would certainly scold him for acting improperly. But with Dagur’s encouraging teasing and Eret’s reasoning about how this was Snot’s day and not his father’s, he was eventually convinced. They took turns dancing with Astrid, and before long more and more couples were joining them, the good mood quickly becoming contagious.

All in all, the day ended much better than Astrid had originally anticipated.

.o O o.

“Oh, Freya…” Hiccup moaned, a shiver running through his entire body. Astrid could tell that he was fighting to keep his eyes open, to keep looking at her, but every so often they fluttered shut despite his best efforts.

Astrid loved watching Hiccup like this. Because she was doing this! Everything, his pressed noises, his dazed eyes being unable to focus, his accelerated breathing, his flushed face, and his hands helplessly clenching at the straw beneath – all that were reactions to what she did, and it never ceased to fill her with amazement.

With measured motions, she kept stroking him, thrilling in the moment. It was only recently that Hiccup had loosened his strict rule, had allowed this to happen. He had been reluctant at first, but her curiosity and her reasoning that, even with her hand inside his trousers, he was still wearing them, had finally won him over. And by now, he certainly didn’t mind anymore anyway.

With a low groan, he gave in to her touch and let his head drop back into the straw, eyes closed. Freya, she loved doing this, all of it. Feeling him in her hand, hot and pulsing, was an incredible sensation, but seeing just how much Hiccup enjoyed her touch was something else altogether. She could have done this all night, but as so often, he eventually stopped her.

Without saying a word, Hiccup reached for her hand, and gently pushed her down into the straw. His kisses were surprisingly soft and sweet, despite the intense fire burning in his eyes. Astrid would have liked to go on, to make him come with her own hand, but she also didn’t mind as he blanketed her with his body, his hand wandering beneath her skirts. With maddening slowness, he stroked the pleasant warmth inside her into a raging fire, grinding into her until it consumed them
“And good evening to you too, milady,” Hiccup murmured into her hair as they both floated down back to reality. His voice was soft, thick with longing and love. “I’m glad to see you in a more cheerful mood. I reckon the party was to your liking then?”

Sighing contentedly, Astrid snuggled deeper into Hiccup’s warm embrace, amused by how, once again, they hadn’t gotten around to talk before. “Yeah, it was okay,” she hummed. “Better than expected. It was great to see Snot again after so long. He really hasn’t changed a bit. And Eret once again turned the occasion into some kind of ball. Uncle Spite wasn’t happy about the breach of decorum, I think. But Father didn’t seem to mind, even smiled when he saw how much fun we had, so Uncle Spite couldn’t really say anything.”

“Yeah, that does sound like fun,” Hiccup chuckled, then sighed. “I just wish…”

“…that you could’ve been there as well?” she continued when he didn’t, and Hiccup nodded. “Yeah, me too.”

Hiccup shifted and, leaning over her, placed a soft kiss to her cheek. “One day, we will dance together,” he promised, murmuring against her skin. “I’ll come to you, open and for everyone to see, and ask you for a dance. Maybe they would stare and wonder, but it won’t matter. There will be only you and me. Forever.”

Astrid chuckled at his mellow words, even as the picture they painted was a beautiful one. “What makes you think you’ll be the one to ask?” she replied, and turned her head to seek his skin with her lips. “Maybe it’ll be ladies’ choice. I’d walk along the line of waiting men, not seeing any of them, only you…” she trailed off, humming against Hiccup’s lips as he kissed her.

“One day,” he murmured again.

Astrid pressed herself closer to his warmth, and nodded. One day they would be able to dance like that. She could hardly wait. But until then, they would still have to wait two long years, maybe even longer. And most of the time would stretch out endlessly.

“Oh, right,” she exclaimed when that thought stirred another one. “Eret suggested I should come and visit you.”

Hiccup seemed to need a moment before the words fully sank in. Then he pushed himself up in a halfway-sitting position. “What?” he exclaimed. “Did… did you tell him after all?” There was disbelieve on his face, but Astrid directly shook her head.

“No, of course not. I just… well, he asked what was upsetting me, and I told him that I’m sad you’re all leaving so soon.”

Hiccup nodded, frowning, and Astrid suppressed a sigh. She knew that Hiccup thought letting at least Eret in on their secret would be beneficial. And maybe he was right, maybe Eret wouldn’t tell on them. But even if he didn’t – what good would it do them? She remembered Eret’s promise from earlier that night; how he would take care of whatever bothered her and how she’d instantly thought that he would never be able to keep that promise. As important as he might be, he still held no real power, just like herself. He couldn’t change his House’s plans so that he and Hiccup would stay here longer, nor could he gift Hiccup land and title. All telling him about her and Hiccup would do would be forcing him to lie for them.

“So, what did he mean about you visiting?” Hiccup eventually asked.
Astrid turned in his embrace so that she was able to look at him. “He suggested I should come for his sister’s wedding. Stay a couple of weeks.” She chuckled lightly. “It would still be a while until then, but it would at least be something?”

Hiccup nodded, hope gleaming in his eyes. “It would. Certainly better than not seeing you at all until next fall. I mean, sure, Eret and I are going to stop here before we head for Westhill and on our way back as well. But those would only be a couple of days at best.”

The prospect of those weeks in Eastervale helped soothe both their minds. The separation was still looming over them like a sword, but at least the burden was lighter now.

For a while, they settled for comfortable cuddles and soft caresses, both basking in each other’s presence. The day had been a long one with the hours here at the stables in the morning, getting ready for the accolade, and the festivities themselves. But even though she was tired, Astrid didn’t want to sleep. Not yet. Too precious were these last nights she could spend with Hiccup to waste them. Instead, she stirred as her mind threatened to drift off after all, and sat up.

“So, where did you store that book we were looking at earlier?”

Hiccup looked up at her, with only one eye open but his lips were stretched into a tiny smirk. “Really? That’s what you want to do now? Look some more at those pictures?”

She shrugged, managing something like an innocent but curious smile, and Hiccup laughed. They settled much like they had this morning, Astrid’s back against Hiccup’s chest and him looking down at the book in her lap over her shoulder. And despite Hiccup being far more relaxed than he had been earlier, she could still feel him stir again behind her after a while.

“Dear, Freya… I never thought you’d be that interested in looking at such pictures,” Hiccup muttered against her shoulder at some point, his fingers around her hips flexing.

Astrid giggled. “You don’t seem to mind them either. Although, I’m mostly curious. I never knew there were so many… options. I mean, I already knew about this–” she pointed at a drawing of a woman riding a man, ”–but this one looks a bit odd,” she commented the next, showing the woman on her hands and knees with the man kneeling behind her. “I can’t imagine that to be very comfortable.”

“It’s not supposed to be comfortable, exactly,” Hiccup murmured. “But it’s certainly not bad either. It’s actually a good position, you– the woman is supposed to feel more that way.”

Leaning back against him, she hummed. “Mmh, can’t wait until we can try all these.”

Hiccup chuckled, breathlessly. “Yeah, me neither.”

They flipped on through the pages, commenting on every single one. Astrid enjoyed winding Hiccup up a little. She understood his caution, she really did. But, Freya, she didn’t want to wait two more years. She wanted it all, now. She might be sensible enough not to push for it, but she could still dream.

“Huh… what’s this?” she asked when they reached a drawing where the man’s head was hardly visible, hidden between the woman’s legs.

Behind her, Hiccup whimpered, his face pressed into the crook between her neck and her shoulder. “Hiccup?”
“I’m okay,” he mumbled. “It’s just… Gods, I’m dying to do this with you.”

Astrid glanced back at the page, giving it a closer look. But no matter how hard she tried, it didn’t make much sense to her. “What… is it?”

Hiccup, noticeably pulling himself together, swallowed. “It… it’s going down on you with my mouth. Making you come with my lips and tongue, licking and sucking and… and tasting you…” He broke off, his fingers on her waist almost bruising.

Astrid felt heat rise to her cheeks. She loved how his mouth felt on her skin, her neck and her breasts especially. But the idea of feeling him there…

“Why don’t you?” she asked, voice trembling slightly. “It wouldn’t… break any rules, would it?”

Slowly, he shook his head. “No, it wouldn’t,” he affirmed, slowly. “It’s just that… I don’t know. It’s something different, special in a way. Or it feels that way to me, at least. And, well… I wanted to keep that for our wedding night.” He chuckled, sounding a little embarrassed.

Another kind of fire rose inside her at his words, not the heat of desire like before but more the comfortable warmth of love. Their wedding… Gods, if only they’d reached that day already.

The next page showed a reverse of the previous, the woman with her head between the man’s legs. But upon her question whether she could try this in return, Hiccup merely chuckled. She probably could… but he’d rather she be more experienced all over before she tried this. They moved on through more intriguing-looking pictures, one even seeming to be a combination of those other two, until they reach one that made Astrid laugh.

“Oh, look. They got it wrong there,” she snickered. Sure, she hardly knew anything about sex herself, but even she knew that that wasn’t supposed to go in there.

Hiccup choked on a suppressed laughter. “Actually, no, that’s exactly how they mean it,” he commented rather cheerfully. Astrid turned to give him an incredulous look, but Hiccup just shrugged. “Hey, it’s possible, obviously.”

“But…” she sputtered. “But that’s…” She glanced back at the page, checking whether she’d gotten it right.

“It’s actually not that much different,” Hiccup explained in a calmer tone, his smile still audible though. “I mean, of course, it doesn’t feel the same. But it can still feel really good too; mostly for men but for women too. It’s actually what Eret and Dagur do all the time, or how did you imagine they do it?”

“I…” Astrid began, frowning, but didn’t continue. She actually hadn’t thought about that technicality so far. But of course, it made sense. She leaned down to study the picture closer, thinking.

“We could do this… couldn’t we?”

Behind her, Hiccup instantly sobered up, stiffening. “Astrid,” he began, but she interrupted him directly.

“No, listen. From how I understand, this wouldn’t break my maidenhead, right?”

Hiccup nodded, reluctantly. “Right, but—”
“And it also couldn’t get me pregnant, right?”

“Yes, but–”

“No but,” Astrid interrupted him again, excited now. “We could do this, couldn’t we? Before you have to leave? Just once?” She’d turned around to fully look at Hiccup now, a strange hope flaring up inside her. She couldn’t even say why this was so important to her all of a sudden. But from one moment to the other, the longing to just be that close to him before they had to part, just once, became overwhelming.

But Hiccup was unyielding. “Astrid, this is madness,” he tried to dissuade her. “Anal sex… that’s not the best thing to start with. Besides, I don’t know nearly enough about it, only did it a couple of times. I-I wouldn’t know what I need to do in order to not hurt your, or–”

“Then you can ask Cami when you go see her tomorrow,” Astrid suggested, brushing all his concerns aside. She was hooked now. “And I trust you. You won’t hurt me,” she added, then paused when something else occurred to her. “Unless… unless you don’t want to do it?”

Hiccup had seemed more and more troubled, but at her last words, his frown broke into a soft smile. “Of course I want to,” he assured her. “I just want to do it right, you know? I don’t want to rush anything, and this,” he paused, gulping. “This feels like… cheating, you know? And...”

For a moment, his eyes glazed over a little, his tongue flicking out to wet his lips. It was just for the blink of an eye, but it told Astrid enough. Yes, he was more than interested, only his sense of responsibility holding him back. She shifted closer, idly entangling her fingers with his. “Look, I understand. But can we at least consider it? Not for right now. But can we at least give it a try? Can you ask Cami about it tomorrow; what she thinks about it, what you’d need to know. And then we decide?”

At first, Hiccup still hesitated. But then he gave in, to his own curiosity and her eagerness alike. “Okay. I’ll talk to Cami about it tomorrow. But no promises, okay? If she says that it’s not a good idea for whatever reason, then that’s it, all right?”

Astrid pouted, but agreed. From the few times they’d met by now on various occasions, she knew that Cami was anything but prudish. She certainly wouldn’t be all that reluctant… or if she was then probably for a good reason.

Chapter End Notes

Ah, yes... Astrid really is quite thirsty, isn't she? But let's be honest, who can blame her?

So, the last months have been easier for Hiccup and Astrid than they’d thought. But will that be true for the coming months as well? What will the future bring?

As always, I'm looking forward to hearing what you think :)
Chapter Notes

Woah! I've got to say, the responses to the previous chapter were amazing! Thank you all so so so very much! During my hiatus, I'd begun to fear that nobody cared for this story anyway, so all your comments were wonderful. Thank you, thank you, thank you! ^^

With this chapter now, the tiny bit of buffer I had built up is truly gone... So it's going to be interesting whether I can manage to actually write out the next in time, whether I'll post shorter chapters, or whether I'll reschedule the updates... We'll see! :|

And I again want to invite everyone who is interested to athingofviking's Discord server. It's growing constantly and slowly turning into a general HTTYD fan server. You can find the invite like on his Tumblr (athingofvikings) and also on mine (shipmistress9) in the posts for this story.

This week's title comes from the song 'Right Here Waiting' by Richard Marx. For this chapter, I was actually looking for an extremely cheesy title (because... reasons) and listened through a playlist of rock ballads. Let's just say... I cried a lot! xD In the end, I choose this title then. It's probably not quite as dramatic as the song, but I thought the line fit nicely anyway. ^^

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Absentmindedly, Hiccup brushed over the spot on his arm where he could still feel Astrid’s touch. Last night, she’d gripped him so tightly that her fingers had left bruises. Smiling to himself as he groomed Chomp, he mused about how it must have hurt at the time, at least a little, but he couldn’t remember the pain by any stretch of the imagination. As always, being with her had been perfect, and those bruises were nothing but sweet reminders of their time together.

Although, if he wanted to avoid other bruises of a less pleasant nature, he’d better focus on the big horse in front of him. Of all his charges, Chomp was the most aggressive, and it was probably only thanks to the months they’d spent in close proximity that the stallion hadn’t used Hiccup’s distracted state for his own advantage.

With a hint of nervousness, Hiccup thought about why he had to groom Chomp to perfection today. Any minute now, Eret and Dagur would arrive, and bringing with them Snotlout of House Jorgenson, Chomp’s new owner. Hiccup couldn’t help but wonder what kind of person he was. He’d heard lots of stories about him by now, back during his time on Berk from the occasional merchant and during his years searching for information from the talkative men in the taverns, and then more funny and personal ones from Eret, Dagur, and Astrid over the last few months. All those stories had painted a certain picture of the man, whom Hiccup had never met despite their connection.

He didn’t need to wait long before the men arrived, Dagur’s booming laughter giving Hiccup warning of their approach.

"Morning, Hiccup," Eret greeted him with a tired smile as they came into view.
"Good morning, my lords," he replied, bowing. He was holding formal behaviour with a bit more enthusiasm than usual, and more earnestly. Carefully, he glanced at the new man following Dagur into the stables. He was short, certainly the shortest of them all, but far more bulky than Hiccup at least. He clearly was a trained warrior, muscles shaped by fights and practice. His black hair was relatively short, even though Hiccup still noticed that it had a familiar unruly streak to it. His face was neutral, polite but not really interested, as the man's eyes glided over him, noticing and dismissing him at the same moment. To Snotlout, Hiccup was nothing more than a lowly servant.

Hiccup glanced at Eret. So they hadn't told Snotlout anything yet. That was good, Hiccup supposed, but it certainly couldn't stay that way. Sooner or later, he would notice something anyway, so they had better tell him directly before he drew his own conclusions. He gave Eret a small nod, which he returned after a moment's hesitation.

With a bit of a smirk, Eret gestured from one of them to the other. "May I introduce? Sir Snotlout, ducal heir of House Jorgenson. And this is my squire, Hiccup..."

Hiccup could practically feel the tension hanging between them, how not only he but Dagur and Eret as well had their eyes on Snotlout, gauging his reaction.

At first, the expression on Snotlout's face barely changed. "Nice to meet you. Hiccup, eh? With that name, I guess you're from the North?"

"I am, Sir," Hiccup replied, directly meeting the other man's gaze. He could see the moment Snotlout noticed that something was off. Hiccup didn't know whether it was because Eret and Dagur were still staring at them or because Hiccup met his eyes without the usual deference of a servant, but it was as if something in Snotlout's eyes changed, something shifted, clicked into place.

"Hiccup you said?"

Hiccup nodded, still not taking his eyes off of Snotlout's. The other man frowned. "Are you..." he trailed off, glancing at Eret. "Is he... who I think he is?"

Eret took a deep breath and nodded. "I guess so?"

Anxiously, Hiccup waited for the reaction. What would it be? Surprise, certainly. Disbelief. Maybe anger? A certain hostility? There was a reason why they'd never met before, after all... But when the reaction came, it was nothing like Hiccup had expected.

"I can't believe it!" he exclaimed, a wide grin on his face. "Ayye! Cousin!" He held out his hand toward Hiccup which he took more out of reflex than anything else, and was pulled into a friendly but bone-crushing hug. Snotlout pounded him fondly on the back and said, "I never thought us meeting at last would happen in a stable, of all places!"

Out of all the possible reactions Hiccup had contemplated, this was pretty far off the track. And apparently, Dagur and Eret were just as surprised as Hiccup was. They stood to the side and stared at Snotlout with clear bewilderment on their faces, and it didn’t take long before Snotlout noticed.

“What?” he asked with a huge grin. “Didn’t you know that we’re related?” He gestured between himself and Hiccup. “His father was my mother’s brother, may she have a good spot at Freya’s tables.”

Eret and Dagur shared a look, and Hiccup couldn’t help but feel the same confusion. “As a matter of fact,” Eret eventually answered. “We did know that. But…” he paused, licking his lips. He threw
a quick glance at Hiccup, clearly asking a question, and Hiccup nodded. It wouldn’t be feasible to keep this secret from Snotlout anyway. “Is... is that all you’re surprised about? To see Hiccup here?”

Snotlout frowned, quickly glanced at Hiccup as if hoping for an explanation from his cousin, but then shrugged. “Yes? Despite our relation, we’ve never met before. I know you always were close to that part of your family, Eret, but for me it’s been different. We were always busy enough with our problems in Westhill, so visiting family never was a high priority. And it’s not as if his family ever made much effort to stay in contact either...” he added, his tone slightly grumbling.

Hiccup grimaced, but didn’t know what to say. It was true that they hadn’t stayed in contact with House Jorgenson, especially after Snotlout’s mother, his father’s sister, had died and Grand Duke Spitelout had remarried. But they had always been somewhat reclusive, from the mainland branches of the family as well as pretty much from everyone outside of the Tribes; it hadn’t been personal. But Snotlout seemed to take it that way, and Hiccup couldn’t really blame him for that. However, this wasn’t what was odd about Snotlout’s reaction anyway.

“He doesn’t know,” Dagur stated flatly, something like hysterical laughter bursting from his chest. Not even he was able to fully make fun of a situation like this.

“‘Doesn’t know’ what?” Snot inquired, clearly getting a little irked now. “Are you making fun of me?”

Again, Dagur and Eret shared a glance, clearly uncomfortable now, but Hiccup felt weirdly detached. “I shouldn’t be here,” he said in a monotone voice. “Because I’m supposed to be dead. My whole family is dead, and I should have died with them.” The truth of these words burned with a sudden flare in his chest, and only the glow of his connection with Astrid was able to soothe the guilt. Yes, he should be dead too... But what would that have done to her?

Snotlout’s eyes widened in shock. “Dead?” he whispered, then turned to look at Eret and Dagur as if seeking confirmation. “They’re dead? All of them? When? How?”

“Nobody really knows how,” Eret sighed. “But it’s already been two years... And you really never heard about it? I know the tribes aren’t exactly forthcoming with any information, but...”

Snotlout shook his head, troubled. “No... I mean, we really have enough problems of our own, but I would have thought...” He glanced at Hiccup again. “I’m sorry to hear that, for your loss and... and for not knowing. I still can’t believe...”

Hiccup took the words with a silent nod. He’d know that meeting Snotlout would probably bring this topic up, had been prepared. But it was still jarring.

“Nobody knows that Hiccup is still alive though,” Eret eventually said. “Hence the squire charade. That way, nobody will look too closely at him. So I hope you understand that you can’t tell anyone.”

Snotlout frowned, but then nodded. “Of course,” he agreed. “I trust that you have your reasons, so I won’t say anything.”

An uncomfortable silence overcame them. Hiccup couldn’t tell whether his secret would be safe with Snotlout; he didn’t know his cousin at all, after all. But Eret and Dagur had assured him that he was trustworthy, and it wasn’t as if he had a choice anyway. He just hoped that Snotlout wouldn’t tell the wrong person after all, ending in Hiccup waking up one day to... well, to not wake up at all.
“All right,” Eret eventually broke the silence, clapping his hands. “We came here for a reason, didn’t we? Snot? This here is your new stallion: Firewind Hookfang—”

“Or Chomp, as everyone calls him,” Dagur threw in.

“He’s got a bit of a temper, but since you’re used to our horses already, I don’t think you’ll have... many problems with him.”

Snotlout took the hint to change the topic, and joined Eret at Chomp’s stall. “I might be used to having them around, but I’m not really used to riding one,” he corrected airily. “But I’ve got to say, I’m looking forward to it. Thor, he looks impressive! Just what I’d hoped for.”

A short while later, all traces of awe or smugness had left Snotlout. Instead, he was cursing all of Eret’s and Dagur’s ancestors as he once more got up from the paddock’s floor, rubbing his backside, while Eret was trying to recapture Chomp and Dagur was laughing cordially.

“Yeah, that’s how I imagined this,” the redhead burst out, wiping tears of laughter from his eyes. “Beautiful. Ah, that makes up for all the boring training with the recruits and formal dinners. Seeing the fine Lord Snotlout covered in dust and dirt, and for once it’s not even my fault.”

“Nor mine,” came another voice from behind them. “Loki, that almost makes up for having to walk the whole way out here again.”

All four men looked up, and Hiccup felt as if the sun was rising once more when his eyes fell on Timothy – with Astrid two steps behind him.

“Swanja!” Eret greeted her enthusiastically as he led an intractable Chomp at his side. “Now, that’s a surprise. I didn’t expect you to show up here today.”

“And neither did I,” Astrid agreed. “But I certainly didn’t say no when Father suggested I ought to... to enjoy this last day with you.” There was a slight trembling in her voice that certainly nobody missed, but also nobody reacted to – even though Hiccup felt the strong urge to go to her and take her in his arms.

“Plus, there’s not much she can do in the castle anyway,” Timothy added. He leaned down to fish an apple out of the basket he’d been carrying. “The castle is a nightmare, everyone buzzing about preparing for tomorrow. Honestly, I can’t remember things ever being this crazy.”

“It’s been pretty busy,” Eret agreed, frowning. “But I assume that’s because of the accolades? I mean, three high noble accolades in two seasons... well, that’s special, so more people than usual decided to make the journey here and get all three of them done. And they take the royal birthday as a bonus.”

“Aye, that’s probably it.” Timothy took a hearty bite from his apple. “Either way, I’ve got to go back and help too.” He grimaced. “Astrid’s governess was in a bit of a panic just now, something about a missing tax collector, and Ruff threatened to read Chicken scary bedtime stories for a month straight if I don’t return as soon as possible and help her deal with the madwoman. So, as much as I’d like to laze around for a while, I’ve got to go. Eret, she’s your responsibility now.”

“As always,” Eret replied, and shook his head at how quickly Astrid’s warder retreated. Chuckling, he turned his attention toward Astrid. “But since when does your governess care for any belated tax collectors?”

Astrid snorted. “I have no idea,” she emphasised. “I mean, she’s been acting weird for a couple of weeks now, being even stiffer and stricter when it comes to my manners than usual but also being
surprisingly supportive whenever I was to spend the day with you guys.” She shrugged. “I gave up on trying to make sense of her.”

Everyone agreed, chuckling, then they all turned their attention back on Snotlout and his new stallion. Hiccup and Astrid shared a quick, longing glance, but with so many people around, they didn’t dare to hold eye contact or, Freya forbid, even move closer. Hiccup had to admit though, just being near her was enough to soothe his anxiety from before. It was enough to hear her laughter when Snotlout landed in the dust again with a vile curse, enough to see her from the corner of his eyes.

All in all, it was a relaxed day. In-between Snotlout’s rather painful-looking attempts to befriend Chomp, they made an extended break, ate the bread and fruits from the basket Timothy had brought, talked and laughed, and generally enjoyed the day.

When the sun was a good bit past its zenith, Astrid yawned, drawing everyone's attention.

"I think I'd like to go for a walk," she declared, and stretched. “As much fun as all this is, just sitting around here makes me tired.”

"Really?” Dagur asked in a playfully exaggerated tone. "How can you get tired of watching Snot land in the dirt?"

"Haha, very funny," Snotlout grumbled.

Astrid chuckled, such a wonderful and light sound that made Hiccup smile despite himself.

"Where would you want to go?” Eret asked, frowning. "Just up and down here along the paddock?"

Astrid shook her head. "No... I don't know. Just walking around a bit; maybe over to the pond and watch the swans." She shrugged.

"I'm not..." Eret muttered, grimacing. "Dagur? Would you want to accompany her?"

"And miss the show here?" he asked, gesturing to where Snot was about to mount Chomp once more. "I don't think so."

Astrid, however, rolled her eyes. "You do know that I can walk that bit on my own, right?” she said sourly.

"I do," Eret assured her. "But I officially took over the responsibility for you. And if anyone was to spot you wandering around unsupervised, your governess will want my head. And I can't leave Snot alone here."

Astrid grimaced, but didn't say anything, and Hiccup had the feeling that she wasn't really annoyed or even surprised by this anyway. Nobody, surely not Eret, doubted her capability. As always, it was all just about appearances.

Or maybe, it was all part of a plan. She threw him a quick glance when nobody was looking, and Hiccup spoke without thinking much about it. "How about I go with her?"

Two or three months ago, such a suggestion would have been dangerous. But after the past weeks, the only one looking surprised or worried by those words was Snotlout.

"That would be an option. Is that all right for you, Swanja?” Eret asked.
Astrid snorted, playing her role well. "If it makes you feel better," she said, a mixture of amusement and light annoyance in her voice.

With that matter settled, Hiccup and Astrid headed off in the general direction of the little swan lake. It was broad daylight, and being outside where they could get seen by any random by-passer made them cautious enough not to even walk too closely to each other. But Hiccup had to admit that just this, walking side by side through the sunlight, felt good. Another memory he would treasure.

"This is nice," Astrid eventually commented, apparently thinking the same as him. She threw him a warm smile, and her hand twitched as if she wanted to take his but caught herself in the last moment.

"It is," he agreed, returning her smile. And it was. It was good to do something so ordinary as taking a walk together. In a couple of days, he'd dearly miss this.

When they reached the pond, however, Astrid's mood visibly fell.

"They aren't here," she muttered. "Again."

Hiccup let his eyes wander over the water and the high grass around it, but couldn't spot the swans either. "Maybe they're looking elsewhere for food? Or are breeding?"

"Maybe," Astrid nodded, sighing. "But coming here was more of a pretence anyway," she added, a small smirk tugging at her lips. She glanced around, then looked at him again and gave a nod toward the forest. "Let's go that way."

Once they were relatively well hidden between the trees and bushed, Astrid weaved her finger through his as they walked on through the forest. Hiccup mused how different this was from how scared she'd been of getting caught in the beginning, and it made him smile. She'd come so far. Oh, he knew that part of this new-found confidence was due to the desperation of getting separated. But he was also sure that another not quite irrelevant part was due to her being less afraid in general, and he just loved to see this side of her. Confident. Happy. Free.

Hiccup didn't keep track of where they were going, only followed Astrid's lead. They only talked occasionally, quietly, and otherwise enjoyed the comfortable silence and the touch of their hands, listening to the singing birds and to the wind rustling through the leaves and branches. It was a wonderful day for a walk like this, warm enough so that even here between the trees where it was a little cooler, it was still warm enough, the sun painting small specks of light onto the ground and their skin.

Hiccup could have walked on endlessly like this, so he was quite surprised when, after only half an hour, the stables came back into view. He threw Astrid a puzzled look, but she just winked and pulled him on. Apparently, their walk had led them around the stables in a wide loop, because they were nearing the building from the backside, invisible to the others who could still be heard at the paddock. Hiccup’s heartbeat quickened when he realised what Astrid’s goal was: a small niche between two parts of the building that wouldn't be visible to anyone unless they came close enough to peer around a nearby shrub.

Astrid didn’t waste time. Her lips tasted of apple and honey from their earlier meal when he returned her kiss, backing her up against the wooden wall as he knew she liked. With her hands in his hair, tugging and pulling, it quickly became difficult to think about anything. In his head, there was only her, only this wonderful and amazing person that owned his heart and soul, and who was so easily able to drive him crazy with her teeth nipping at his lips.
Hiccup lost all sense of time as they kissed, and they only paused when the noises coming from
those on the other side of the building changed. There was a shift in voices and tones, then very
audibly the opening of the front door and the sound of hooves on stone as Chomp was led inside.

“It’s time to go back,” Astrid murmured. She pushed him back a little until their eyes met. “You’re
having a date today, after all. And an important question to ask,” she added cheekily.

“Right,” Hiccup muttered, grimacing. He still wasn’t so sure about her suggestion to try anal sex.
Not that he didn’t want to; the idea was lurking in the back of his mind ever since she’d come up
with it last night and refused to leave. But still, it felt like cheating, like skirting the rules in a not-
quite-acceptable manner.

“I haven’t forgotten, don’t worry,” he assured her. “But remember, I can’t promise anything.
Besides, I don’t know how tonight will turn out anyway. With Snotlout being there too, I don’t
know if I’ll even get the chance to ask Cami in private or will be able to sneak away at all. It…
It’s…”

“It’s okay,” Astrid interrupted him gently. She reached for his hand and started playing with his
fingers, averting her eyes. But when she continued speaking, she sounded sincere. “If you can’t get
away, I mean. There’s no need for you to feel… bad or anything. And the same is true for when
you’re back in Eastervale, or in Westhill come summer. I don’t mind if you sleep with an Ástir,
you hear me? You don’t need to hold back because of me.”

Warmth spread through Hiccup’s chest, and he let out a low chuckle, shaking his head. How was it
possible that she kept saying or doing things that made him fall in love with her over and over
again?

“I know,” he breathed, placing a hand beneath her chin to lift her head and look at her again. “But
you don’t understand. I don’t want to. I only want you; every other woman lost her appeal to me.
You have bewitched me in the most wonderful way, and I love you, so much, more than words can
say.”

Astrid’s eyes grew softer, and nuzzling into his hand she placed a soft kiss to his palm. “It’s the
same for me too,” she murmured. “But still…”

But still...

Hiccup grimaced. But still there was the problem that he didn’t even know what to expect from
tonight. Sighing, he nodded, then leaned in to bury his face in her hair. The all-too-familiar scent of
mayweed immediately made him dizzy and at the same time comforted him, and he idly
contemplated whether to buy a bottle of scented oil to take with him to Eastervale. The noises from
the other side grew louder, more active, and Hiccup pressed himself closer against her. “I don’t
want to go,” he groaned. He was aware of how often he’d said those words lately and the different
circumstances were amusing to a degree, so he couldn’t really begrudge Astrid chuckling shakily.

“Yeah, I’d rather stay here with you all night too,” she whispered. She tilted her head to nuzzle
against his neck, and a light shudder ran down his spine. “But we both know that won’t happen.
Besides, I really want to know what Cami is going to say, so…”

Hiccup couldn’t help but chuckle as she trailed off suggestively. Her eagerness was amazing. “I
promise that I’ll do whatever I can to be here with you tonight!”

Astrid’s face turned into a soft smile. “I know. And I’ll be right here, waiting for you,” she
breathed.
“Swanja? Swanja, we’re heading back. Where are you? Hiccup?”

They both winced as Eret’s voice echoed toward them, and reluctantly, they parted. “Time to go,” Astrid stated, but Hiccup didn’t feel like doing so just yet.

Once again, he leaned down to kiss her, one hand softly cupping her cheek. He was careful not to lose control again though, and pulled back when he felt that the urge to just continue regardless of any consequences grew.

When they finally parted, Astrid’s cheek had turned a lovely shade of pink, her eyes hazy, and the smile she gave him was dazzling. Gods, how was he supposed to live even one day without her?

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“You haven’t told him?” Hiccup looked incredulously from Eret to Dagur and back again.

Eret just shrugged. “It didn’t really come up so far,” he muttered.

Dagur, however, wore an obscenely huge grin. “And I’m dying to see his face!”

Hiccup shook his head in disbelief, but didn’t say any more when Snotlout returned from the outhouse to where they’d been waiting for him in the entrance hall of Freya’s temple. Despite their closer relation, Hiccup didn’t feel like it was his responsibility to inform Snotlout about possibly important details, even though he still thought it would have been better if they’d told him about Cami before.

But as it was, they hadn’t, and if Hiccup was honest to himself then that wasn’t what really bothered him anyway. Far more pressing to him was the question of what would happen after he’d seen her. Would Hiccup be able to sneak away and back to Astrid like he usually did? How would Snotlout react if they told him he would spend the night with his secret girlfriend instead? Was that something he dared to reveal to his cousin? And what was the alternative? Snotlout knew about Eret and Dagur, so they wouldn’t need to keep that facade at least. But the idea of having sex with Cami tonight, of possibly even sharing her with Snotlout, just to keep his secret hidden didn’t sit well with him. He hoped there would be another way out.

But when Cami finally joined them, everything went differently than he’d thought it would.

“What in all Gods’ names is this?” Snotlout exclaimed as Cami appeared between him and Eret.

She was dressed in a pretty gown in varying shades of blue and her golden mane artfully arranged in intricate braids all around her head, as usual for her role. As expected, Dagur burst out laughing and Cami joined in with a low chuckle, but to Hiccup it was clear that neither Snotlout nor Eret found the situation even remotely funny.

“This is Cami, an old friend of mine. She’s our date for tonight,” Eret tried to explain. “And Cami, this is Snot. We told you about him, right? Sir Snotlout of House Jorgenson.”

Cami threw Snotlout a cheeky grin and curtseyed elegantly. “It’s a pleasure to finally meet you, Sir Snotlout. I’ve already heard a lot about you.”

Snotlout didn’t seem to be in the mood for pleasantries though. “Is this supposed to be a joke?” he asked, turning his attention back to Eret. He looked angry, but Eret shook his head.

“No, believe me, we were just as surprised as you are the first time we saw Cami like this,” he replied quietly, his body language reserved, as if trying to keep the other people in the atrium from
looking in their direction more than they already were.

“And still you…” Snot began, but broke off directly. He threw measuring glances from Eret to Dagur, then one at Hiccup, and eventually nodded. “I see,” he murmured, grimacing, and Hiccup got the impression that Snot’s thoughts probably weren’t so far off the truth.

“Is there a problem here?” Cami asked cheerfully, and linked her arm with Snotlout. “Shall we go upstairs and talk there?”

Snotlout nodded mutely, but pulled his arm back from her, and with a stony expression followed the others to Cami’s room. Once the door closed behind them, however, he didn’t hold back any longer.

“Are you insane?” he hissed, gesturing at Cami without looking at her. “She looks just like Swanja!”

Dagur snorted from where he’d let himself fall into one of Cami’s cushioned chairs. “Believe us, we noticed,” he said dryly, and reached for a cookie on a tray – another visitor must have brought them before.

Snotlout threw him an irritated look. “And still you meet with her? Repeatedly, if I understand correctly? All of you? I mean, I get that this is ‘not what it looks like’ –” he gestured elaborately at Eret and Dagur, “–but still. What are you thinking? What are the people supposed to think?”

Eret closed his eyes and gave a heavy sigh. “The people,” he emphasised, “already think that Swanja and I are a couple. And that she’s supposed to marry one of us one day anyway. So whatever rumours there might be, they won’t say anything new.”

“And what about Swanja?” Snotlout threw back harshly. “What if she hears about this? That we, who should know better, meet with an Ástir who looks like her and indulge in the fantasy of banging her all at once?”

“She already knows,” Hiccup interjected despite himself, but Eret spoke over him.

“Swanja knows better than to believe that,” he replied, equally harshly now. “She knows about Cami, they’ve met–”

“–and became friends,” Cami threw in, but Eret didn’t stop.

“–and she knows why we meet with her. Not because she looks like her, but because we knew her before. Because she’s our friend and covers for us. And even Hiccup knows her from Eastervale and doesn’t see Cami as Swanja.”

Snotlout threw him another calculating look, grimaced, and shook his head. “I still don’t like this. If this works for you and Swanja doesn’t mind, then… whatever. But I can’t do this, not with her!” Again, he gestured toward Cami who at least didn’t seem to be offended.

“And that’s all right,” she said, calmly and in a much more natural tone than before. She even moved differently, much more like Hiccup remembered her from Eastervale. More like herself and not her role. “I understand and respect your reasons, Sir Snotlout. If you prefer, I can see which of my sisters would be available for you?”

Snotlout hesitated, once more throwing glances at those around him. He looked uncomfortable, torn between leaving and staying with his friends.
“Hey, it’s okay. We understand,” Eret said with a slight smile. “We’ll catch up again tomorrow.”

Snotlout nodded, then turned toward Cami and finally looked at her directly again. “Thank you for your offer. And I take it gladly. Please know that I didn’t mean to be offensive, but–”

“Don’t worry, I understand,” Cami interrupted him, smiling genuinely. “In fact, I see it as a compliment that my role is good enough so that it even convinces those who know the Princess in person. Now, if you’d follow me?” She left, and after one last glance around, Snotlout followed her, leaving the other three men in silence.

“Yep,” Hiccup eventually commented dryly, “that went just as brilliantly as I’d thought. Maybe you should have told him earlier after all.”

Eret gave a non-committal grunt, and even Dagur looked a little remorseful. But deep down, Hiccup was actually glad how things had turned out.

Even as the prospect of asking Astrid’s question was a little daunting.

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“So, what are we going to do today?” Cami asked once the door to her bedroom had closed behind Eret and Dagur. She sauntered over to her table, sank down into a chair, and reached for a cookie. “Do you want to play cards or just chat a little?” She smirked as his face scrunched up. “Oh, is there something you want to talk about? How do you feel about leaving?”

Hiccup grimaced even more. He tried not to think about leaving, or else he might go crazy. But then, with Cami he at least could talk about it. He followed her to the table and took one of the cookies as well, mainly to distract himself. “What do you think how I feel?” he eventually muttered, and slumped down into another chair, the cookie forgotten in his hand.

Cami cocked her head, her blue eyes never leaving him. But she didn’t say a word, and after another minute Hiccup sighed.

“I feel horrible, okay? I've gotten so used to her presence, to talking to her, to feeling her warmth at my side when I wake up. It feels so right, so wonderful, and the idea of going without that for w-… for months is driving me insane.” He averted his eyes, hoping that Cami hadn't noticed his slip up. It would probably only be weeks until Astrid came to Eastervale if everything with the wedding worked out as they hoped. But he couldn't tell Cami that – it might give away too much about his lady love's identity. Although, his worries seemed to have been for nothing.

“Yeah, that's what I thought,” she sighed, shaking her head. “How often have you been meeting lately?’

Hiccup swallowed, and nibbled at his cookie after all. “Every night?” he admitted a little sheepishly. “And we've at least seen each other nearly every day, too. She's become such a big part of my life that I can barely imagine spending just one day without her.”

“Have you exchanged some tokens, something to remind you of the other? I've heard that helps, at least a little.”

Cami sounded truly concerned, and that actually made Hiccup smile. Not because the situation was funny in any way, but because he was grateful to Cami for her genuine interest. That she cared enough about him.

“We have,” he replied with a light nod, his hand wandering to his chest where he carried Astrid’s
“Remember the horse statue? Apparently, she placed it next to her bed.”

That made Cami chuckle. “Oh, so that’s the perfect place for her to remember you?” she asked, mirth glinting in her eyes. “I really wish you’d tell me who she is so that I can show her how to pleasure herself once you’re gone. I’m beginning to think that it actually was rather unfair to introduce her to sex, only to withhold it from her after all. And for so long. I think I’d go insane.”

At that, Hiccup grimaced again, for more than just one reason. “You know I can’t tell you who she is,” he muttered, but he knew that wasn’t really an issue for Cami and he’d only brought it up to buy time. Because the other thing he needed to talk about with Cami was back at the front of his mind from what she’d said, and he honestly wasn’t sure how to begin. He ate the cookie, then a second one and drank a glass of the light wine before he felt ready to start. “But… but on that matter… there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

“Oh?” Cami’s head perked up in amused — and predatory — curiosity. “What about?”

Hiccup swallowed at the look; she had far too much fun in getting as many details about his and Astrid’s relationship out of him as she could, for Hiccup’s taste at least.

“Yeah,” he went on, hesitantly. “It’s… I need your advice on a certain practice. You know, how to go about it, what to heed. I mean, I do have some experience, but she doesn’t, and I don’t know what to do to make it easier. I want it to be as pleasant as possible for her. And I couldn’t live with myself if I hurt her because I did something wrong.”

Cami nodded, a tiny smirk playing around her lips. “I didn’t expect any less of you. But if you want me to give you any advice then you actually have to tell me what ‘practice’ you’re talking about.”

He gulped. “I… uh… you see… there was this book, and we were reading it, and…”

She snickered. “Last I checked, reading a book to your beloved worked better with less stammering.” He gave her a light glare, which made her break out into giggles. “So, what was this book?”

“The Exotics of the Southlands,” he said, looking down. Cami made a noise of surprise, and he continued, “And, well…” he swallowed and blurted in a rush, “I need advice on anal sex.”

There was a very long pause, so he hesitantly looked up at Cami, and then flinched. She was giving him a cool — no, make that frigid — look, and then fluidly rose out of the chair where she’d been casually sprawled only moments before.

“That book. Oh, yes. I know it. And did you pick it out of the royal library ‘accidentally’, Hiccup?” Her tone was acidic and accusatory. “I know you’re quite the scholar. Did you see it and figure you could convince your lady love to—”

“She’s the one that brought it to me! And she asked me when we found those pages! I had no idea!” he protested in a rush.

Cami blinked and then gave a small harsh chuckle. “Well.” She continued pacing around him.

Hiccup tracked her motions around the chair. “Well... what?”

“If it were anyone else, I’d call bullshit,” Cami said bluntly. “I know men. Hel, my entire profession is about giving men a warm place to shove their cocks, when you get down to it. And while I enjoy what you’re asking for, the thought of having that be the first thing you give your girl as a way to loophole through the rules... well, you’re not the first to come up with that idea,
and normally I’d be reporting you to the Fyrir for censure and fining. Possibly some public shaming.”

Hiccup swallowed.

“But... this isn’t normal. And you’ve been honest with me from the beginning – except about who in Freya’s name your girl is – so I’ll buy it for the moment, that she’s as keen as you are, if not more.”

Hiccup relaxed slightly. “Thank you, Cami. And it’s more, I swear.”

She leaned down in front of him and gave him a flat look. “Don’t thank me yet. Before I say anything, do you swear to me before Frigga that this truly was her idea?”

Swallowing again, he nodded and said, “I swear on Frigga, Freya, and Odin that what I told you was true.”

She looked him in the face, sighed, straightened and rubbed her temples. “Great. So, two things before I tell you anything.”

“Yeah?”

“First, I really wish you could tell me who it is,” she said. “She’s in the palace, I’ve figured that much...” she said leadingly.

Hiccup shook his head. “I can’t. I promised.”

“Even if that means I won’t tell you anything?” Cami pressed.

He nodded. “I’d rather go without sex with her than betray my word to her. Like I said, it was her idea, she was very insistent, and I promised I’d ask you. If you say no, then that’s that.”

She smirked. “That was the right answer. Fine.” She eyed him. “But I will find out one day, just so you know.”

“Cami, once everything is settled, you might even be one of the bridesmaids,” he said earnestly.

She laughed. “I’ll hold you to that, then!”

They fell silent for a moment, and then Hiccup asked, “And the second thing?”

“The second thing I’d like to know is… why do you want to try that.” Hiccup wanted to reply what he’d said before, but she waved him off with a quick gesture. “So let’s say I believe you and your oath that it’s not about you just getting it in,” she commented. “And I actually don’t expect you to give me a detailed answer. But I’m going to ask you two to talk about it. If she’s as eager as you said, then what’s her reason? Because if it’s just about getting it over with for her, just about doing it, then that’s not a good enough reason either. Don’t allow that she pressures herself into anything because of this upcoming separation, okay?”

Hiccup nodded mutely, but it wouldn’t have needed her warning; he would never want Astrid to feel pressured into something either.

“Good. And now that that’s settled,” Cami went on, turning away from the chair and walking over to one of her decorated shelves, “let’s talk about the technicalities. If I remember correctly you already know about the necessary rules of hygiene, right?”
“I do,” Hiccup murmured.

“Right. No need to go into the details there then.” She reached for a small object on one of the upper shelves. “So we can focus on the preparation. Because that’s the key, especially for someone who’s never done this before. First point: you need good lubrication.”

She came back to him and handed him the small object. On closer examination, it turned out to be a ceramic pot in the form of a swan, delicately sculpted and painted in white with blue-ish shadows. “What is this?” he asked hesitantly.

“It’s a scented oil. You can keep it and use it as lubrication; don’t worry, I have enough. And be sure to *use* enough. Go slowly. And by that, I mean *really* slowly. Take the usual time for foreplay and preparation and at least double it. Actually…” She paused for a moment, then nodded. “You have two nights left, is that right? Good. Then my advice would be to *only* prep her tonight. Let her get used to the feeling, see if she likes it at all, and let her body get accustomed to it. Play around a bit, but leave the main event for tomorrow night.”

Hiccup nodded to show that he’d understood. “That is a good idea. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. And Hiccup?”

“Yes?”

“When I’m your beloved’s bridesmaid...”

“Yes?” he repeated as she trailed off significantly.

“I’m going to ask her about what we just talked about. And if you *did* just lie to me about whose idea this was, and took the gods’ names in vain for that oath...” she smiled at him with all her teeth. “I won’t deprive the poor girl of her wedding night. But once you’re done, I’ll serve you your dick, fried and with onions. Got it?”

He winced. “You don’t need to worry.”

“All right.” She nodded, still smiling eerily, before glancing at a candle clock hanging near the wall to her bedroom. “Your usual half hour isn’t quite up yet. So, is there anything else you’d like to talk about?”

Chuckling, Hiccup shook his head. “No, not really.” After *this* talk just now, he was pretty much done with talking for tonight. To her at least.

They spent a couple of minutes in companionable silence, and Hiccup's attention turned back to the small pot she'd given him. Carefully, he opened it, and an all-too-familiar scent rose from the oil, making his heart flutter and his head spin. “Mayweed?” he asked, glancing up at Cami still standing over him.

She grinned. “Yeah. Originally I used rose oil, but after your suggestion, I pretty much changed everything to mayweed. You don’t like it?”

Chuckling, Hiccup shook his head as he put the lid back onto the swan-shaped pot, caressing it gently. “It’s perfect.”
And finally... all domino pieces are in place...
All The Best Laid Plans…

Chapter Notes

So, here we go again. Sorry again that there was no update last week! But everything went a bit chaotic, and, well... *shrug* I hope this chapter may make up for the wait though.

I've struggled with this week's title a bit as I had a very specific idea of what I wanted it to convey. By now, it ended up being this title form the song 'Best Laid Plans' by James Blunt. It's the perfect quote really, but I hesitated to use it because the song as a whole doesn't fit at all. But then, that's also true for other titles I chose, so I guess it's okay. ^^"

More at the end...

When Hiccup returned to the stables, he was greeted by the sight of something he’d grown used to, but would never tire of: Astrid lying in his bed, wrapped only in his warm blanket, and fast asleep. It was a heartwarming sight, and for a while, Hiccup just watched her sleep. She looked so soft, so peaceful, and he was reluctant to wake her. But he knew that she’d scold him if he didn’t, and she would have a point. Their time was almost up, and sleeping was too much of a waste of time.

He lay down beside her, and reached out to carefully caress her face. “Good evening, milady,” he whispered. “I hope you had a comfortable rest?”

Slowly, Astrid stirred and her eyes opened, still a little bleary. But when she saw him, her face turned into a warm smile. “Hey,” she mumbled. “You’re back.” She yawned and blinked a few times. “H-how late is it? How did things go, with Snot there and all?”

“Oh, Snotlout was not a problem,” he chuckled. “And I was able to sneak away as usual. Don’t worry, we have enough time now.”

Astrid’s smile grew even brighter, and she drew him closer toward her, her lips on his incredibly soft. More often than not lately, Astrid’s first reaction when they met at night was more intense, heated kisses and searching hands. But sometimes it also was like this, slow and sweet and sensual, and Hiccup couldn’t say which he preferred.

As always, he completely lost track of time as they kissed. Astrid’s soft gasps and her hands in his hair effectively distracted him from every thought that might have come up, be it about his conversation with Cami earlier or about the coming weeks of separation. As long as he was here, with her, nothing else mattered.

“So, did you ask her?” she eventually asked what easily could have been an hour later – an hour filled with nothing but soft kisses and caresses, of them basking in their closeness. She was wrapped tightly into his blanket against the cool air, her head resting on his bare chest by now, and
her fingers were drawing random patterns onto his skin.

Hiccup’s heartbeat quickened at her question. It wasn’t that he’d forgotten about this plan, not exactly. But a part of him, the part that was still clinging to the rules he’d grown up with, had hoped that she had forgotten about it.

"I did,” he replied, and shifted until he could look at her. “And she said we could do it,” he went on truthfully. It would have been easy to tell her something else on this matter and play safe… but he would never lie to her.

Astrid's eyes widened a little, gleaming with excitement. But before she could do or say anything in response to his answer, he slightly shook his head. “But before… I want to ask you a question.”

“A question? What question?”

“It's… I need to know why you are so eager.”

There was a moment of awkward silence before Astrid sat up and gave him a strange look, half a frown and half a puzzled smile. “What?”

Sighing, Hiccup sat up too and watched her intently. “I mean, why is this so important to you all of a sudden? Is it because I'm leaving? Do you… do you just want to do it, to get it done before I go?”

Slowly, Astrid shook her head, still looking confused. “No,” she mumbled. “No, that's not it. I…” She made a pause, thinking. “No, it's not because you're leaving,” she finally clarified, more clearly now. “If I'd found out about this option, found that book two weeks or even a month ago, then I would have wanted to try it then already. I want to learn about all the ways we can be close together, because I feel like every bit I know makes it easier, lighter. But… I do want to try before you go. I-I’m also curious about how it feels to-to have y-you in-inside me… I…”

With a fierce blush, she trailed off, stammering, and Hiccup acted purely on instinct, pulling her into a comforting hug. She gave in without resistance, hiding her face against his chest, and Hiccup wanted to kick himself. With all her courage and eager curiosity, he'd forgotten just how strange and unknown sex really was to her. Soothingly, he rubbed her back, and it didn't take long before she'd caught herself again.

“You're right,” she sighed, leaning more comfortable against him. “I'm eager to try this before you leave. But not because you leave… if that makes sense?”

Hiccup nodded. “It does.”

“Okay. So, can you now answer a question for me?”

“Of course! Whatever you want to know.”

She pushed herself up to look at him again, a weirdly tense expression on her face. “Why did you ask that? You seem… reluctant. Is it because you don’t want to do it? Please, I… I don't want to persuade you into doing something you don't want.”

For a short second, Hiccup just stared at her. Then he pulled her back into a hug, more tightly now than before, his whole body shaking with quiet laughter. “Oh, Milady, you are amazing. Have I ever told you that? Gods, I love you!”

Astrid, however, didn't seem to be quite as amused. “That's great and all, and I love you too. But it's not an answer to my question?”
Chuckling, he let go of her again, fighting to meet her eyes with the appropriate sincerity. “No, it wasn't, and I'm sorry,” he said, smiling ruefully. “You just surprised me, that's all. Okay, let's see. You wanted to know why I asked. Well, first because it was one of Cami's conditions. I had to make sure that you don't do something you're not ready for just because of time pressure.”

Astrid snorted and rolled her eyes, and Hiccup had to admit that it had been a foolish thought right from the beginning. She was so strong, there was probably nothing that could make her do what she didn't want.

“Okay, but that's only half of an answer,” she shrugged that topic off. “You said 'first'. So what's the second reason for you to be so hesitant?”

Hiccup bit his lip, but then let out a heavy sigh and shook his head. “No, you're right; there's something else. But it's not…”

“It's not what?” she asked carefully as he trailed off.

“It's nothing… nothing serious.” He gave her an apologetic smile. After a short pause, he made himself more comfortable, leaning against a straw bale, and held out his arms, inviting her to cuddle into them. He waited until she'd settled before he explained himself. “It’s… it’s not that I don’t want to. Believe me, physically, I’m just as eager to try as you are.”

“Oh, really?” she asked, and suggestively let her hand trail down his chest. But he caught it midway, entangling his fingers with hers, and playfully rolled his eyes at her.

“Really,” he emphasised, chuckling, but then became serious again. “It’s my mind that is torn. It’s just… the same thing as before, I guess. I’ve been raised to certain standards, certain rules. And even though I know by now that my understanding of those rules has been stricter than necessary, it’s still… weird to break them. Don’t get me wrong, I don’t regret anything that happened between us! Between just how right this--” he tightened his arm around her, “--feels and Cami’s reassurances, I’m not really worried anymore. But anal sex feels like a bigger step, something else, something more. And I’m still not entirely sure what to think, even though Cami didn’t really have any objections – beyond threatening to castrate me if she ever suspected that it had been my idea instead of yours, that is.” He’d added the last bit to lighten Astrid’s mood, and apparently, it had worked.

“She would do that, wouldn’t she?” she laughed, shaking her head in amusement.

“Without a doubt. Her exact words were that she wouldn’t deprive you of your wedding night but would cut off my dick afterwards and serve it to me, fried and with onions.”

“How very considerate of her,” Astrid giggled, then grimaced. “And Ouch!”

“Very much so,” Hiccup said, grimacing too.

In his arms, Astrid stirred, shifted until she could look at him. All of a sudden, her expression was serious again. “We don’t have to do this if it makes you uncomfortable,” she said quietly. “Yes, I’d love to try, but only if you want that too. We can always wait; we have time after all. And I’m sorry; if I’d known then I wouldn’t have brought it up at all.”

Once again, Hiccup’s chest felt as if it would burst, unable to contain all his feelings. Love, wonder, amazement, and the knowledge that he was just so lucky to have her. Without a word he cradled her face in his hand and pressed his lips to hers, kissing her passionately.

“You’re amazing,” he murmured when they parted, brushing his thumb over her cheek as if to
make sure she was real. Even after all these months and with their bond thrumming so vibrantly in
his chest, it was still hard to believe sometimes. For a few more seconds he gazed at her, at her tiny
nose, the freckles, the deep blue eyes, her round face with the pointy chin, all framed by golden
strands – and made a decision.

“Let’s try.”

.o O o.

Astrid would never admit it, but she was nervous. Not scared, not afraid, not uncomfortable or
worried, but nervous. So she was actually grateful for Cami’s suggestion to divide their approach
over the two nights they had left; to first get used to it tonight on the one hand, and to have
something to look forward to for tomorrow.

And it also helped that Hiccup seemed to be just as nervous as she was. It was written all over his
face as he returned with what looked like a bucket of water and a small ceramic pot, and made
himself comfortable at her side, propped up on one arm. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected, but
neither that nor her nervousness mattered anymore when he leaned over her to sweetly kiss her.

“Promise me that you’ll stop me right away if something doesn’t feel okay for you,” he murmured
against her lips. He sounded earnest, and Astrid understood how important this was to him.

“I promise,” she whispered back, meaning it, but then leaned in to kiss him again. She didn’t want
to talk right now. She only wanted to feel him.

And feeling him she did.

As he continued kissing her, his free hand slowly wandered on over her skin, her neck and
shoulders, her arms and sides. Astrid didn’t hold back either, exploring his body in the same
manner. As always, feeling his hot skin against her own without anything to separate them was
overwhelming. That and his kisses alone was enough to let her forget everything else, and she felt
as if they were floating in the moment, detached from the world outside.

She gasped when he became more active, his hand playing with her breasts. Caressing, kneading,
pinching; it didn’t take long until he had her in that wonderful mindless state where all she craved
was more. More of his touch, of the sensations he elicited, more of him. She wanted to protest
when he suddenly retreated, but when she opened her eyes she saw that he’d only turned to the side
and was reaching for the small pot he’d placed there earlier.

“It’s a scented oil,” he explained in a husky whisper at her questioning look. “For lubrication. It..
it’ll make things easier.”

He seemed to wait for some kind of response so Astrid nodded mutely. But the truth was that she
only had a vague idea at best of what he meant. For a second she pondered asking him, but decided
against it. Whatever questions she might have, she could ask those later. She trusted him, and for
now, that was enough for her.

“Can you try to look at me?” he murmured after he’d lain down next to her again. “It helps me to
better gauge how you feel, when to go slower or to stop.”

Astrid complied, gazing up at him through bleary eyes. She hadn’t even noticed that her eyes had
fallen close, had been too focused on his hand casually caressing her inner thighs. When she looked
up at him, he rewarded her with a beautiful smile, so warm that it made her heart melt.

However, keeping her eyes open became increasingly difficult. His fingers on her clit felt
wonderful as ever, but, of course, he didn’t linger there. Not tonight. Tonight, he moved on, down, his oily touch weirdly warm and slick. For a split second, she feared he would directly push in when his fingers found their goal, and she tensed.

“Relax,” he murmured, soothingly stroking her hair with his other hand as he made no attempt to push into her at all. Instead, he just lightly caressed her, massaging her with light pressure, and she easily relaxed again.

Once she’d gotten over the initial surprise, she even found that she rather liked him touching her there. It felt different, but still good. So good… A soft moan slipped from her lips as he increased the pressure a little bit, and her hand reflexively clutched at the blanket beneath them, searching for an anchor. On and on, it went like this, with Hiccup occasionally kissing her as a distraction or murmuring low praises. He hadn’t exaggerated when he’d said they would go slowly, and even though it frustrated her a little when all she wanted was more, she still enjoyed every second of it.

“Ready for a little more?”

Hiccup’s question barely registered in her mind, buzzing with all the sensations and feelings. She just shifted, struggled, tried to push against his hand. But apparently, he wouldn’t do more without an answer.

“Astrid?”

“Nng, yes. More,” she mumbled past biting her lip.

“All right,” he whispered, sounding tense. “Take a deep breath, then let it out again. But slowly.”

She did as he told her, trying to brace for what would come next. But she hadn’t been prepared. A high-pitched whine escaped her as Hiccup slowly pushed a finger into her. He didn’t go far, just to the first joint, but that already was enough. Never in her life had she anticipated how… how powerful anything could feel, not until that moment. The sensation of even such a small part of Hiccup being inside her was intense, so much more than she’d ever expected, and at first, she was entirely overcome.

“Astrid? Astrid, talk to me, please. Are you all right?”

It took a while before she realised that he was talking to her. She noticed that her eyes were closed again, and she forced them open, looking up into his clearly worried face.

“I’m fine,” she breathed, grinning, once she’d found control over her voice and features again. Then she frowned, wriggling, trying to feel… “Why did you stop?”

Hiccup’s expression broke into one of relief, and he laughed weakly. “I… thought it was too much.”

Grinning again, she shook her head. “Was good. Can you do that again?”

This time, it was easier. Astrid knew better what to expect, and while the sensation still was intense, she also managed to keep looking at Hiccup now, to keep her eyes open and reassure him. Time lost all meaning then as he went on, slowly pushing in deeper, more. Every now and then he took a break, for her sake or to add more oil. By the time he had two whole fingers inside her, Astrid was covered in sweat, but grinning like an idiot.

“You okay?” Hiccup asked for the umpteenth time, but his voice was different now, not as anxious as in the beginning, but rough and heavy. When her eyes made contact with his again, she saw that
he was certainly not unaffected by the last hour either. His eyes were dark and blown, his lips parted, and now that she thought about it she could also feel his trousers against her side where he had to be straining against the fabric from within.

Holding his gaze and glad that his hand wasn’t moving for the moment, she brought her own hand down to where she could feel him. His eyes widened a little when he got her intention, but he didn’t interject, only groaned when he felt her touch. Slowly, almost reverently, she pushed the fabric down, always watching his reaction. This went far beyond what he usually allowed, but if tonight was meant to be preparation for tomorrow, wasn’t it only sensible to loosen that rule as well? Hiccup panted, but didn’t stop her, only whimpered when her hand closed around him, slowly stroking him as he’d shown her. It was daunting – everything, from feeling him hot and thick and pulsing in her hand to him now carefully moving his fingers in and out of her – and to distract them both she craned her neck, searching for his lips again. It was a desperate kiss, hungry, both seeking more of the other with every passing second. Between his groans and grunts muffled into her mouth, his hips jerking against her grip, and his fingers twitching inside her, it was difficult to concentrate on moving her hand along his shaft, and he didn’t make it easier when he brought his thumb to her clit, rubbing it with every thrust of his fingers.

Soon, it became all too much for her. The friction on those weirdly sensitive spots, feeling his movements at her side, frantic and searching, his noises – it all had her tumbling into the most intense orgasm she’d experienced so far. She screamed as her body shook with pleasure, and the fact that she could feel him even more intensely as her body clamped down on his fingers cramped up the sensations even more. She barely registered Hiccup’s cursing, how his body shook, or something warm landing on her belly, too overwhelmed by what her body was capable of feeling. It seemed as if there was still a lot for her to learn and discover.

It took her a while before awareness truly returned to her, but when it did she could feel Hiccup’s lips against her skin again. But now, all urgency from before was gone. Instead, he was trailing a line of soft pecks up her neck and along her jaw, making her hum and giggle.

“How are you feeling?” he eventually asked, murmuring quietly against her skin.

Astrid hummed. “Gooooood.”

She turned to look at him, a little apprehensive about how he would feel after he’d been so reluctant before. She really hadn’t wanted to push him, and even though he’d agreed – and, Freya, it had been worth it! – she was a little afraid now how he would react. But apparently, all her worries were unfounded. Hiccup looked entirely relaxed and at ease, warmly smiling down at her.

“And you?” she asked, reaching up to cup his face.

He chuckled, and turned his head to place a soft kiss onto her palm. “I’m good too. More than good, actually. I…” He trailed off, shaking his head, but still smiled. “It still feels weird to circumvent the rules like this, but… But I won’t deny that I very much enjoyed this. You’re amazing! And I never thought… Gods, Astrid, I love you so much!”

Laughing weakly, Astrid closed her eyes as he leaned his forehead against her own. “I love you too, Hiccup,” she whispered, and let her hand drop to his chest, to his heart. “More than words can say.” Then her lips twitched into a smirk. “And I can’t wait for tomorrow night!”

Hiccup groaned as he rolled to the side and sat up. “You’re unbelievable!” But there was no anger in his voice, only amusement and a hint of anticipation that told her he felt similarly.

Astrid couldn’t say that she liked the chill of the cool soapy water with which Hiccup quickly
cleaned them both, but him cuddling up to her after he’d put his trousers back on, with his bare chest warm against her back, made more than up for any inconvenience. Humming, she huddled closer against his warmth when the distant drums of Odin’s clock towers echoed toward them.

“Midnight,” Hiccup noted, then let out a short laugh. He pulled her even closer, burying his face in her hair, and whispered, “Happy birthday.”

Astrid chuckled, but didn’t reply and only basked in how wonderful this moment was. Wrapped into Hiccup’s embrace and his blanket and still a little dazed from earlier, she couldn’t remember ever to have started her birthday with a similar sense of happiness. She would savour this moment, drawing upon its memory whenever she missed Hiccup during the coming weeks – even as she expected this day to end with even happier experiences.

.o O o.

Late morning on the next day, Astrid began to realise how much she would need the sweet reminder of that shared moment today. She had anticipated that her birthday would be a busy day, so she and Hiccup had gotten more sleep than on most other nights. However, it still stunned her when Ruff came whirling into her bedroom a good two hours earlier than usual, carrying one of her two new-made dresses for this day.

“Come on, sleepyhead. Time to get up,” she called in means of waking her. “We have a strict timetable, can’t waste a second.”

Sighing tiredly, Astrid got up and let her maidservant put the elegant day-dress on her; an extravagant dress made of dark blue satin and with lace trimmings along her arms, her decolletage, and along the heavy skirt. Still, it was nothing to the dress she would wear tonight, made of a light fabric in uncountable shades of blue, and decorated with silken flowers and swan patterns everywhere.

“Why the hurry?” she asked, grunting when Ruff pulled the cords around her waist tight. “Isn’t it just the usual procedure? A reception, mingling, and then the official dinner after nightfall?” It was the same every year, after all. A long and boring day that would drag on and on, not much helped this year by her torn feelings. On the one hand, she wanted it to be over as quickly as was possible so she could return to Hiccup. But on the other hand, she didn’t want the day to be over. She didn’t want it to be tomorrow, didn’t want him to leave. If only there was a way he could stay, just a little bit longer…

Ruff, however, just snorted. “Yeah, that’s the plan, as far as I know. But you’ll need every bit of time you can get, believe me.”

Even though she was mystified by Ruff’s words, Astrid didn’t waste much time on thinking about their meaning and let her mind drift off to the previous night instead. No matter what she’d meant, it would still be the same as every other year. A reception for the well-wishers to greet her and present their gifts, an hour or so of polite chatting and mingling, and then later the formal dinner in the big dining hall. Nothing special.

But once Tuff escorted her to the throne room where the reception would be held, she quickly understood why Ruff had urged her on. The number of well-wishers was anything but ‘as usual’. In the previous years, there had only been the Grand Dukes, their and her father’s higher-ranked vassals, and some of the local nobility. This year though? There seemed to be ten times more; not only the usual dukes and barons and counts, but so many more she’d never even seen before and nearly all of them had also brought their sons, wives, and daughters. Astrid’s eyes grew wider and wider as more and more people filed into the throne room, and the table at the side of the room
meant to hold her gifts quickly got expanded by a second and a third. And as if the sheer quantity of
gifts wasn’t enough to baffle her, the *quality* of those gifts also was much higher than in previous
years. Everyone seemed eager to point out the valuable jewellery or adornments they’d brought for
her, and before long her head was spinning. What in great Odin’s name was *happening* here?

“The only explanation I can come up with is still the accolades,” Eret mumbled when she asked
that question a little while later as the reception had gone over to the least-formal part of the day.
“But even that doesn’t explain *all this*!” He gestured vaguely at the people around them and the
gifts still on display.

Mutely, Astrid nodded, and neither Dagur nor Snot seemed to be able to come up with any other
explanation either. They looked just as bewildered as she did. But at least she knew why Ruff had
been so adamant about her needing all the time she could get; the reception had taken *hours*. By
now, it was close to noon already, and with this many people ‘polite mingling’ was turning into a
chore. ‘An hour or two’ just wasn’t enough to do all these people justice.

Sighing, she braced herself to talk to the next group of strangers. She couldn’t hide with her
brothers forever, after all – that would only draw things out even more. But before she could leave
their comfortable circle, Eret held her back.

“Hey, wait a moment,” he said with an encouraging smile. “I talked to Father last night, about the
idea with Ester’s wedding, remember? To be honest, his reaction was a little weird, something
about ‘We’ll have to see how the next weeks turn out,’ but he certainly seemed to like the idea of
you being there. Now all you need to do is ask your father.”

This news, and the reminder of that visit, brightened Astrid’s mood immensely. There was light at
the end of the tunnel. Even though Hiccup would leave tomorrow, it wouldn’t be too long until she
saw him again. And no matter how long this day would drag out, at the end of it she would be in
his arms again. Taking the next step…

With her mouth turning dry in anticipation, Astrid gave Eret a grateful smile. “I’ll ask Father as
soon as I get the chance,” she announced, then left them to do her duties as hostess. They’d get the
chance to talk more later anyway.

For the next few hours, Astrid was constantly surrounded by her guests. Sometimes, she would
converse with only one person, which made it harder to get away, and other times, she got involved
into small groups, all trying to talk to her at once. It gave her a headache, but she knew that
retreating to her rooms wasn’t an option today, no matter the reason. So she just put her mask of a
smile on and vehemently fought down the uneasiness of so many strangers around her.

She didn’t believe any of the men around her would harm her. Not really and certainly not here in
this crowded room, with servants and guards everywhere. But it still took the constant reminder of
Hiccup – of his encouraging smile and his soothing embrace – for her to bear it all. Especially
when one particular person from her *honoured* guests approached.

“Milady Astrid! How lucky to get you alone for once. Allow me to again congratulate you on your
birthday. And may I say that you look even more stunning than usual?”

With tensed shoulders, Astrid slowly turned toward the tall man in his elegant outfit. “Duke
Thuggory,” she greeted him coolly. “Thank you for the compliment, your Grace.”

Thuggory chuckled darkly. “Still so stiff, Milady? Ah, but I’m sure in a few months, you’ll be
addressing me... *differently*.”
“Differently how?” she replied, narrowing her eyes.

He smiled wolfishly. “As ’my lord husband’, of course,” he purred. “I can’t wait to hear it from your pretty lips.”

She choked and managed to get out in a strangled voice, “You’re insane if you think I’d ever marry you, let alone in a few months!”

His lips curled in a satisfied sneer. “What is insanity if not a man who sees the world in a different way? I see it very differently. But unlike a madman ranting on the street, I can bring what I see into reality. And I will.”

She felt nauseous, and replied, “You’ll excuse me if I think you should see Freya’s healers for treating your diseased mind.”

His smile deepened. “Diseased... or prescient, Princess? Only time and the Norns will tell.”

She bit her lip, fighting the urge to reply that, of the two of them, only she had received a vision of the gods as to her future husband, and it wasn’t him.

Thuggory was watching her face with clear enjoyment, and leaned in. Too close for her taste. “We’ll see, Princess. We’ll see,” he murmured, his breath tangible on her cheek, and she fought down the bile rising in her throat. The mere idea...

But before she could say anymore, he’d backed away, his smirk still present. “I expect we’ll see more of each other soon, dearest Princess. Until then, I hope you enjoy your birthday.” Before she could reply and give articulation to her disgust – or her confusion – he turned and walked away.

Let him talk, she tried to calm herself. That’s all he can do anyway. Taking a deep breath, she placed her hand to her chest, to where she could feel Hiccup’s soul, his warmth, his love. One day she would be his wife, she reminded herself. The Gods wanted them married, and no pompous lordling would be able to work against this.

With shaking legs but a slightly truer smile, she turned to talk to the next group of guests. She was looking forward to the formal dinner later when she at least didn’t need to interact with so many people anymore.

.o O o.

‘Later’ turned into much later than she’d expected though. Ruff definitely hadn’t exaggerated about the strict timetable; she’d barely had an hour between the social mingling and the formal dinner. Ruff actually had a minor meltdown at how little time was left for her to arrange Astrid’s hair in the required extravagant style after putting the evening-dress on, and indeed Astrid arrived late to the dinner, everyone else already being seated.

Her father gave her a stern look as she took her seat next to him which turned more accepting when he took in her appearance. Sighing inwardly at how her appearance seemed to make up for everything, Astrid let her eyes wander around the room, once more baffled by just how many people there were. The room was packed to the last free space with tables and chairs, with barely enough space to walk between them, much less wander around and mingle. That was something, at least. But it also meant that another impromptu dance with her brothers was impossible.

Next to her on the King’s High Table sat Eret, Dagur, and Snot, the Grand Dukes in the same manner next to her father, with Grand Duke Oswald fortunately having recovered from his illness. The men were arranged around the heads of the table to make chatting easier – among themselves
at least. Astrid herself was singled out without a partner directly across from her, so that she could more easily watch over the whole room – or, more likely, be seen by the whole room. It was only thanks to her practice that her mask didn’t turn into a scowl, and she was grateful that not much later the first course, creamy soup with vegetables, was served to everyone. The sooner all this nonsense was over the better.

The evening promised to drag out though. Astrid was uncomfortably aware of how many eyes rested on her from all across the room, and her brothers’ bantering next to her only helped so much to distract her. Oh, it certainly was fun to listen to Dagur teasing Snot about all the mishaps he’d had with Chomp over the day and Eret giving him tips on what to heed in the future. She contemplated saving some of Snot’s dignity by mentioning that Daniel had gotten thrown off, too. But participating in their conversation was difficult from where she sat, and she soon gave up. She’d had enough talking today anyway. Instead, her mind drifted off to the stables, to Hiccup. How comfortable she would feel in his arms once she got back to him, the look of happiness in his eyes, and–

“You look happy, child. I hope the party is to your liking then?”

Her father’s voice tore her out of her daydream, and she hastily recomposed her face, afraid of what exactly it might have shown. She turned toward her father, giving him a smile that was half-genuine and half-mask.

“Thank you, Father. I see and appreciate how much effort went into all this,” she said, unwilling to outright lie and say that she enjoyed herself.

The King nodded, smiling, then they both looked up as the next course was announced. And from one second to the other, Astrid’s stomach dropped, all happiness from thinking about Hiccup gone in an instant, and she felt sick.

The castle was proud to serve a special dish on this special day: swan roast from the castle’s own ground.

So that was why her swans hadn’t been at their lake...

When the dish was served to her, Astrid had to press a shaking hand over her mouth to hide her reaction. With a horrified expression in her wide eyes, she stared at the meat, surely tender and delicious, but knew that she wouldn’t be able to eat even one bite. Why? Why had her father ordered this? Why hadn’t he asked her at least once what she actually wanted?

Tears rose to her eyes, and she fought hard to keep them back. Why had this had to happen? Why, oh, why had her swans needed to get slaughtered for this? She wasn’t naïve, knew perfectly well that most animals were kept around as livestock, and she accepted their death as a necessary part of life. But this? This hadn’t been necessary. Not her swans! This shouldn’t have happened, this shouldn’t have happened...

A small sound escaped her, something between a sob and a wail, but luckily the noises around them drowned it out. Only Eret had noticed, his hand soothingly rubbing her back. I’m sorry!, he mouthed, looking just as stricken as she felt. Behind him, Dagur and Snot were giving her similar looks of sympathy, and Astrid wanted nothing more than to burrow into their comforting hugs right now.

But she couldn’t. Appearances had to be kept at every time, and especially now, with so many eyes on her, she couldn’t afford to show any weakness. Slowly, with her hands still shaking, she reached for her cutlery. She didn’t fool herself, knew that she wouldn’t be able to stomach the swan roast.
But she at least forced herself to eat from the vegetables and dumplings, slowly to make sure she wouldn’t run out of those before the next course was served.

She was desperate for any form of distraction, but thinking about Hiccup right now only brought back memories of her nightmare from all those weeks ago. Another unnecessary death, and even though it hadn’t been real, she couldn’t shake it off her mind. The image of Hiccup dangling from the tree, feet kicking in that hopeless fight for air, and–

No! No, she couldn’t think about this, not now. She needed something else, something to focus on or she’d go insane. Her brothers were equally low-spirited though, not talking at all right now, and Astrid’s hands tightened around her knife and fork. She needed something else to occupy her mind with, anything, just–

“Ah, it’s so great to have us all together again,” sounded Grand Duke Oswald’s booming voice toward her, and she eagerly focused on him and the men’s conversation. Everything would be better than her own thoughts right now. “And good that I’m back up on my feet; would have been a shame if old Spite comes down from his mountains for once and I miss it;” he laughed. “It’s been too long, old friend.”

There was low chuckling from all men, Oswald and Spitelout exchanging a couple of playful punches, before Spitelout turned serious again. “Aye. But there’s still someone missing. Where is the old warhorse? I thought he’d at least show up to this event, if nothing else.”

From one second to the other, the men were dead silent, and even though Astrid had only listened to distract herself, this reaction drew her honest attention. She chanced a glance up at the men’s faces, and was surprised to see pain and sorrow there. It wasn’t often that these men showed their emotions so clearly, especially not in public.

It was Oswald who finally spoke again. “You don’t know?” he asked, voice hollow.

“Know what?” Spitelout shot back, a little irritatedly. “Does he think himself too good to be among us now?”

Another moment of heavy silence, and Astrid sifted through her memories, wondering who they were talking about. Was there someone missing from the group? But it had always been just these four.

This time, it was her father who broke the silence. “Stoick is dead,” he said quietly. There was pain in his voice, something Astrid rarely ever had heard, except when he’d talked about their mother when she and Daniel had been younger. Who was this Stoick that mentioning him had such an effect on him – on all of them, really? But that wasn’t a question for now, and she quickly stowed it away into the back of her mind as the men kept on talking.

“He… what?” hissed Spitelout incredulously. “You’re joking, right? I would have–”

“It’s true,” the older Eret on the table interrupted him, speaking in a low but firm voice. ”He’s dead, as is the entire family.”

“Well, not the en–” Oswald threw in, but got cut off with a quick gesture by her father.

“Not here,” Osmond said in a low voice. He sounded stern now, and Astrid risked another glance up at their faces. There was determination mixed with sorrow and, in Spitelout’s case, utter confusion. Astrid really felt with him there.

“I don’t understand,” he said, turning to Oswald, but again her father cut off any further comments.
“We can talk about this later,” he said sternly. “Now, there’s something else to do.” He stood up, and within seconds, the entire hall had fallen silent.

Astrid watched in puzzlement; she hadn’t expected a speech from her father, not now. This day was full of surprises, and so far she couldn’t say that she’d enjoyed many of them.

“My dear guests,” the King called in his far-reaching voice. “I’m honoured to welcome you all here, honoured that so many of you followed my invitation.”

Astrid frowned. Her father had invited all these people? But why? Mystified, she listened just like everyone else in the room.

“Yes, we’re here to celebrate the birthday of our Princess, my beloved daughter, but I know that rumours were spreading already. As most of you already guessed, there also was another reason behind those invitations. This year, my father, King Ragnvald the Blessed, the glorious founder of our beautiful Kingdom, would have turned eighty-one years. And in honour of his nine-times-nine and to celebrate our latest victories over the Malarians, I’ve decided to host eighty-one days of festivals; funded out of the Royal Purse for all of the folk of the realm to participate in and enjoy.”

There was tentative cheering in the room, and Astrid threw a puzzled look at her brothers. While this explained why there were so many people here, it still astonished her that she hadn’t heard about this plan before. But as it seemed, Eret, Dagur, and Snotlout were just as surprised as she was.

Next to her, her father’s voice rose in volume to carry over the babbling of the crowd. “The festivities will start tomorrow, and there will be a wide variety of events, suited for everybody. There will be tournaments and hunts, balls and feasts. And to crest this grand occasion with a worthy highlight, we will celebrate another joyous event during these days of happiness.” He made a pause, waiting until he had everyone’s undivided attention again, then continued. “Honoured guests, I am proud to announce that, in two months from today, we will celebrate the wedding of our fair Princess Astrid.”

Chapter End Notes

Right... before I hide under rocks again (aka in our secret writers’ bar), I want to say that I’m immensely curious for the reactions to this chapter! The ending, yes, it doesn't really come as a surprise to many, but still.

But there's so much more! Thuggory, the swans, the Grand Dukes’ conversation, and, of course, the steamy beginning. And the ending! I'm really looking forward to hearing your thought to all this.
Interlude 4: Late Insight

Chapter Notes

I'll be honest and say... the reactions to the last chapter completely blew me away! There were some great reactions, on FFnet, on AO3, and on Tumblr, thank you all so very very much! That's what makes all the struggles and hardships of writing worth the while! :)

Now, I know you're all eager to know what happens next with Astrid and that announcement. But before we go back there in the next chapter, here's another interlude, and I guess many of you can guess who's POVs we're getting. There's been quite some anger and hate coming up after the previous chapter for the King but also for Daniel, and I hope I can disperse at least part of that... They don't mean bad...

See the end of the chapter for more notes

...so I am glad to inform you that the construction work on the fortress of Redpeak proceeds as planned. Thanks to Uncle Spiteloût’s help with organizing the logistics and his recommendations on more people to help, we were able to start with the alterations even sooner than I had hoped. By now, a part of those alterations are already underway and the preparations for the remainder are complete. I trust in the overseers’ capability to supervise their execution. Thus I am confident in being able to return to the castle as planned once this last mission is complete.

Daniel reviewed the lines he'd just written and nodded to himself before sealing the paper with wax. It was just a short note, to be delivered by pigeon, and there were many points he would have liked to add, but hadn't due to the limited space. But he couldn't change it, and it wouldn't be long until his return to the capital anyway.

Sighing, he thought about all the things that would await him there. The report and a renewed expression of gratitude to Spiteloût, because without his help, none of his current work would have worked out as effortlessly as it had. But there were also other, less pleasant duties awaiting him.

Like investigating the death of the former Count Ravenledge, for example. Even though Daniel had received the message weeks ago, shortly after his arrival in Westhill, it still irked him. By all accounts, the old man had been found dead in his cell the morning after Daniel had left the capital, letting him escape the slow and public death he’d been sentenced to as part of justice for his crimes. Even more worrisomely, the report suspected poison. With how secluded and securely the man had been guarded, Daniel could only think of one sensible explanation that didn't involve their entire personal security having been compromised: his father had arranged for it. It also explained why the former count had agreed to confess after stonewalling: because he'd gotten a new offer, a quicker death in exchange for information. Daniel could see the… the meri in this decision, even as he didn't like it. They had needed that information far more than they'd needed another public execution. But it irked him that he hadn't been included in the plan. His father had probably thought he would be against it, would have demanded justice for the people of Ravenledge. Well, he would have been right, but still. Not knowing about the plan had made Daniel give a promise he felt more and more reluctant to keep with every day.

He had promised not to treat Angus, Harold's older brother, any differently, despite the crimes his
father and brother had committed. It had been an easy promise at that time. Nothing in the reports they’d received indicated that Angus, who’d left his family in early years to receive extended education as a squire and a nobleman, had been involved in any of those crimes. But since Daniel’s return to Westhill, the young man had changed. Not enough to warrant disciplining him, but it was still obvious that he was upset about losing his birthright to title and land.

With another heavy sigh, he rubbed his face. He knew all too well that focusing on this problem – no matter how real it may be – only had one purpose right now. It was to distract him from what he really worried about upon his return to the castle: how Astrid would react when she saw him. For the umpteenth time this evening he glanced at the calendar on his small travel desk, and his heart sank. This wasn’t the first year he couldn’t be there for his sister’s birthday, what with him being a knight for two years now and a squire for many years before that. It had always pained him to not celebrate this day with her, but this year, it was so much worse. Because he knew this year was different. Maybe it was right now that their father held his speech; about the anniversary to their grandfather’s birthday, the planned festivities, and all the other made-up reasons they’d come up with to mask the real event.

Astrid’s upcoming wedding, and the time before where her suitors were supposed to compete for her favour.

It was a sickening plan, but it would certainly be effective. The prospect of the Princess’s hand in marriage would be a potent bait, potent enough to lure out even the most hesitant conspirators, and by the time they realised that the accidental deaths were only hitting the enemies of the Crown, it would be too late. But it pained Daniel to use something that was supposed to be a happy day for his sister for such a purpose, and the only solace he could find in any of this was that she would still get to choose.

It meant that not that much would change, or might even change to her advantage. He still put all his hopes in Eret, in that he and Astrid would finally be able to look beyond their sibling bond and see how good they would be for each other. But if there was someone else among the guests they’d invited, another nobleman that caught her interest, then she would be free to choose him instead. That was good, wasn’t it? It gave her more freedom than she ever could have hoped for, and the fact that all this would come two years sooner than expected wasn’t really that bad… right?

Groaning, Daniel let his head drop onto the table. She would hate it! He knew Astrid too well to fool himself on this. She would hate being used like this. She would hate being reduced to just the royal figurehead, nothing but a puppet in this scheme. And she would hate that she had no say whatsoever in this decision that so immensely changed her entire life. Maybe it wouldn’t change all that much in the end if she chose Eret as he hoped, but still.

“Is anything the matter, my Lord?”

Daniel sat up straight in an instant, looking up at the young man who had entered his private tent.

“Milburn,” he greeted his squire, buying time to recompose himself. “Yes, everything’s fine. I… just finished the letter for the King.”

Without a word of explanation needed he handed the folded and sealed paper over, and Milburn directly walked over to where the last of his carrier pigeons was waiting in its cage. It took him only a minute to fix the paper to the bird’s leg, whereupon he went to the tent’s entrance and let it loose.

“I brought you the reports from the scouts,” Milburn said as he returned, handing him a letter, probably from the captain of his guard. “It looks like the area is clear of any Malarian raiders.
There’s one group of bandits operating in this general area, but they aren’t big enough to pose a threat to us. Nothing should get in the way of tomorrow’s trip to that outpost.”

Daniel nodded mutely. He hadn’t expected anything else, but it was still good to have the confirmation.

“So, now that this is dealt with…” Milburn began hesitantly. “May I ask what is bothering you, Milord? Anything I can do to help? Get you a mug of ale, for example?”

Smiling weakly, Daniel let out a snort. For two years now, Milburn had been his squire, but it still surprised him on a regular basis how good an observer the young man was. “No ale, thank you. It’s really nothing of importance, just…” he paused, considering options, then let out a heavy sigh. By now, secrecy wasn’t important anymore. Tomorrow, all the previously spread letters would become public declarations, announcing the eighty-one days of festivities and the Princess’s wedding as the crowning highlight. Telling his squire now beforehand wouldn’t do any damage anymore – the official part and his own worries, at least.

“Actually, you’re right,” he said ruefully. “There is something bothering me, but it’s nothing you can help me with.”

Milburn, easily able to interpret his master’s tone of voice, quickly seated himself on a stool, and watched Daniel in anticipation. It wasn’t often that Daniel could talk about official or personal topics with him, but when he did, Milburn was always eager to listen and often even able to help with a good piece of advice. Daniel doubted that he would ever become a skilled fighter, but he certainly would become a good advisor in a few years.

“It’s nothing… heavily important for the Kingdom,” he began slowly. “I’m mainly worried about my sister.”

Frowning, Milburn cocked his head? “The Princess? Why? Did something happen to her?”

The reaction made Daniel smile inwardly. If he hadn’t known better, he might have thought the lad had a crush on Astrid. But knowing that women weren’t of any interest to him meant that his honest concern was merely born of politeness and the tentative friendship they had developed over the years.

“No, nothing happened to her. Not as far as I know at least; she should be fine. But it’s her birthday—” Milburn nodded knowingly, “—and the King will make a big announcement today. You’ll hear all about it in the next few days, but in the end, it all boils down to her marrying in less than two months. And I’m worried how she’ll take the news. She didn’t know about this plan beforehand, so as to not trouble her. But with no time to get used to it, I fear it’s going to be a shock to her. Announcing her wedding without even knowing who her husband is going to be, and even two years earlier than is customary…” he trailed off, shaking his head. No, she wouldn’t like it, and it truly pained him that she would have to go through this and that he wasn’t there to help her.

“You don’t know who she’ll marry?” Milburn asked, a little incredulously. “How’s that possible?”

“It… it’s complicated,” Daniel sighed, unable to explain the whole scheme to lure out their enemies. “All that’s certain is that she’ll have to choose her husband-to-be from a group of selected noblemen.” Of which she barely knows anyone, he added inwardly, scowling.

Milburn’s sudden laughter took him completely by surprise. Daniel looked up, puzzled by this reaction, and tried to make sense of it.
“I—I’m sorry, Milord,” he gasped, visibly fighting to pull himself together but failing miserably. “It’s just… it isn’t even funny, but… but I’ve heard so much and… and… Oh, Gods, I’m so sorry.”

Daniel watched in bewilderment until his squire had calmed down enough to speak clearly again.

“I’m truly sorry, please believe me. I didn’t mean to laugh about a topic that upsets you so much, Milord. And I’m sorry for your sister as well, that can’t be an easy time for her. I was just laughing, because… well, I know of at least one person who will be absolutely heartbroken about the news.”

Daniel snorted. “Oh?” he asked, not really interested. Aside from her status, Astrid had grown into a beautiful woman. He wasn’t blind, after all. He was used to hearing about people being infatuated with her.

But Milburn’s enthusiasm was unwavering. “Oh, yes,” he went on, chuckling again. “You see, the guards you brought with you from the castle were talking about it a lot. Well, probably not to you, I guess, but, well… Apparently, there’s been this new fellow around the castle? And whenever he’s around the Princess, he can’t take his eyes off her. From what I heard, it goes far beyond a normal crush, he even frequents an Ástir playing the role of the Princess. He never grew past the point of endearing puppy adoration though, not disturbing at all, they said, or they would have dealt with him already, and some say he’s even friends with the Princess, though that’s just a rumour. Either way, he’s going to be devastated when he hears about this. Ah, but I better not laugh too much about this, or meeting him come summer is going to be awkward,” he added, chuckling in slight embarrassment. Then he looked at Daniel. “Sir? Is… everything all right?”

Daniel had listened to the whole speech with growing alarm. Had there been someone stalking Astrid without him knowing about it? Hearing that his men would have dealt with the man if he’d gone too far was reassuring, but still. He was still wondering who this man could be when Milburn’s last addition made him look up in confusion. “You expect to meet this man? How? Is he one of the new recruits? We don’t even know where those will be going yet.”

“Oh, I know,” Milburn nodded, grinning. “But I expect to be working in close proximity with this one. As I understand, you and the ducal heirs are going to form a team, right? So I expect to spend a lot of time with Sir Eret’s squire.”

Daniel blinked. He blinked again. And then it was his turn to burst out laughing. “You’re talking about Hiccup?” he gasped out, disbelievingly. Oh, sure, there had been a time when he’d hoped for this option; it would have solved two problems at once. But by now, that hope was long gone.

“Uh, yes, that was his name.” Milburn nodded, clearly surprised by his master’s reaction.

Shaking his head as his amusement simmered down, Daniel sighed. “Believe me, Hiccup doesn’t have a crush on my sister. I can confirm the rumours: he and the Princess indeed became good friends over the winter. But his heart belongs to someone else. He’d told us about her once, you see? I’ve never seen a man that much in love before. I mean… I might have been a little intoxicated at that time, but I still remember enough. That dazed smile and the enthusiasm with which he’d talked about his beloved. No, be assured, there’s no place in his heart for anyone else.”

Milburn cocked his head. “Are you sure? I mean, no offence, Milord, and you certainly know him better, but the men were all pretty convinced he only has eyes for your sister. Ah, well, but if he told you who his love is then they must be mistaken. Less funny but also less awkward, and better for him anyway.” He shrugged.

“Actually, he never…” Daniel began, but trailed off again, his mind suddenly working with rapid speed.
Hiccup had never told them who his beloved was. Only that he would need to convince her father and brother of his worth before he could marry her… A picture was forming in Daniel’s mind, but it didn’t make much sense yet. That… couldn’t be, could it? Yes, Hiccup was seeing Cami, but not because she played the part of the Princess, but because they were friends. On that point, the rumours already were wrong. But what about the rest? What about Hiccup looking at Astrid more than most others, enough to draw the attention of the guards? *If* he’d had a crush on Astrid, then he probably would have hidden that from him and Eret. But from others? There would have been no need.

Could it be? Daniel sifted through his memories, trying to remember what Hiccup had said about his beloved.

> She’s amazing! I only met her after we got here, but it already feels as if we’ve known each other forever. She’s so beautiful, her eyes gleaming as bright as the sky, and her hair… her soft skin, and those sweet lips. I could spend all day kissing her. But she’s so much more than just beautiful, also kind and funny, witty and smart, strong and brave. So brave… And I love her. Gods, I do. I love her so much.

Daniel swallowed, hard. It fit… He hadn’t even wasted one thought about this back then, but the description, vague as it was, certainly fitted to his sister. Was Hiccup in love with Astrid? Was she the one he wanted to marry, whose family he had to convince? But how was *Astrid* thinking about all this, what did that mean for her? Had he brought danger into her life by involving Hiccup into their activities? Had he brought another unwanted admirer who would upset her with his advances? But no… Daniel clearly remembered Hiccup’s words in the tavern that night.

> “I want to marry her. And I will marry her one day. She’s the one for me, I know it.”

> “So she feels the same?”

> “Amazingly, she does.”

Yes, those had only been *his* words. Sure, he’d gotten to know Hiccup as nothing but honest and honourable, but could he trust him in this? Could it be that Astrid felt the same? With these thoughts, another picture rose to his mind’s eye. The picture of Astrid hugging Hiccup tight at the *Grand Blot*. At that time, Daniel had been stunned by her seeking this kind of closeness to a man, so shortly after Harold’s assault, and then the fear in her eyes afterwards had convinced him that it must have been nothing but a thoughtless reaction. But when he thought about it now… It was *remarkable* how easily and naturally the motion had come, how she’d seemed to know exactly where to place her arms. How relaxed and *at ease* she’d been in that moment. And the fear… it hadn’t been directed at Hiccup, Daniel realised with a start. It had been directed at *him*!

> “Oh dear Gods,” he breathed as everything clicked into place. With unseeing eyes he gazed into the distance as his mind raced through the weeks they’d spend together. Astrid had been so different. He’d written that off to Eret’s presence and the horses, but even with those explanations, the changes in her behaviour had surprised him. But if she’d fallen in love, for real, it all made sense. Her cheerful mood, her dreamy smiles, her enthusiasm and occasional distractedness. All that made sense when she and Hiccup had been in love all this time.

He gasped out a laugh, a disbelieving smile on his face. This was *everything* he’d hoped for. His beloved sister, happy and cared for by a man who truly loved her, a man he respected. And a new purpose for a friend who’d lost everything.

But why hadn’t she told him? Why had they kept it a secret? She used to tell him everything…
The answer came to Daniel with a painful sting. The fear in Astrid’s eyes. She’d been afraid of him, of his reaction. And after Harold's assault, that even made sense in a way. Daniel would have punished everyone who would have dared to lay hand on her, and he even remembered how he’d warned Hiccup to not touch her again on that first night. But did she really believe he’d do anything if she was happy? Again, he tried to go through past events in his mind, how Astrid begging for mercy had only made things worse, how he’d sworn to himself to more trust in his own judgement in the future, and realised… Yes, she did believe that. And to his own disgrace, he couldn’t even say that he blamed her.

“What have I done?” he muttered, face buried in his hands. If Astrid didn’t trust him enough, then that was on him alone, he knew that. But if he’d known, he would have done everything to support them. Talk to their father, provide Hiccup with enough influence to make him eligible. It wouldn’t have been easy, but surely possible, somehow. It had to be. But now, it was too late, he realised with a start. The announcement was made, the group of suitors already picked. Astrid was to marry one of the invited men – and Hiccup wasn’t one of them. If only she’d told him!

But no, it was not too late! Daniel refused to believe that. His father was the King, for Odin’s sake! That had to count for something. And he had promised to support Hiccup in convincing his beloved’s family.

Hastily, he reached for another sheet of paper and his pencil, startling his squire with his sudden activeness. “Milburn, get another pigeon ready. I need to write another letter to my father.” There had to be something they could do. Maybe they could make Hiccup a baron or even a count. Or he could become an advisor of some rank, just putting him into any position that would make it acceptable for Astrid to choose him if that was what she wanted. If there was a chance for her to marry for love, then Daniel would do everything to make it possible.

He started to scribble a few quick lines to his father, explaining the situation and asking for his help, when Milburn clearing his throat drew his attention. The lad was still sitting on his stool, unmoving and with a look of discomfort on his face.

“I-I’m sorry, Milord,” he said in an apologetic voice. “But you can’t send another carrier pigeon; I just sent our last one off.” He shrugged helplessly, looking truly miserable for being unable to follow his command.

“Oh, for the…” Daniel cursed. He brought his fist to the table, making the simple construction tremble. No, no, no, this couldn’t be happening! Astrid’s happiness was too important to him; he just couldn’t give up. Not now, not if there was a chance that what he’d just put together was true.

But it wasn’t too late yet. There were still weeks before Astrid was to decide on a betrothed. With a grim expression and a stern face, he said, “Go, and tell the men they are to pack their things tonight already. We set out as soon as possible in the morning.”

Milburn stood up, nodding in understanding, but hesitated nonetheless. “Of course. But may I ask for the reason of this change of plan? I assume the men would react better to this news if they also got a brief explanation.”

Daniel nodded. “Calling this last mission off when we’re already so close to our goal would be stupid,” he replied grimly. “But as soon as it’s done, we’re heading back to the next fortification. I need to get hold of a carrier pigeon to the castle as soon as possible, and I won’t tolerate being held up by laziness.”

Milburn nodded and left the tent without another word, and Daniel stared at his resolutely clenched fists. He wasn’t happy about this delay, felt as if every day of waiting might be too much. But there
was nothing he could do about it, and sending this letter with a delay of three or four days would certainly still be enough.

Wouldn’t it?

Chapter End Notes

So, a short one this week, but one that answered some questions from earlier, I think. And probably posed some new ones. As always, I'd be happy to hear about your thoughts and reactions. ;)

And I want to put a warning here. I don't want to switch to a solid two-weeks-schedule just yet, but I want to say that it's possible that two-weeks-gaps may happen more often in the future. If so, then there will always be a warning up on my Tumblr (@shipmistress9).
Yay, only one week of waiting! Wasn't sure whether I could make it but it worked :)

Be prepared to wait longer from now on though! We're officially switching to a two-weeks-schedule from now on.

This came up a few times in the comments, and although I answered commented on it on the Shoutouts, I also wanted to address this topic once for everyone because it probably won't come up in the story. The swan roast. In general, swan meat was considered to be one of the highest delicacies of the medieval world. And more specifically, the swan is the heraldic animal of House Hofferson. With both these reasons, it was a matter of House Pride to serve swan roast at such an important evening. It had nothing to do with the King being heartless or cruel as he didn't even know Astrid had a fondness for those swans. If he'd known, he certainly would have spared them. And it had nothing to do with Thuggory somehow influencing it to get to Astrid, either.

This chapter... I'll be honest and warn you, I cried buckets writing it; and that was after having the scene in my head for months, regularly crying over it already. So... yeah... feelz ahead, hopefully.

This week's title, *Falling Too Fast To Prepare For This*, again come from 'Whatever It Takes' by Imagine Dragons. Have I mentioned that I like their music and this song in particular? And in this case... it's incredibly fitting I'd say... :|

Astrid’s first reaction was surprise and disbelief. She was to marry? But it was too early! She’d just only turned eighteen; there were still two more years before she could marry. But when the news sank in into everyone’s awareness and hushed voices filled the hall, she remembered that this wasn’t a law. Legally, she could have been married for two years already. But why had her father changed the plan away from custom?

A heartbeat later, fragile joy sparked up in her chest. Had her father learned about her and Hiccup? Was this his gift to her, that she could marry him now instead of waiting for two more years? It seemed too good to be true, but there wasn’t another explanation, was there? She would marry Hiccup, that was the fate the Gods had designed for them, and if she was to marry in two months… With a racing heart, she stared up at her father, hope and anticipation ruling her every thought. Maybe this day wasn’t such a disaster after all...

But when the King continued, all her hopes were shattered into finer and finer pieces with each word.

“You will be wondering who’s going to have the honour of tying the knot with my daughter,” he called over the general noise of the whispering crowd. “But as of now, not even I know the answer to this question. This is why I invited you and your sons here today. During the coming moon, all eligible noblemen in this hall will get the chance to compete for the Princess’s favour. There will
be tournaments for you to show your strength and skills, hunts to impress her with your courage and acuteness, and other occasions where you can present yourself to her however you wish. In two weeks, there will be a grand ball for all of us to enjoy, and in four weeks from now, she will announce her choice.”

The King went on explaining the plan for the following weeks, the time of preparation for the wedding and the other planned events afterwards, but Astrid wasn’t listening anymore. All she could do was stare in shock, unseeing eyes still resting on her father. This couldn’t be… No! No, this wasn’t possible! There was a mistake! She couldn’t marry one of the assembled men here! It wasn’t… wasn’t right!

A part of her wanted to object, to thoughtlessly blurt out that she would only ever marry Hiccup and no-one else. But one look at the crowd before them instantly silenced her. For the entire evening, nearly all eyes had been on her, but now, after her father’s announcement, everything felt differently. Where before, all their looks had only been annoying or unsettling at the worst, she now felt like a cut of beef thrown in front of a pack of hunting dogs. It seemed like everyone was looking at her as if she already belonged to them, measuring and evaluating her worth. It made her sick.

Feeling detached from her body, she struggled to get up on shaky legs. “Excuse me,” she whispered, long-instilled reflexes making her speak when her mind was a complete mess. “I-I’m not feeling well, and…” she trailed off, staggering away from the table, away from the crowd and their leering eyes, away from her father. Away from everything.

She had no idea for how long she was left to walk alone... Well, not really alone. A servant in formal livery was following behind her, she saw, but she ignored him. Part of her wanted to break into a run to get away from him, but the dress she was in wouldn’t let her take more than small steps and she wasn’t trusting in her legs’ strength right now anyway. Eventually, she managed to find a door to a sitting room and stumble inside, numb. Thankfully, the servant didn’t follow her.

She just sat there, unmoving, hearing her father’s voice repeat those horrible words over and over. And then the door opened.

“Astrid?”

She nearly sobbed. She didn’t want to talk to her father, not now. But she also didn’t have the presence of mind to try to keep running, and to where. The fate of her swans had been a hard enough blow. But this...

This was the coup de grace, and there was a little voice in the back of her mind gibbering that she had to wake up, she was dreaming, this was a nightmare...

But if it was a nightmare, she had yet to wake up.

She rose from her seat, numbly, and started towards the other door out of the chamber.

“Astrid, wait!” her father ordered, and she found herself unable to disobey him. She stopped, but didn’t turn around. “What is this behaviour supposed to mean? Why are you leaving your party and your guest so gracelessly? That is unbecoming of your position.”

Hysterical laughter bubbled up inside her. “Why I’m…” she began, hardly able to believe what she heard. How could he even ask that? Anger boiled up inside her, and she turned to face him after all. “Why I’m leaving?” she hissed. “What do you think? Those aren’t my guests, they are yours. And
it’s not my party either. *You* invited all these people and provided them with a topic worth talking about. Leave me out of this.” She wanted to turn away, but her father’s stern look kept her from moving even one muscle.

“Don’t be ridiculous, child. Of course, this is your party, to your honour.”

“Don’t call me a child,” she retorted in a quivering voice. Tears were forming in her eyes, but whether of anger or of sorrow she couldn’t say. She wasn’t a child anymore. She was a grown-up woman, knew what she wanted.

“Then stop *behaving* like a child,” he said firmly, “And why are you acting with such hysterics? Because of the wedding announcement? I’m actually doing you a *favour* there! So stop *acting* like a child and come back with me.”

“A *favour*?” Astrid repeated, dumbfound, not certain if she’d heard him correctly. “How is proclaiming my marriage to one of those lordlings a *favour*? If you believe I’d marry one of them then you—”

“Of *course* you will marry one of them,” he interrupted her sternly. “All these men, or their fathers in their places, have sent official proposals for your hand over the years, that is part of why I invited them. You would have married one of them regardless, how is doing so two years earlier such a problem? And you even get to choose for yourself instead of me picking someone for you or simply putting your hand out as prize of the tournament. These are good man, Astrid. Don’t act like a fool by affronting them like this.”

Astrid snorted harshly. “‘Good men’? Do you mean men like Duke Thuggory?” He’d *known*, she realised. Thuggory had *known* of this announcement. That’s what his leering words had meant. Again, she felt bile rise in her throat. Did her father really believe she would ever marry scum like Thuggory?

However, mentioning this name had a strange effect on the King. His face turned stony for a moment, his jaw clenched. But then he sighed, and his features softened. “No, I don’t mean Thuggory and his ilk. But with his high rank, I had no choice but to invite him. You certainly don’t have to choose him though. In fact…” he sighed again, then continued in a lower voice. “At your birth, I made contracts with the Grand Dukes that you were to marry one of their heirs. Circumstances demanded for us to renounce these contracts, and I meant what I said, you are free to choose whoever of these men you want to marry. But… but for the sake of stability, I ask you to *still* choose one of my friend’s sons.”

Disbelievingly, Astrid stared at her father. Was he *serious*? Oh, she’d heard about these contracts, and they’d all laughed about the idea. Eret, Dagur, Snotlout – they were her brothers, and always would be. Marrying one of them – that was *insane*!

“What *circumstances*?” she asked after a pause, trying to think of something else. She would never agree to this ridiculousness, but maybe it helped her form better arguments if she at least understood the reasons. “Why was this change of plan needed, and why didn’t you tell me earlier?” Certainly, it hadn’t been necessary to spring all this on her like that, right?

Her father threw an apprehensive look around, and slightly shook his head. “I can’t tell you why this was necessary. All you need to know for now is that the Kingdom is at a breaking point, and this marriage and everything around it is necessary to keep the stability. Your wedding was always meant to strengthen the Kingdom and the Crown’s alliances; now, it has become even more important. And why I didn’t tell you before… well, I knew this news would unsettle you. And you always were so happy on the days you spent with young Eret and Dagur, carefree. I didn’t want to
ruin that for you.”

A tiny voice in the back of Astrid’s mind was trying to reason with her that her father was right; her sudden betrothal wasn’t much different from what she’d been prepared for... once. Except that, with Hiccup coming into her life, everything had changed.

A memory rose to her mind, of another conversation she’d had with her father not so long ago. Back then, she’d mused about how for the Astrid of a few months before – the one that had known and accepted that she was destined for a politically advantageous and likely loveless match – Markor and the small gasp of freedom he provided had been the best gift she could have dreamed of.

But even back then, that Astrid already had been gone. Now, she expected more from life, more than a politically arranged marriage and more freedom than just a couple of hours on horseback. If this change in her had just been because of a flimsy idea then she might have been able to push it aside and become who her father thought she was once more.

But it wasn’t just a flimsy idea. Her hand wandered to her chest, feeling for Hiccup’s soul glowing in her chest. This was more, the Gods’ will. And she knew that she could never return to her former self.

However, thinking about that conversation with her father from all those months ago brought another memory to her mind, and her mood immediately brightened. “I have a wish,” she announced, looking up to meet her father’s eyes directly. “I want you to cancel this plan. You promised me a royal boon and said I only have to name my wish. This is it. I don’t want to marry now and certainly not one of these men.”

For a moment, she contemplated mentioning Hiccup, but held back for the same reasons she’d had earlier. Her father wouldn’t allow her to marry a titleless squire, not until Hiccup’s plan was fulfilled and he’d regained his title. It would only put an assassin’s target on Hiccup’s back – now more than ever, with all those predatory men in the grand hall. But if she could at least ward off this stupid plan...

“That’s not possible,” the King replied in a stern voice.

Disbelievingly, Astrid stared at him. “But... but you promised–”

“–that I would do my best to fulfil your wish as long as it is within my power, yes,” he interrupted her, and his voice turned soft. “But this is not within my power. Astrid, I can’t go back on my word and renounce a public announcement like this. If I did that, after all these people travelled here on my invitation, it would undermine the credibility of the Crown. It would throw the Kingdom into chaos, and we’d likely find ourselves in the middle of a civil war within half a year.” He sighed and even managed to look apologetic. “You have to believe me that going this route wasn’t an easy decision. But it is the only way.”

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As Astrid followed her father back into the dining hall, she felt numb all over. Her usual mask had turned into something more, something like a solid wall around her mind, shielding her from everything around her and at the same time letting nobody see how she was inside.

Because inside, she was a mess. Her father’s words still rang through her mind, and a part of her, the part that had been taught to become the responsible Princess of the Kingdom for all her life, understood the logic in those words. It was her duty to serve the Kingdom by marrying for an
alliance, being allowed to choose her husband herself certainly was better than simply accepting the decisions others made for her, and the two years didn’t really make a difference either.

However, it was the other part of her that struggled with this revelation, the one Hiccup had awoken and strengthened in her. This part had always been inside her; the independent girl who ran through the forest, who loved to listen to stories of distant places, and who was able to compete with even the best archers. The woman who enjoyed horse-riding and learning about healing plants and practices more than gossiping with other noble ladies over a cup of tea. But during the past months with Hiccup, that part had become stronger and stronger, had taken over. And Astrid refused to go back to being just the royal figurehead; not when the Gods were on her side and nobody would even tell her why.

With slow distracted steps, she walked back into the dining room. It was loud, everyone talking above everyone else, but she didn’t pay the gathered guests any mind. She was prepared to spend the rest of the night in silence, not looking at anyone, waiting until she could sneak back into Hiccup’s reassuring arms. She would need his confidence tonight, needed him to ground her mind again. She needed to talk to him, to mock the ridiculousness of her father’s plan. Because she wouldn’t go through with it, no matter what her father expected.

But before she even reached her seat, she caught sight of her brothers standing a bit to the side, talking, and of Eret in particular who’d spotted her and was waving her over. Her father’s wish about her marrying one of them shot through her mind, but she smothered it directly. The thought was too bizarre; as if anyone of them would ever go for this option!

“Hey,” Eret greeted her when she reached them, his voice subdued. “How are you?”

Astrid suppressed a burst of hysterical laughter. How she was? What did he think how she was? But he meant well, she reminded herself. From all the assembled people in this room, Eret, Dagur, and Snot were the only ones she was still sure of that. “I’m… I don’t know. I don’t think I can wrap my head around it yet,” she murmured, shaking her head.

Eret placed a reassuring hand on her back, soothingly rubbing up and down. It was such a normal and familiar gesture, something he’d done on many occasions before, but now, it felt different. Again, she remembered her father’s words, and thinking about how Eret touching her would look – to him and to everyone else in the room – made her shudder. She knew that Eret didn’t mean it like that, wasn’t laying claim on her. However, that didn’t change that him touching her didn’t feel as it used to. She made a small step away from him and threw him an apologetic look when she caught his grimace.

In that moment, sudden hatred for her father flared up inside her, hatred for taking even this form of comfort from her after everything else he’d done tonight.

Oblivious to the short interaction, Dagur nodded at her words. “Yeah,” he said in a low voice that missed his usual cheerfulness. “That was quite a shock, to all of us. I can’t believe our fathers kept this from us. ‘Not wanting to spoil our fun’ is a stupid reason.”

Eret nodded. “Especially with all the preparations that are going to waste now and how much we’ll have to do tomorrow instead.”

Astrid cocked her head. She wasn’t interested in whatever the Grand Dukes had come up, not really. Her mind was still too numb to care about anything. But Eret’s words still made her wonder, if only as a small distraction.

“I’ll have to help Lavo and his men,” Eret explained, grimacing. “Advice them on how to best
divide the herd to get all the horses safely back to Eastervale. I mean, Lavo knows the horses well enough, but he’s never before been in charge of them all on his own for such a long journey.” And upon Astrid’s confused frown, he added, “It looks like at least one of your wishes is coming true after all, Swanja. We’ll all be staying here, for the next two months at least.”

All Astrid could do was nod mutely. Right now, nothing could affect her. It even made sense, she mused, detached. If it was their fathers’ hope that she would choose one of her brothers as her betrothed then they had to stay here with the rest of her suitors. But deep within her, a tiny part was laughing hysterically as they were called back to their seats when dessert was served. Eret was right, she’d wished for just any way for her brothers – and subsequently Hiccup – to stay a little bit longer. But this certainly hadn’t been on her list of options.

“Daniel must have known,” she overheard Eret mutter next to her. “That’s why he can’t stay in Westhill as long as he’d originally planned.”

“True. He’s probably going to be back for the wedding, if not sooner,” came Snotlout’s subdued reply, and Astrid realised that they had to be right.

“It also explains all the weird comments he sometimes made,” Dagur added. “About how he couldn’t tell us what bothered him, but how we would learn about it soon enough.”

Eret nodded. “And why we would see each other again before the summer campaigning. And do you remember the conversation we had on that last night in the tavern? About Ester’s wedding and whether—” he broke off with a sudden grunt. A moment later, his fist hit the table with a low thud!, making them all jump. “Oh, damn, Daniel you utter arsehole!” he suddenly cursed, unashamedly.

It made the other two men question, but Eret wouldn’t say what was bothering him all of a sudden, and after a minute or three, Astrid lost all interest in listening to them.

She couldn’t turn their words down, however. Daniel had known about this plan, there was no doubt about that. But why had he kept it from her? Because Dagur had been right, simply not wanting to ruin her time was a stupid reason. But then… it was very much how her life always had been, wasn’t it? Keeping her sheltered and protected, not telling her about things she didn’t have to know. Keeping her ignorant while the men plotted and planned.

The longer she thought about all this, the more sense this explanation made and the more disturbed and distressed she became.

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Without knowing what it was, Hiccup could tell that something was wrong. The sensation wasn’t as strong as with her nightmare two months ago or Harold’s execution on the day after, but it was still the same sense of anxiety that flared through their bond and that made it impossible for him to calm down.

Not that he’d been able to do so before. All day, he’d been agitated up to the point where he just kept walking up and down the stables until his twinging leg protested too much, his thoughts running in circles.

Last night had been amazing. He still had his worries whether actually trying anal sex wasn’t going too far after all. However, he couldn’t deny that watching her take his fingers and feeling her so hot and tight had been incredibly arousing, their closeness afterwards more intense than he could explain. So he was looking forward to the night with a mix of apprehension and anticipation, only fueled by how much he already missed her. Which only made the anguish about the coming weeks of separation worse.
But all that faded in comparison to what he felt now. For a while, he stood at the stables’ entrance, watching the castle in the distance and with his heart racing as he pondered what might have caused this distress. But the dark shape didn’t hold any answers for him, and he knew that he couldn’t do anything but wait for Astrid to come to him anyway, so he tried to distract himself with the books she’d brought. It was a futile attempt, his mind barely able to understand a single word. But it was still better than the pacing and the staring at the distance from before.

When she finally arrived, however, it didn’t look as if he would get his answers anytime soon. He’d barely managed to utter her name in greeting before she was on him, her mouth sealing his and her hands clinging to him with a desperate strength that instantly worried him. He was used to her being fierce when she came here at night, but today, there was something different about her.

At first, he gave in to her though. Kissing and touching, desperate searching and clutching. He could feel that she was upset, but it was also clear that she needed their closeness to cope, and he certainly wouldn’t deprive her of that. When her occasional gasps turned into sobs, however, he wasn’t able to go along anymore.

Gently but firmly, he pulled back, holding Astrid by her shoulders. “Hey, what’s wrong?” he asked in a soft tone. He didn’t want to upset her further.

But Astrid didn’t answer. She just whimpered and shook her head, and Hiccup could see that she was crying. Her face was wet with tears, her eyes swollen and red. “Not now,” she begged, her voice quivering, before she leaned forward again, searching his lips once more.

Hiccup let her, but only for a second before he pushed them apart again, his gaze on her pained but firm. “Astrid, what happened? Please, tell me. Talk to me.”

She wailed, her eyes closing in defeat, and when she leaned forward again, it wasn’t to resume kissing him this time, but to bury her face against his neck. He let her, wrapped his arms around her trembling body and soothingly rubbed her back until she calmed down again.

But when she finally spoke, he wished she’d said anything else as her words threatened to shatter his entire world once again.

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Astrid still hoped to wake up from this nightmare at any moment now. All of this was too weird, too surreal to be the truth.

The party had dragged on endlessly, with her being unable to participate in any conversation. Her father had thankfully given her the space she’d needed and hadn’t tried to talk to her again. Eret had tried a few times, but had given up quickly when she wouldn’t even react with a grunt or a nod.

In her mind, everything was a mess. Her father’s wish for her to marry one of the men gathered there, the realisation that Daniel had been in on this plan, the betrayal she felt from both men, how Thuggory and many of the other guests must have known about this plan – it was all more than she could bear.

It seemed to take forever until she was allowed to retreat to her rooms, and even longer still until the twins went to bed too, until she could risk sneaking to Hiccup. She felt as if she’d been lying in her bed for hours, waiting, turning more desperate with every passing second.

She knew that her father had been deadly serious. He wanted her to marry, preferably even Eret, Dagur, or Snot. But she also knew just as clearly, that she would never go for any of these options
– not her brothers and not one of the other silly lordlings that had come to court her. She wasn’t sure how to circumvent her father’s wishes, but she would. She had to!

By the time she was wrapped in Hiccup’s arms, trembling and crying, this was the only thought that still gave her strength. That she wouldn’t do what her father wanted, that she would marry Hiccup and nobody else, that he couldn’t make her choose one of them.

“My father wants me to marry,” she eventually found the strength to mumble in reply to Hiccup’s urgent question. “In two months.” Saying it out loud made it even worse, and she pressed herself harder against him, seeking more of his comfort.

His disbelieving reaction to her words was pretty much exactly what she’d expected. “What?”

Snivelling and clutching at his tunic for something to hold on to, she explained, “He made the announcement during dinner. Surprise, you’re all going to stay here after all. Because he wants me to choose one of the noblemen he’d invited, wants me to marry one of them in two months from today.”

Hiccup’s arms around her tightened. “But… why?” he gasped, still sounding incredulous.

She gasped out a short and harsh laugh. “I don’t know. He wouldn’t tell me. And why would he? It’s been my fate to marry for the benefit of the Kingdom anyway, so to him, nothing even changed. All he said was that ‘the Kingdom is at a breaking point’ and that my marriage is necessary to keep the stability. But this won’t happen. It doesn’t make any sense. I’ll talk to him again,” she promised, not sure whether to reassure him or herself, and clutched even tighter to him, hot tears seeping into his tunic. “I already did, but today was just chaos. I’ll talk to him tomorrow, explain that I don’t want this, beg him to take it all back. He cares for me, doesn’t he? Deep down? I-I’m sure he’ll…” she trailed off, her voice cut off by the growing lump in her throat.

How was she to convince her father without telling him why? Because she didn’t dare to mention Hiccup, now even less than before. After today, she was afraid of what the King might do to Hiccup, to the one reason that kept her from doing what he wanted her to.

For several minutes, they were quiet except for her low sobs, both caught up in their thoughts and just clinging tightly at each other. Even without looking at him, she could feel how Hiccup’s mind worked through the little she’d said. She’d been thinking about this for hours now, but hadn’t been able to come up with a solution. She trusted in him though, in his quick mind. He would find a way.

“But he can’t take it back,” he mumbled eventually, breaking the silence with his voice sounding hollow and weak.

This wasn’t the response she’d expected at all! With a start, she sat up, looking at him in confusion. “What?”

“I wasn’t there but I know enough about politics in general and about the problems Eret and Daniel talked about. A proclamation like this and with what he said about the Kingdom…” Hiccup looked pale, his face nearly expressionless, and his eyes were frighteningly empty. “He can’t take it back. You won’t have a choice.”

“What? No!” she insisted, her fingers digging into the fabric over his chest. “I won’t do it! He can’t force me to choose. He can’t!”

A weak and sad smile crossed his face for a heartbeat. “Maybe not. But you still won’t have a
choice on this matter,” he repeated in the same low and empty voice. “If you don’t pick a betrothed, your father will do so for you.” His breathing quickened a little and he averted his face, and for once, Astrid was almost glad to not have to look into his hollow eyes.

“But… but he can’t,” she stammered. “He can’t make me do this, can’t make me marry. He–”

“Of course, he can,” Hiccup interrupted her in a weak whisper. “He’s your father. He has every right to decide for you.”

Biting her lip, she dropped her gaze as well. Yes, Hiccup was right, but… but… That didn’t change anything, did it? None of this made sense and all she knew was that they would find a way out of this. They had to, even though right now, everything was just too overwhelming, too much for her, for them both to think.

“But it’s ridiculous,” she eventually mumbled, trying to turn this into the joke it had to be. “If it were up to my father, I’d marry one of the ducal heirs. But that’s insane! H-how could I ever marry one of them? No… There has to be another way. Hiccup, please, look at me. Tell me there’s another way. None of this makes sense, not with what the Gods want. There has to be a way out.”

She pressed her hand to his chest, over his heart, to their bond. But in the next moment, she wished she hadn’t.

As if in a trance, Hiccup lifted his head again, gazing at her with an expression that positively scared her. His eyes were still eerily hollow, but there was also something else in them, a deep-reaching pain that she hadn’t ever seen there before. Slowly, he shook his head, and reached for her hand, pulling it away from his chest. “Unless we were wrong,” he whispered, nearly inaudible. He squeezed her hand for the briefest of moments, then let go of it. “Astrid, I… “ he gulped, a strange sound somewhere between a gasp and a suppressed sob escaping him. “This changes everything! A-and I’m not sure there’s a way to… He’s the King! Neither of us can stand against him.”

“But this doesn’t make sense!” she insisted. “You said it yourself; the Gods want us to be together. ‘We can’t fail’. Those were your words. Please, Hiccup, there–”

“Unless we were wrong!” he repeated, the urgency and pain in his voice momentarily silencing her. He swallowed, hard, his hand wandering up to his chest, to where her hand had lain only moments before. “Maybe we were wrong after all. Maybe those visions… they were just wishful thinking, and this bond nothing but our imagination. I-I don’t know. But this… I can’t think of a way around this, not against your father’s explicit wish. There just isn’t enough time.” He shook his head, his eyes falling shut and his hand dropping to his side again.

Astrid couldn’t believe what she heard. He couldn’t be serious, could he? The visions, their connection, their feelings – all this had to be real! Feverishly, she forced herself to think harder, to come up with a reason why he had to be wrong, with a solution, just anything.

“What if we ran away?” she whispered after a minute of heavy silence. “We could leave right now. We get our horses ready and will be gone long before anyone notices anything.” Her heartbeat quickened at that idea. It was bold, but maybe, just maybe, this was the way they had to choose.

However, Hiccup just reacted with a sad look. “I would never ask you to do that,” he whispered, sounding incredibly tired. “It might sound like a good idea now, but…” he paused, swallowing hard. “But it wouldn’t work. We have two fast horses. They have two hundred. Markor and Cassie would need to rest eventually, and they would send out search parties and find us within hours, a day or two at most. Then they’d cut off my head for kidnapping the Princess and drag you back here anyway.”
She paled at his word. “But… but what can we do?” There had to be something. Anything. There had to be.

But Hiccup’s answer did nothing to reassure her. On the contrary, it served to shatter her completely.

“You should go back,” he said in a detached, almost emotionless voice. He didn’t even look at her as he reached to lift her off his lap. “You shouldn’t be here.”

“Astrid?”

“Astrid… it’s over.”

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Astrid’s mind was in chaos.

There were no other words to say it. On her way back to the castle, she was only able to find her way because she knew it by heart. She couldn’t see the path through her tears and afterwards, she couldn’t remember how she’d made it back either. It certainly was only pure luck that nobody spotted her as she sneaked through the sleeping castle and as she slipped into her rooms again. With her last strength, she fought against sobbing too loudly as she blindly tore of the simple dress again and somehow managed to get her nightgown back on.

She barely found any sleep that night, smothering her crying into her cushions and clutching at Hiccup’s tunic. She didn’t even remember taking it out of her new treasure box, but was unable to even think of putting it back either.

He can’t be serious, she thought over and over, hiding her face in the rough fabric that only held the smallest memory of his scent by now. It wasn’t possible. She knew where their future lay! It lay in that small house with the barking dog and the excited boy, with him returning to her, to their home. That vision hadn’t been just wishful thinking, it had been real!

Hadn’t it?

On and on, she mulled over the same thoughts again and again, unable to find rest or comfort in anything. Without a doubt, this birthday had been the worst of her life, the worst day altogether. It couldn’t be real, it couldn’t be real, it couldn’t be real…

“Let me wake up,” she begged into the night. “Let this nightmare end, please, let me wake up. I can’t stand it anymore.”

But the nightmare wouldn’t end, and deep down, she knew why. And when she did wake up, to bright sunlight and both her maidservant and her warder looking down at her with concerned expressions, she understood that it wouldn’t end at all.

Her hand in his tunic, clearly visible on top of her blanket, tightened. There was no way she could hide it again. But neither Ruff or Tuff reacted as she’d expected. No shock, no confusion, no demanding where the suspicious piece of clothing was coming from. No questions about her tears and her shattered state either. The twins only shared a quick glance and a nod, then Ruff reached to tug at a strand of her hair.

“So… Is there something you want to tell us?” she asked in a strangely off-handed tone, as if she didn’t even need an answer to her question. And when she pulled her hand back, Astrid realised why.
In her hand, Ruff held a stray bit of straw.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand I'm back to hiding under rocks. *jumps out of reach of any missiles*
You Only Miss The Sun When It Starts To Snow

Chapter Notes

Right, on we go. But before we get started, I feel like a warning is in order. There are a couple of dark chapters ahead of us, with only a few brighter parts. I promise that things will get better again... just not right away. But let's be honest. after the loooong build up, solving this particular mess within one or two chapters... that wouldn't feel right, would it?

This chapter contains a few important scenes. Scenes that have been planned out in detail for over a year by now, and I'm so excited to finally have reached them. In this chapter, questions will get answered, some that have been around pretty much right from the start of the story, others that might have come up only recently.

This week's title comes from the song 'Let Her Go' by Passenger. It is another title that was set a long time ago, and that makes me cry whenever the song is on the radio.

Unable to form a single coherent thought, Astrid’s eyes bounced from Ruff to her brother and back again. A tiny voice at the back of her mind was screaming at her, telling her to come up with an excuse, some story to explain the straw and the tunic, just anything. But she was too tired, too numb, to think of anything.

“I… I can’t,” she stammered, but Ruff silenced her by placing a hand on her arm.

“Hey, it’s okay. We know.”

The words landed with an impact like being thrown from a horse. Astrid gasped, and fear blossomed inside her, fear for Hiccup. They knew? What? How much? What would they do?

Tuff, insensitive as ever, snorted. “Did you really think we wouldn’t notice you leaving these rooms? Do you think so little of us? We’re the masters of sneaking around. Honestly…”

Astrid’s hands tightened, clutching at Hiccup’s tunic and her blanket. “What…?”

Ruff threw her brother a dark look, then turned her attention back to her. “He’s right. Of course we noticed you leaving. What guardians would we if we hadn’t?”

“I-I don’t understand,” Astrid stammered. “W… How much–”

“–do we know? Enough, I’d say. Tuff followed you, that first night you snuck out – and most of the times afterwards, too. He had to make sure you’re safe, after all.” Ruff shrugged. “So we know where, when, how often... and with who.”

A fresh wave of panic washed through her, making her gasp for breath with short, sharp pants. She’d thought things couldn’t get worse, but she’d apparently been wrong. If they knew, what did that mean for Hiccup? One word from them to her fa... to the King... Oh Gods. Hiccup’s safety was
still paramount in her mind. “You know,” she whispered in a weak voice, and gulped. “Wh-who did you tell? I mean…” She couldn’t go on. The possibilities were just too horrible. Was that why her father had made this decision? Had he learned about Hiccup and decided to bring her wedding forward to keep her away from him? If that had been his plan… it apparently had worked.

But Ruff just rolled her eyes. “Of course we didn’t tell anyone. Why would we?”

Disbelievingly, Astrid gazed at her, uncomprehending. “But-but you… the King… I…”

Again, Tuff snorted, interrupting her. “We might get paid by the Crown, but that doesn’t mean we’re working for the King. Mother told us to look out for you, and that’s what we do. Besides,” he added with a grin, “it actually helped us understand.”

“Understand… what?” Astrid asked hollowly.

“Well, your mood changed and we were wondering for weeks. Daniel thought it was because of Eret and that horse he gave you, but we know you too well for that, and it didn’t seem… right.”

Thoughtfully, Ruff shook her head. “We thought something was off when, after that… incident, you agreed to stay with the groom, alone. But later, when you snuck off that night… well, that was when it dawned on us.”

Astrid blinked; despite her own uncertainty and unsteadiness, understanding bloomed. “You knew. You knew all this time? But… why did you never say anything?”

Ruff shrugged. “Why should we? Your secrets are safe with us, but as long as you don’t share them, there never was the need to talk about it. Tuff made sure you wouldn’t get into trouble, but otherwise…”

“He did? How?”

At that, Tuff grunted in annoyance and Ruff cackled. “He followed you there and back again.”

“And again, and again, and again…” Tuff muttered.

“What do you think why he constantly complained about all the ‘hiking’?” Ruff added with a smirk.

Astrid blinked. Tuff had followed her? She hadn’t noticed, had thought she was so careful. If it had been anyone else—

_No, don’t think about that_, she stopped herself before she could panic again. It was moot now anyway. Instead, she clung to the one thought that gave her comfort; there were actually people in this castle who were on her side. Whatever that meant and however much it was worth.

She flinched when a hand shook her shoulder. “What?” she blurted, realizing that she’d faded out of the conversation.

Ruff huffed. “I asked what happened. Twice. You’re obviously more than just upset. So, is there something you want to talk about?”

_What happened…_

The banquette, her swans, her father’s announcement – everything she’d refused to think about so far came crashing down on her again, choking her. Her eyes were filling with tears until Ruff right in front of her was nothing but a colourful blur. What had happened… Hiccup.
With a loud sob, she buried her face in her hands. She wasn’t sure whether the twins were able to understand her mumbled answer, but she didn’t care either way. “No, there’s nothing to talk about,” she whimpered. “Because it’s over.”

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The morning passed in a blur. Astrid was still numb, and vaguely grateful for it; she didn’t want to think. Not about what had happened or what would happen or really about anything. Numb was safe. Ruff stayed with her, and Astrid was oddly grateful for the company. Nobody could ever know how she felt, but at least here, in her personal chambers, she didn’t need to hide anymore.

Eventually, she managed to choke down some of the bread and cheese that Tuff had brought for her, although the rumblings from her stomach barely even registered on her concerns. To make matters worse, her governess arrived by mid-morning and started to list off her itinerary for the day, and Astrid just wanted to hide.

Her father hadn’t exaggerated when he’d said ‘the festivities will start tomorrow’. Apparently, she wouldn’t even get one day’s break, would be thrown in front of her suitors immediately. Starting today and going into the next week, they would each have a private audience with her. It was all planned out nicely, with her spending her day in the royal garden; under the supervision of guards and her governess, they would get half an hour each to spend with her... to get to know each other.

Her governess was without sympathy or mercy as she listed off the agenda, and Astrid wondered how she would be able to endure it all... but she wasn’t given a choice. Even Ruff’s sympathy was muted; as her maidservant dressed her, Astrid whispered that she wasn’t ready, and Ruff pointed out that she never would be. And she was right. So Astrid gave in, wrapping her sense of numbness around her like a cloak, and, feeling hollow and detached from her own body, as if watching herself go through the motions, she followed her governess out to the gardens, moving like... moving like a man sentenced to be sent to the dungeons.

It was a surprisingly chilly day, an unexpected onset of winter with grey clouds covering the sky like a heavy blanket, and there was a cool wind blowing in gusts from the north. But none of that seemed to matter as she entered the garden in an elegant but sturdy winter dress, an embroidered cloak in dark blue around her shoulders. The gardens were a beautiful place, all things considered. But with the orderly arranged flower beds and hedges and the neat walkways leading through them and past the occasional statue, she couldn’t say that she liked the place. Nothing was out of place here, everything as it should be, even now in early spring when all of the plants were still asleep and the branches were bare. It made her feel even more imprisoned than ever before, even though the skeletal woods seemed to suit her mood – dead and barren.

She didn’t have to wait long before the first of her suitors was brought to her, but she quickly discovered that, to her, they were all the same. Every half hour, her governess would bring another man to her, introduce him, and leave out of earshot. He would talk to her, mostly about himself, and maybe ask her a question or two in return. Astrid could hear herself answer, her well-trained mask able to converse, even though she would never be able to remember anything she heard or said later on. It was like a dream, like being submerged under water. It all happened, but none of it reached her.

There was a small break around noon where she was to sit and eat. She probably did, judging by the lack of reprimands, but again, she could barely remember any of it.

All day, her mind was tiptoeing around the only topic that held any meaning to her, unwilling to approach it outside the safety of her room, where she could break down and cry as she knew she would, but also unable to leave it be.
Hiccup couldn’t be serious. He couldn’t! No, it wasn’t possible. She wouldn’t believe it. Even now, amidst all the pain and confusion, she could still feel their connection thrumming in her chest, even though it felt less comforting than usual, bringing a weird sense of desperation with it. But it was there! They couldn’t have been wrong, and what she felt wasn’t just her imagination. What they had, this soulbond, their love, it was real. Somehow, they would find a way. They had to.

But for now, there was nothing she could do but endure these interviews and play along. The second half of the day passed exactly like the first had. The clouds became darker, the wind colder, and meaningless voices and faces glided past her until the last one was one she recognised.

“Snotlout!”

For the first time that day, she registered what she was saying, and while it wasn’t a smile that crossed her face as she threw herself into her brother’s arms, it was, at least, an expression of relief and gratitude. Even if all she had was half an hour with him, it was better than anything else that had happened that day.

“Hey there, Astrid,” he chuckled as he wrapped his arms around her waist, holding her tight. “Had a rough day?”

“Oh, you have no idea,” she half-whimpered, laughing weakly against his shoulder. It was so good to have him close. A small ray of sunshine in the dark and gloom of the day.

“Oh, I guess I have,” he muttered in reply. “It’s been chaos for all of us. I’ve been busy all day writing letters to rearrange all the plans and schedules for the coming weeks. It’s a total mess. I still can’t believe Father didn’t tell me about it earlier. And all just because they feared we’d let something slip and you’d do something stupid.”

Astrid retreated and caught sight of him rolling his eyes. So that had been the reason? A harsh laugh burst from her as she turned to walk along the brick pathway, not away from the ever-watching eyes but at least out of reach of too-eager ears. It even made sense, in a way. Maybe her father knew her better than she’d thought, after all. But if he’d feared she’d do something stupid, didn’t that mean that there was something she could do? Maybe there was hope after all.

That thought kept whirling around in her mind, and even made her smile for real as Snot caught up with her again. He wrapped an arm around her waist as they walked on, an odd gesture she wouldn’t have allowed from any other man she’d met with today. But this was Snot, her brother. He didn’t mean to flirt, just offered comfort, even as it would certainly send the wrong signals to those watching.

“Yeah, that’s pretty much how we all reacted,” he commented airily, throwing her a toothy smile she didn’t quite get the meaning of.

“How are the others?” she asked, blaming her clouded mind for not being able to quite keep up with his. But maybe hearing about something from the outside would help her to get grounded again.

He shrugged. “Busy? Dagur took my place in the scribes’ chamber after I spent the day watching them spill ink and harass pigeons with letters back home to deal with the changes. And he’s also trying to decide on a new squire, I think. He’ll need one for the upcoming tournaments. And Eret… well, he spent all morning at the stables with their horses, and then I met him at some point cursing about having to appear all knightly from now on. With how little he took care of his outfit until now, I guess his poor squire will be spending half the night at the armoury, polishing his equipment. That’s at least something Gustav won’t be able to complain about.” He laughed,
thankfully keeping her thoughts from lingering on Eret’s squire. “I mean, he’s certainly practised enough at mending my armour and weapons.” He motioned to indicate his fine outfit, cleaned and with the buckles polished to a high gleam. “I’d say he does good work, don’t you? And he’s so eager to help with it after I get dinged up after skirmishes.” He leaned his head in closer. “I’ve occasionally let myself get hit so he feels useful patching up afterwards.”

He winked and gave her waist a light squeeze, and Astrid chuckled at his comment, even though she didn’t really feel like laughing. This was just how Snot was; he liked to talk about his deeds, even liked to exaggerate a bit, and they all had learned how to take it by now. It wasn’t his fault that she’d heard enough of such bragging today already and was rather annoyed to hear even more boasting.

But when he went on and on, talking without a pause, she eventually interrupted him nonetheless. “That’s great, Snot. But would you mind talking about something else? I think if I hear even one more word about anyone’s fighting skills today, I’m going to scream.”

Snot paused for a moment, but then nodded. “Of course. Whatever you want, Astrid. Is there something in particular you’re interested in?”

She was just about to shrug and shake her head; after all, she would have been happy with simply a few minutes of peace and quiet. But before she could do so, another thought occurred to her, something she’d wondered about but had pushed into the back of her mind. Something Snot’s father had said last night, before everything had collapsed.

“Do you know something about a man called…” She paused, trying to remember. “Stoick was the name, I think?”

Snot snorted and gave her a weird side-eyed glance. “Do you mean Stoick ‘The Vast’?”

“I… I don’t know. Maybe? I think he was someone our fathers knew, but apparently, he’s dead now. I heard them talking about him last night, and it sounded as if he’d been a friend of theirs once. But I’ve never heard of him. I mean, it has always only been these four, the Houses Hofferson, Jorgenson, Berserker, and Jag’r, ever since the time of our grandfathers. But from the way they’d talked about him, it sounded as if this man had been their equal.”

Snot seemed startled. “You… you don’t know? About the Haddocks? Nothing?”

She just gave an insecure shrug. “Erm, no? Should I?”

The name didn’t ring a bell, and once again she cursed her education that had only ever focused on ladylike arts and never on anything that mattered. At first, changing the topic had merely been a matter of convenience, but by now, she was genuinely interested. And it wasn’t just because it provided a highly-needed distraction, but also because of Snot’s peculiar reaction.

He made a weird sound, something between a laugh, a snort, and a disbelieving grunt. “Yeah, you probably should. But then, I’m not even that surprised you haven’t. They’ve been pretty reclusive ever since I can remember. But still, I would have thought…” He trailed off, shaking his head in disbelief.

“So… will you tell me what I missed there? Or are you just going to babble and mutter until the sand runs out back there?” she grumbled. She knew that it wasn’t fair to take out her mood on him. But she had no idea for how long they would be able to keep talking like this. Yes, Snot was the last of her suitors for today, but still. She pulled her cloak closer around her shoulders as a cold gust of wind blew through the garden, and kept looking at him expectantly.
“Uh, yeah, of course. Sorry. I just… I’m trying to think where to start. Erm…” He paused, then nodded to himself. “You know how this Kingdom was originally founded, right?”

Astrid nodded. “Of course. My grandfather united the original five Princedoms, threw out the corrupt nobility, and restored the Gods’ order. He turned the former Princedoms into the Grand-Dukedoms, and put his closest and most trusted friends in charge of them,” she recited the old story. “But what has that to do with this Stoick?”

Snot gave her a weird look, as if she was missing something vital. “How many Grand Dukedoms does Volantis have?” he asked, watching her intently.

Her answer came without a second’s hesitation. “Four. There’s Volantis itself under Father’s rule, Westhill which belongs to House Jorgenson, Southshore with House Berserker, and Eastervale with House Jag’r. Why?”

With a short disbelieving laugh, Snot shook his head. “No, there are five Grand-Dukedoms, one for each former Princedom. But I don’t blame you for not knowing about the fifth, not really. Despite its extent, it’s rather insignificant, politically and all that, although it has a lot of history. It’s simply called The North and mainly consists of the uninhabited swamps north of Volantis, and the thick forest of Wodensleya. There are a few villages in that forest, along a couple of roads that lead through the woods and a few more fishing villages along the coast, but that’s pretty much it, on the mainland at least. Most of the population lives on the islands of the Tribes in the North Sea.”

Astrid could do nothing but stare. How was it possible that she’d never heard of this, that she, the Princess Royal, knew so little about her own kingdom? But she also didn’t doubt his words; they made sense.

“The man you asked about,” Snot went on after a short pause. “Stoick, was the head of House Haddock, and also the Grand Duke of The North as well as the High Chief of the Northern Tribes. I’ve never met him, but I know that he and our fathers used to be best friends, just like we, Daniel, Dagur, and Eret are now, too.”

Confused, Astrid shook her head. “But… but I don’t understand. If they’d been such good friends, why have I never heard of him, of any of this?” All this had been supposed to be a distraction, but instead, it only made her feel worse. Like another lie, something else nobody had thought important enough to tell her.

“I don’t know for sure,” Snot said with an apologetic shrug. “All I know is that Stoick and the Tribes withdrew more and more from the rest of the Kingdom since before we were born. It wasn’t as if they had much to offer anyway though, nothing to compete with the other Grand Dukedoms. I mean, Westhill has its mines... and had a lot more, Southshore has its rich harbours and markets and the rich soil for all their farms, and even Eastervale is important with the grasslands for livestock and their horses, of course. But all the North has is fish and infantry... but since your grandfather centred our army around cavalry, they weren’t as needed. So between distance and the sea and the weather – I hear it’s dreadful, snows like nine months out of the year and hails the other three – they mostly keep to themselves outside of warriors for the Kingdom and some trade. I think like half of the Royal Guard is from there, since they tend not to get involved in mainland politics, due to that isolation.”

Astrid nodded mutely. He was right, it made sense. But still. “But what about this Stoick? If he and our fathers were such good friends…”

“I honestly don’t know. I mean, he was my uncle, my late mother was his sister. But even we didn’t have much contact with them. I think he followed the wish of his people to focus mainly on
them and only stayed through letters in contact with your father. Well, and then he got killed two or three years ago. It probably proves just how reclusive he’d become when I tell you that Father and I only yesterday learned about that too.”

“He… got killed?” she asked incredulously. A Grand Duke of the Kingdom had been killed, and hardly anyone even knew about it?

Snot nodded. “Yes, he and his…” he paused, biting his lip, then went on with a slight grimace. “He and his entire family, his wife and their three children, two boys and a girl.” He looked a little uncomfortable, shifting his weight and averting his eyes. “I… I think you should ask Eret if you want to know more about them though.”

“Eret? Does he know more? Why?” she asked urgently as she caught sight of her governess waving them over. Their time to talk freely was almost up.

Snot snorted. “Yeah, House Jag’r is the only one that stayed in closer contact to them. Eret even visited them regularly, and… Well, it was probably because of his aunt. Stoick’s wife that got killed along with him was Grand Duke Eret’s sister, our Eret’s aunt, Valka.”

Astrid cocked her head, puzzled. Valka… That name sounded familiar. She had heard that one before, hadn’t she? She scoured her memories for its meaning, cursing her sluggish mind as they slowly walked to where her governess and the guards were waiting. Then it hit her.

*He’s Valka’s son.*

Grand Duke Eret’s voice rang clearly through her mind, as if he was standing right next to her, and she stopped dead in her tracks.

“Hiccup,” she gasped under her breath.

“What?” Snot had paused a step ahead of her, his hand reaching for hers to pull her along.

But Astrid couldn’t, and instead even made a small step away from him. Her eyes were fixed on the people waiting for them at the garden’s main exit, her head working at full speed. She had to get away, had to talk to–

“Snot, I need your help,” she whispered, her eyes drilling into his. “Can you slow them–” her eyes flickered to her governess, “–down a bit? I… There’s something I need to do, and I can’t have anyone follow me.”

She could see in his eyes that he didn’t fully understand what she meant, but he nodded nonetheless. “Go. I’ll think of something.”

.o O o.

Hiccup felt… empty...

It was strange, he mused as he sat in the castle’s armoury, how different it was from the last time his world had fallen apart. He still remembered how he’d felt almost three years ago now; the pain of loss, the desperation of an unknown future, the hot anger of seeking revenge, and the cool determination of finding out the truth. All those emotions had fueled him through a tough two years all on his own, and even though they had been horrible, feeling them had still been better than *this.*

Now, he just felt *nothing.* Where his heart had been only yesterday was now nothing but a
frightening hole, and whenever his thoughts got too close to it, he felt as if he was falling into an endless pit. He was numb, unable to think, to comprehend. All he knew was that it was over. Everything.

He was actually grateful for the work he'd been given, polishing Eret's armour and equipment to perfection. It meant that his hands were busy with work that required just the right amount of concentration to keep his mind from wandering without his consent, but that, at the same time, wasn't so complicated that a slight slip-up would ruin it. Perfect to keep his thoughts from venturing into dangerous territory.

Instead, he directed them to safer topics, back to the morning when Eret had come to tell him that they were staying at the capital after all. Hiccup hoped he’d put up a good-enough show; of being properly surprised, both by the news and the reason, and of not letting the renewed pain those words had caused show. He wasn’t entirely sure he’d been successful with Eret giving him a strange, undefinable look, but since he hadn’t said anything, Hiccup didn’t have the mental strength to be worried as he continued to work at sharpening Eret’s daggers.

What was there to notice anymore after all? That he’d had a crush on the princess? That had to be a commonly known rumour by now, and they’d agreed that it wouldn’t cause a public problem by itself. She was adored by many people, after all, and Eret and Dagur knew better anyway.

Eret could also have noticed that he hadn’t been thrilled about these news, but even that wasn’t surprising, was it? Eret hadn’t seemed to be exactly happy either.

No, there was no reason to worry about Eret. In fact, there was no reason to worry about anything. There were no uncertainties, nothing to fear or to anxiously await a decision. She would marry someone else and there was nothing he could do about it. End of story.

Solely on reflex, Hiccup’s hand flinched away from the sharp dagger he’d been sharpening. Detached and with an expression of surprise he gazed at the oozing cut in his palm. Weird… shouldn’t that hurt? But it didn’t, not even as his blood began to trickle down his wrist and into his tunic. He just felt as empty and hollow as before. As if nothing mattered anymore.

He staggered to his feet and stumbled as his bad leg threatened to give in on his way to the side of the small working room that had been assigned to him for today. Reflexively, he caught himself at the table and reached for a clean strap of cloth to wrap around his wound. For months now, he’d pretended that being Eret’s helpful squire was all he aspired to be. Now that the lie had become reality, it was literally all that was left to him – and maiming himself even more wouldn’t be very helpful to Eret.

He was still staring at his hand, watching as the white fabric slowly turned red, when the door behind him opened. Idly, he wondered who it might be. Eret maybe, because he’d forgotten something? Or the Master of Arms or one of his underlings to give him further instructions? He tried to think of someone else, another explanation why someone would seek him out here – but deep down he knew who it was.

He could feel her.

“Hiccup of House Haddock.”

Hiccup flinched at her words, even as her voice made his heart sing with uncalled-for joy. He hadn’t expected to hear that name again, not now, not here, and certainly not from her.

“That is your name, isn’t it?” she went on when he didn’t react, her voice sounding brittle. “Hiccup
of House Haddock, first-born son and heir of Stoick ‘The Vast’ of House Haddock, former Grand Duke of The North and High Chief of the Tribes. That is who you are.”

Unable to react, Hiccup kept staring at his hand. He’d wanted to tell her so many times, had promised himself he’d do so whenever the topic came up again, to answer all of her questions… And now she asked, when it mattered even less than before? He almost felt like laughing.

But, of course, she couldn’t know his thoughts. “Am I right?”

With closed eyes, he let his head drop in something like a nod. “Yes.”

For a minute or three, they were silent. Hiccup ached to turn and look at her, but didn’t dare to actually do it. Seeing her would only make the wounds in his heart and soul hurt even more.

“Then I… I don’t understand. You…” she eventually stammered, trailing off again. When she continued, it was clear she’d made the connection. “You said you don’t have any title that would be enough for my father. But you do! You’re the Grand Duke of The North! Not your father, you!”

Still having his back turned to her, he trembled at her words, glad that he could lean on the table in front of him for support. It was all too much, the emptiness in his chest, her being here, and now this reminder. Too much… “No, I–”

“No! You said you don’t have any rank or title to speak of. But that’s not true! You’re a Grand Duke, for Odin’s sake! My father aside, there is nobody up there in the castle who outranks you! Equals, yes, but not outrank! Nobody can complain against me choosing you. Why have you never said anything?”

“Because I’m not!” he finally interrupted her, his voice close to breaking. Hearing her say out loud what he so desperately wished was true had only made everything worse. His hands, clenched into fists, were shaking, and he still couldn’t feel the pain of the cut.

“But… but you said…”

Hiccup took a deep breath and finally turned toward her. Gods, she looked even more beautiful than in his memories, radiant despite her tired eyes and desperate expression. It hurt to look at her.

“I’m not the Grand Duke of the North. Yes, that’s who my father was and who I should be. I should be up there with all the other lordlings, courting you. It should be easy!” His voice had risen in volume with him getting more agitated as he tried to make her understand the irony. But then his shoulders slumped, and he added in a low whisper, “But it’s not.”

“I... don’t understand…”

The pain inside him was getting stronger, lurking beneath the cover of apathy ready to jump and break him, but he pulled himself together nonetheless. He owed her the truth, an explanation of why they had no chance.

“You’re right in that my father was the Grand Duke of The North and the High Chief of the Tribes. And yes, I was supposed to be his heir. But… But it never happened.”

A small, unrealistic part of him hoped that would be enough of an explanation. But of course, it wasn’t. She was still looking at him, expectantly and confused.

In a low voice, he explained, “There were always voices among the Tribes that were against me becoming their next High Chief, but they only got loud when… when everything fell apart. I failed
my initiation, then my family got killed in a way that made me look suspicious. They couldn’t prove my guilt, but they also made it clear that, under those circumstances, they wouldn’t accept my rule either. They offered me the choice between letting me try with the prospect of getting assassinated within a day, or to let me live, ostracised and in exile. To them, it didn’t make a difference; by tribe law, I’m dead to them.” Shivering, he closed his eyes. “No, I’m not a Grand Duke, never was, and – unless a miracle happens – never will be. I’m a nobody.” And a failure, he added mentally. A failure that’s been a fool to believe that he could only once do something right. 

She still didn’t seem to fully understand though. “But... but then we have to tell them. We have to tell my father who you are, and then I’m sure he’ll help, he wanted to...” she muttered before trailing off when she saw him shake his head. 

“Your father knows who I am,” he sighed, looking at the floor between them in an attempt to keep himself together. “And, for the sake of his friendship with my father, agreed to keep my identity hidden should anyone still be after me. It’s not likely with me officially being dead, but who knows. But that is all he can do. The Tribes weren’t defeated to become a part of the Kingdom.” He snorted. “A lot of the noblemen are actually just Tribesmen a few generations removed; maybe as much as half of your grandfather’s army came from the Tribes, I think. And when he was finished conquering Volantis, he came to the North and offered them a seat at his table. And they agreed to be integrated into the Kingdom, but only on their own terms. We... They are a proud people, and their main condition was that they would keep their autonomy, that they would rule themselves within the King’s laws. If your father tried to dictate who should be their leader, he’d only risk a civil war, which is something he can’t risk.” Tiredly, he shook his head. “No, that path isn’t an option, never was… and never will be.” 

There was another extended stretch of silence, and when Hiccup looked up to see her reaction, he was surprised to find her confused and pondering, but not as devastated as he felt. Did she still not understand? 

“But I thought you had a plan,” she eventually whispered, her beautiful eyes searching and holding his. “You said there was a way for us. I thought it was reclaiming your title, but if that’s not possible… what was your plan? What is keeping you from still pursuing it?”

Hiccup let out a harsh laugh. “I wanted to earn myself a new title. I wanted to prove my worth to your brother during the summer campaigning and impress him until he would reward me with a barony, or maybe even a county. I wanted to earn my right at being at your side, but now, that plan is ruined.”

“You could still try. Maybe I can even help you. Just tell me what to do, I’d do anything.”

There was still a flicker of hope in her voice, and he hated that he would have to crush it. “It’s impossible,” he said softly. “Two years... With so many other unlanded men of noble blood competing for titles already, two years would have been an awfully short time to reach that goal. However, I was confident I could reach it. I mean, working so closely with the Prince and with the Gods’ blessing, it seemed possible. Now though? I don’t even have those two years anymore. You’ll be married in two months, and betrothed even earlier. There is no way I can gain the standing necessary to marry the Princess in a month!”

“So... you just want to give up? Just like that?” Yes, it hurt to see the hope fade from her eyes, to it being replaced by disappointment and betrayal. It was awful, and Hiccup would have gladly accepted any punishment if it meant she’d smile again.

“No, I don’t want to give up,” he replied in a trembling voice. “But I don’t see any way out of this. I’m not giving up; we already lost. Don’t you see it?”
She shook her head. “No, I don’t. I refuse to think like that. The Gods didn’t bring us together for no reason. And I also won’t believe that we only imagined it. Do you remember the beginning, this confusing longing to get closer to each other, and the intensity with which the bond formed when we kissed? Because I do. Vividly. We didn’t make that up, Hiccup. It was real!”

Yes, he remembered it. Against his will, his hand wandered to his chest, aware of how her eyes followed the motion. It had been real, but that didn’t change their situation. No matter how much he thought about it, he couldn’t find a way out.

He jumped when out of the blue her hands were suddenly on his, tugging it away from his chest and turning it until the palm was up.

“What’s this?” she asked, anxiously examining his bloody hand.

“Just a cut,” he muttered, dazed by how close she was. He could smell faint mayweed on her hair, and he had to fight hard to not simply pull her closer, against his chest, his lips. But he couldn’t…

Without a word but with a concentrated expression, she looked around the small room, and proceeded to clean the wound with a damp cloth before binding it into a tight cast.

“Try to keep that clean, or it might get infected.”

“Uh-huh.” It was all he could give as a response. Even after she was done taking care of his wound, her hands still lingered, and he couldn’t bring himself to retreat. It felt too good to be near her… Her taking care of his wound was so weird though, such a tender and normal thing to do, yet completely out of place right now. He wished with all his heart that it could be different, that this could be normal again. But it wasn’t

“Maybe there is another way,” she mumbled after a while, not meeting his eyes even as her fingers kept caressing his skin. “What… what if… I mean I could marry Eret? Maybe we can risk telling him and make some kind of agreement. That I’m legally and officially married to him, appeasing our fathers and whoever else might care, but in truth he lets me be with you and I let him be with Dagur. It… it wouldn’t be quite the same, but… but it would be better than nothing, wouldn’t it?”

She eventually looked up at him after all, eyes filled with tentative hope again, and now it was he who needed to avert his gaze. Her words made another spark of pain shoot through him, and he had to suppress a low groan. It wasn’t what he wanted for their future, not at all. It wasn’t openly standing at her side and proudly proclaiming their love to the world, wasn’t raising their children together. But compared to the harsh reality, it was tempting, oh so tempting! And yet...

“That’s not an option.” His voice was rough, hoarse even as he felt her gaze like a heavy weight. “It might look like one, but… What would happen if it became public? Because it would. No matter how careful we’d be, eventually some servant or other would notice. Imagine the scandal, the downfall of three of the great Houses at once. Dagur and Eret wouldn’t risk that, and I don’t think we should either. I don’t want our happiness to be at the cost of the people. Besides, marriage is a sacred vow, and one does not break it.” He made himself look at her, really look. “I won’t turn you into an adulteress.”

He had to swallow as, again, the hint of a hopeful smile vanished from her face, and the deeper meaning of her suggestion registered in her mind. Adultery was one of the bigger crimes one could commit in the eyes of the Gods; adulterers and oathbreakers were fed to Nidhogg, the great dragon at the roots of Yggdrasil, after all... and while he’d never doubted the Gods before, having that vision with her... No, he’d spare her from that. He wanted to reach out and cradle her cheek to
comfort her through the painful realisation, and he had to actively fight his own body to hold back. Such a gesture was more intimacy than they could ever share again.

However, her suggestion had sparked another thought, and even though it hurt just to think about it… it would be for the better. “But you’re right on one point,” he uttered, barely audible as if a part of him hoped she wouldn’t hear it. But she did, frowning slightly, so he had no choice but to go on. “You… you could marry Eret. Not because of any secret arrangement but because he would treat you well. Certainly better than most others…”

With one quick motion, she stepped away from him, staring in disbelief. “You can’t be serious,” she breathed, shaking her head.

Hiccup had to turn away again, unable to bear the pain on her face, and just gave a slight shrug. No, he wasn’t serious. He didn’t want her to marry Eret – or anyone else – and he certainly didn’t want to be reminded of her belonging to another man every day. But then, he would never forget her anyway, and actually seeing her wouldn’t make that much of a difference. And with Eret, she would have a better life than with pretty much everyone else.

But she hadn’t reached that insight yet as it seemed, stammering on in a low and weak voice. “No, you aren’t serious. I won’t believe that. You’re not honestly advising me to marry someone else. Because I won’t! I won’t marry anyone but you. You’re not serious, you can’t be. Because you… you…”

She broke off, a sob echoing through the room, and he thought it was the worst he would hear in his life, her crying because of him. But he’d been wrong he realised when her next words broke out of her.

“Because I thought you love me.”

Her words hit him deep, hard, almost making his legs buckle beneath him. Because a small, logically thinking part of him had expected such a question and knew what he had to reply. He had to lie to her. He had to tell her that he didn’t love her, that it had only been an intense infatuation after all. That it wasn’t as real as they’d thought it was, and that they would get over it. It would be the right thing to do. It would undoubtedly hurt her beyond anything her father’s betrayal had done to her. But pain meant that she could heal. She would get over him, eventually, would live on. It was all he wanted for her, to not feel this pain for the rest of her life. It would be the biggest lie of his life, but for her sake, he had to say it. He had to let her go.

But when he looked up at her again, gathering all his strength for the words he had to say… he found that he couldn’t do it. He couldn’t bring himself to lie to her, ever, especially not in this, even if it would be for her own good.

From one moment to the other, his eyes were burning with tears he was barely able to hold back anymore. With a pained smile, he whispered, “Of course I do. I love you, Astrid, with everything I have, with everything I am.” A small sob tore itself from his throat at uttering her name after he’d refused to even think it since last night. “But that’s simply not enough. I am not enough for you.”

He was about to make a step toward her, to take her into his arms or just caress her face, but held back at the last moment. It would only make everything worse. Instead, he continued to speak, his voice quivering. “Believe me, I wish I was enough... I wish I could walk up there, reclaim my birthright, and marry you before the summer comes. But I can’t. I just can’t. And I’m sorry, so so sorry. I never wanted you to be hurt like this. I’d rather I had decided against becoming Eret’s squire and had stayed out of your life instead of the pain I’m putting you through now. But I can’t change what happened and all we can do is run with the decisions others made. I’m not giving up
because I don’t want to find a way. But there simply is none. And I’m so sorry…”

She was eerily quiet, just gazing at him through bleary eyes and with tears running down her cheeks, and it broke something inside him to see her like this. All the emptiness from before was gone in an instant, filling with an endless flood of pain and sorrow, threatening to drown him. He had to get away from here or he’d break, would fall to his knees, beg her to forgive him, and agree to every crude idea she would come up with. Anything if only he could stay with her.

Trembling, he made a step toward her, seeing another painful glitter of hope in her eyes. Quickly, he looked at her hand instead, reached for it almost fearfully, and bowed as best as he could muster. He breathed a light kiss into the air right above her knuckles, her hand resting nearly weightlessly over his.

“Goodbye, Your Royal Highness. It’s been a pleasure to meet you.”

Then he turned, not daring to look at her again, and fled the room, the armoury, entering the dark night in the hopes that it would swallow him.

He couldn’t say for how long he walked until his legs gave up and he slumped to his knees amidst snow-covered grass. He gazed up at the dark sky, at the white flakes falling down around him. The cool air made the tears running down his cheeks burn even hotter as he couldn't keep them back any longer. Shivering, he wrapped his arms around himself, feeling a chill deep inside his chest that had nothing to do with the cold around him – and he missed his personal sun already.

Chapter End Notes

Riiiight... I'm back in one of those lockable safety rooms in our bar... *jumps back into hiding*
Once Upon A Time We Had A Lot To Fight For. We Had A Dream, We Had A Plan

Chapter Notes

Okay, this was a tough chapter to write, though for once not because of the content. Let me tell you about the fourteen days since I last updated. The first nine I had writer's block and couldn't get even one word down for this story. Then followed two days where I was on quite a high and got down 7k words, which is a lot for me. And after that, there were two and a half days through which I struggled again to get anything done, which left me and my alpha-reader with less than half a day for edits. I still can't believe it's actually done by now, and if it sucks... well, then I'm sorry!

In addition, I'm not quite sure of this chapter. It got awfully long, but somehow I feel like nothing happens. I mean, I know that's not true. But still, it feels off. Well, it's something of a bridge chapter, I guess.*sigh*

This week's chapter owes its title to a friend who made me listen to The Rasmus again after many years of not thinking much about this band. And when I listened to 'Sail Away'... well, the very first lines of lyrics of that song just really hit me. They fit so well to how Hiccup and Astrid feel right now.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Hiccup couldn’t remember how he’d made it back to the stables, nor how the night had passed in any specific detail. It was all just a blur of pain and sorrow, of desperation and hopelessness. It was over. Everything was over. It was true what he’d told Cami once, after all, that his entire life only revolved around her. But now, she was gone, and he didn't even understand why. He’d been so sure...

But now, it seemed as if the Gods had abandoned them, if not for that guttering spark in his chest that kept reminding him of her, cruel and unrelenting.

When Eret arrived at the stables, hours after the sun had risen, Hiccup was still sitting in his stall, unmoving, staring blankly out the small window, and registered nothing until his cousin’s broad hand touched his shoulder.

“Hey, Hiccup. You okay?”

Slowly, Hiccup turned to look at Eret, and forced a wry grin to his face.

“Hey. Yeah, I’m just… just tired, I guess. I’m sorry, I didn’t finish polishing all of your kit, but I’ll get back to that today.”

Eret gave him a scrutinising look, but nodded, accepting this explanation. “That's fine, I won’t need it right away. But—” He paused, his eyes on Hiccup’s injured and bandaged hand. “What’s this?”
Quickly, Hiccup covered the hand with the other one. “Nothing. I cut myself, but it… it’s nothing.” At some point last night, the pain of the cut had eventually registered in his mind, but it was still too dull and unimportant to matter. All it did was remind him of her hands on his as she’d attended to the cut. Probably the last time he’d ever felt her touch… He swallowed, then made an effort to appear normal. “Anyway, what brings you here today? Don’t you need to do some training, or so?”

Eret still looked at him funny, but then shook his head. “Maybe later. But I came here for another reason. The thing is… I’m going to need my squire from now on. The hunts start tomorrow and then there’s the first small tournament in a few days, and… I already talked to father and we agreed that it will be safe enough now to keep these hotheads—” he nodded at the stallions, “— in a separate part of the main stables, now that the herd isn’t there anymore and there’s enough free space. They need to get used to that anyway. So… for the rest of our stay, you’re going to be my squire full time, which also means you’ll have to move; I can’t afford the time for you to hike back and forth to these stables. We could move to our townhouse, where there’s enough space for you to have your own room… but Grandfather’s staying there and…” he shrugged helplessly.

Hiccup needed a moment to wrap his head around what Eret had said. He seemed to be sorry for some reason, but Hiccup actually couldn’t see why. As much as he’d enjoyed the solitude of these outer stables during the past months, a change like this seemed like the best thing that could happen to him right now. It would keep him busy, would keep him from mentally tearing himself apart. It would keep him from remembering all the nights they’d spent here...

And then the rest of it registered. Oh. Right. His grandfather, who thought of him as a failure. Well, he was right, after all, but that didn’t mean Hiccup needed to hear it from the old prune.

“So what else is there?”

“Sharing a room in the squire barracks or the couch in my rooms,” Eret said apologetically, and then hastened to add, “It’s clean! I promise!”

Hiccup almost laughed – out of humour or despair, he had no idea. But he managed to keep the smile up. “The couch will do,” he murmured.

Something like a relieved smile played around Eret’s lips. “I’d hoped you’d say that. Dag and I already organised a trunk for your things and while it’s not an enclosed room, you’ll at least have a separate corner for yourself there. A little bit of privacy. Come, I’ll help you pack your things, then we can get the horses ready to be moved.”

Not having any reason to hold back, Hiccup got to work. His few possessions were quickly tossed in a rucksack – with Hiccup carefully avoiding a certain object hidden between the straw bales least Eret would ask unnecessary questions – before they turned their attention to the horses. All the while, Hiccup felt as if Eret was throwing him weird looks every now and then, but it never became so obvious that he felt like asking about it. To him, it wasn’t important, and if Eret wanted to talk about something… well, then he could bring it up. Which he eventually did.

They had just started their way to the main stables – with Hiccup riding Chomp and leading Hunter at his side while Eret rode Squish and led Crusher – when Eret eventually broke the silence. “So… what do you think of these… new plans?”

Hiccup snorted. “What’s there to think about?” he asked and tried not to sound as bitter as he felt. “I’m your squire and I would have needed to fully act like it by now anyway. So this is good, a change for the better.” Wrong! “And in case you meant the… the festivities... It's the King's right to entertain his people with hunts and tournaments and whatever else he's planned. It might even get
interesting for us.” He forced himself to shrug nonchalantly in case Eret was still watching him.

“Yeah, interesting might be the right word.” Eret let out a deep sigh. “But that’s not what I meant. I mean this whole wedding scheme. I don’t get why Uncle Osmond thought that was a good idea. Or Daniel or my father, for that matter.”

Hiccup’s hands around Chomp’s reins tightened; it made him wince when the cut stung and the stallion snorted in annoyance. Was Eret honestly asking him what he thought about her impending wedding? If he hadn’t been in danger to spill out exactly what he was thinking, he might have laughed. Instead, he just said, “Same answer. I don’t think it is my place to question the King’s decision. She’s going to marry one of these noblemen for the sake of the Kingdom. That isn’t really different from what was planned before, right?”

“True,” Eret admitted reluctantly. “But it still doesn’t feel right. And it’s certainly not right for Swanja! From what Snot said last night, she isn’t herself anymore. She lost her spark, her wit. He said she’d tried to appear unperturbed, as usual, but he saw right through her. All this must have hit her pretty hard; she was devastated at her birthday dinner. She wouldn’t even let us help or comfort her, for Odin’s sake!”

He sounded tense, worried, and Hiccup was incredibly glad that they’d reached a narrow path by now that wouldn’t allow them to ride side by side. It meant Eret couldn’t see his expression of soul-deep pain and self-loathing. Devastated… That seemed like an apt description of her the last few times he’d seen her. And it had been his fault.

Everything was his fault! And always had been… If he’d spoken his mind more firmly all those years ago, about not losing their connection to the Kingdom, his father might have stood up against their fellow tribesmen. If he’d acted more like the tribesman their people had expected him to be, they wouldn’t have been so openly against him being the heir to the High Chief’s title. If they hadn’t lost their standing within the tribes, his parents and siblings might still be alive and he would be a knight by now too. He could even participate in this competition for her hand as a ducal heir himself.

The thought was too good to be true, literally, and, unable to bear it, Hiccup pushed it aside. They all had thought they’d been doing the right thing back then, and reprimanding himself for it now, when he knew better, wouldn’t do him any good. Besides, he didn’t even need to go that far back into the past to pin down his mistakes.

He should have stayed away from her in the first place. The idea that, after all the things he’d messed up, his life could change for the better… this too had been too good to be true. Again, he’d made the wrong decision by becoming Eret’s squire just to be able to see her again, and now, she was paying the painful price for his impudence. Oh, he’d thought he’d been right back then, too. But the pain in her eyes last night was wholly and entirely his own fault, and any attempt of his to comfort her was bound to only hurt her more.

There was nothing he could do to help her.

Except…

“Don’t worry,” he heard himself say, oddly calm and composed. As if it wasn’t really him who was speaking. “What was is you said once? The Princess is a fighter. She’s tough. This whole wedding thing took her by surprise, but I’m sure she’ll accept it, eventually. She’ll come around and then you all can be there to support her when she’s ready for that.”

Eret grunted, but didn’t say any more until they’d reached the end of the narrow pass where he
waited for Hiccup to take his place next to him. “You’re right,” he admitted, face turning to Hiccup, who was now focused entirely on keeping his feelings locked away as deep inside himself as possible. “But this is still different. Our fathers want her to marry one of us. How can we support her as her brothers when everyone is looking for signs as to who she’ll choose as her betrothed?”

“But maybe that’s the point,” Hiccup replied with a light shrug. “She was to marry one of you anyway, wasn’t she? Maybe it’s time to get over how you grew up like siblings and start seeing each other as what you are. An option. I… I think I know her well enough by now to say that she won’t spontaneously fall in love with one of those strangers her father presented to her. But a love match was never a likely possibility – for neither of you. And I remember what Daniel said on that first night we spent here, your accolade. He said that you would be good for each other, and… and I agree.”

Saying those words felt like a hungry beast tearing at the dead remains of his heart and soul. It hurt! But it was better this way. His own pain he could deal with, but hers? Not so much. And if it wasn’t within his power to help her directly, then the least he could do was send comfort in another form.

As they rode on, Hiccup was aware of Eret’s scrutinising gaze on him, and all he could hope for was that he wouldn’t see how Hiccup felt inside. But he didn’t say anything else until they reached the stables where a group of grooms quickly took over the horses to lead them to their new stalls.

“Hey, Hic,” he eventually spoke again once they were alone. “I know I offered to help, but… Would it be all right for you to get Markor and Cassie on your own? They shouldn’t give you any problems, after all. And I’ll take your bag up to my rooms, and…” he paused, grimacing, then shook his head. “There’s a message I have to send and I need to see whether I can find Dagur. Gotta talk to him…” He ran a hand through his hair, and if Hiccup wouldn’t be feeling so dead inside anyway, he’d be sorry for his cousin. It wasn’t only she who’d gotten thrown into this mess, after all…

But still, it was better this way.

“Sure,” he agreed with a sympathetic smile and a clap to Eret’s shoulder. “See you tonight then.”

On his way back to the outer stables, he wasn’t able to control his thoughts and emotions any longer though. He didn’t cry; after last night he didn’t think he had any tears left, but the pain still returned in full force.

It’s better this way, he kept chanting to himself. No matter how much the thought of her marrying Eret or one of her other brothers hurt, it was still the best option there was. She would have a good life with a husband who respected her as a person and not just saw her as an object, who cared for her. It might not be the right kind of love that connected them, but at least there was some form of affection, enough for her to eventually find comfort in her fate. It was all that was left for him to hope for.

And if she chose Eret… Well, Hiccup did feel sorry for him and Dagur. Even with knowing that their relationship couldn’t last, having it end this abruptly couldn’t be easy either. No wonder Eret had wanted to talk to his lover.

Once back at the outer stables, he concentrated on getting Cassie and Markor ready. It was a welcome distraction, and the familiar motions and the simple affection the horses offered gave him comfort, Cassie especially. She’d been with him for so many years now, had been his only support during trying times, and now easily adapted to his pain again. He took several minutes just scratching her and accepting her rubbing her nose to his chest, until something like a smile was
back on his face. Not a happy but at least a content one.

The smile didn’t last long though, only until he entered Markor’s stall. The gelding directly looked up at his visitor, clearly hoping and then being disappointed as it wasn’t who he’d hoped it would be. The sight gave Hiccup a new sting, and he did his best to cheer the horse up by rubbing and cuddling his neck.

“I know, I know. I miss her too,” he whispered, hiding his face against the gelding’s warm fur. It was three days now since she’d last been here – a long time considering how often she’d been here during the past three months. No wonder Markor missed her, especially since he couldn’t understand why she wouldn’t come. “But don’t worry, boy. She’ll get back to you. You’ll see.”

Hiccup let himself feel comfort from the horses’ presence for a few minutes longer, before he got them both ready. He struggled a bit with which saddle to put on Markor, but then decided on the ridiculously decorated side saddle. It was the official saddle, after all, and he would need to ask Eret where to store the unofficial but more practical one.

When he was done, he let his gaze wander through the stables that had been his home during these past wonderful months, and gulped. Leaving this place for good felt like a sign. It was truly over, and their time really had only been borrowed, had never been intended to last.

He was about to leave when he remembered the one thing he’d left here before and hurried back to his former sleeping stall to retrieve it. If anyone was to find it by chance, it would only raise unnecessary questions. Hesitantly, he picked up the small swan-shaped oil pot. His chest was tightening – at the sight, at the memories, and at what it stood for. He’d been so grateful to Cami for this gift, not just because of why she’d given it to him but also because of what else it represented. He’d meant to keep it during the weeks and months of their separation, as a reminder and a promise for better times. The scent of the oil alone would have served to comfort him over missing her. But now? Now, it only hurt to look at it, the cool ceramic feeling as if it was burning his skin. All it did now was remind him of what could never be.

With a low suppressed sob, he stowed it away into a pocket, then left the stables without looking back. He tried to leave it all behind him as he once more rode down the path to the main stables on Cassie’s back, but his thoughts kept whirling around the pot and what it stood for. Why had the Gods abandoned them? He’d told her that maybe they’d been wrong, that they weren’t soulmates meant for each other after all. But he didn’t believe that, not really. She’d been right, he’d felt it too, the connection, their bond – and still felt it! All that had been real! And yet… And yet, the Gods had turned away from them, had separated them without leaving them any hope. Why? What had happened, what had changed?

A whirlwind of thoughts blew through Hiccup’s mind, thoughts that, in a way, added another layer of pain to his battered soul, but that, at the same time, made perfect sense.

It was all his fault.

With shaking hands, he pulled the pot back out of his pocket – leaving Cassie to find the way on her own – and stared at it. They’d gone too far... It made sense, now that he thought about it. This had to be what had angered the Gods. Them ignoring the rules, getting intimate before it was allowed. A part of him wanted to blame Cami for her support, for her assurance that it would be all right as long as they kept to certain rules. But Hiccup knew that wouldn’t be fair. It had been his decision to go further than he’d felt comfortable, than he’d been taught was allowed. He had ignored the rules he’d learned, had given in to his desire. He should have known better!

His breath became ragged as he kept staring at the oil pot and everything clicked into place. Them
getting intimate must have angered the Gods. The timing was a clear indication. They’d gone too far, and before they’d been able to break another rule with their forbidden plan to have anal sex, the Gods had put an end to it. The timing was unmistakable.

*It was all his fault!*

A pained sob tore itself from Hiccup’s throat. Having lost her… that was bad enough. But now, he knew that it had been his own doing, that he should have known better. If he hadn’t been so foolish and selfish… their future would still be in reach.

Hiccup’s hand tightened around the pot – until it cracked. Without a warning, he was emerged in a cloud of intense mayweed scent, and it momentarily rendered him blind and deaf to everything around him. His mind got flooded with the memories he’d tried to hold back – of her smile, of her being in his arms, of burying his face in her hair and inhaling deeply. Of the flush on her face and her little gasps, of the taste of her skin, of holding her through the night. Of all the things that could never be.

With a pained and desperate outcry, he hurled the pot away. He wasn’t looking, didn’t care where it might land. He only wanted to get rid of it, to never relive those memories again. It was too painful.

But when he heard the splash of water, he looked up after all, puzzled. Without him noticing, Cassie and Markor had paused near the little lake that used to house her swans, and the pot must have landed in there.

*How fitting,* Hiccup thought bitterly as he watched the waves on the surface getting smaller and fading away. Eret had told him about the swans’ fate, how that, too, had hit her. It felt oddly right that this place now was also where all their hopes, dreams, and plans for the future were buried. Forever.

He stayed for a little while longer, gazing at the now-calm lake, and let the pain wash through and out of him. It was over, and there was nothing he could do but accept it.

He let himself wallow for a little bit longer, then forced every remaining trace of pain into a distant corner of his heart to keep it locked there forever. From now on, he had to function. Be it the upcoming tournaments and other occasions or the possibility of still seeing her regularly in case she chose Eret – he couldn’t let her or anyone else see his pain.

From now on, he wouldn’t let his emotions slip ever again.

.  o  O  o .

A part of Astrid still clung to the hope that she would eventually wake up. Nothing seemed real; not the days she’d spent getting introduced to all her suitors, not the evening meals she was to take in the usual company of her father, the Grand Dukes, and their sons, and not the nights when she lay awake crying or too agitated to fall asleep until exhaustion took over. And now, she sat beneath a neat little pavilion, overlooking the fighting grounds that were decorated for the first of many upcoming tournaments, and still didn’t feel as if she was fully awake.

The whole setting was just… *surreal.* The sudden snow from the previous week had all melted by now, but it was still rather cool, and the *practical* part of her mind was grateful for her gloves and the warm cloak she was wrapped in – even as her heart kept recalling the warmer days from not so long ago. Around her, everything seemed dull and bland, colourless beneath the grey sky, except the brightly painted flags and banners everywhere which seemed completely out of place. It all just
felt *wrong* to her. And the fact that the men in the arena beneath somehow believed that fighting each other would gain them her favour was just absurd.

Not for the first time, a pained outcry sounded over the crowd followed by a wave of whispers as one of the fighters fell to one knee and clutched at his thigh. Blood quickly stained his blue-and-green-coloured clothes in shades of red, and Astrid hoped that the blow from his opponent's sword hadn’t severed his main artery. It was quite possible that he’d not survive if it had.

The thought upset her even though she didn’t feel as if there was much left of her to be upset. She’d probably talked to this man during the past days, and now, he might very well be dying a pointless death. And the worst was that, if he died, he wouldn’t be the first and certainly not the last one either.

The first had been an accident during a short hunting trip two days prior. The man’s horse had been wounded by a misguided arrow from one of his companions, and the fall off his horse’s back onto the uneven ground of the forest had caused severe injuries – or something like that. Astrid only dimly remembered how the King and the other men had talked about it during dinner. It had been one of three deaths on that day, and since then, the body count had only climbed higher.

And as much as the small *sane* part of her mind despised these unnecessary deaths, she still had to admit that they weren’t unusual. Accidents during hunts happened. Likewise, injuries during tournaments weren’t uncommon. Many of the young men who participated considered the event incomplete if they hadn’t gotten a scar out of it. Once she had agreed with that bit of joking humour, but now? Now, she just felt numb.

So it was with a heart of stone that she watched the loser be carried off to the healer’s tent, festooned with Freya’s symbol. He wouldn’t be the last victim of these festivities, that was for sure. But as much as she loathed that thought… it wasn’t what really bothered her.

As selfish and as vile as the thought made her feel, she couldn’t bring herself to care too much for these strangers who had all come to haggle over her future as if she was nothing but a pretty adornment for their household. They had known what they were in for.

Although… with a strong sense of unease, she remembered the half hour she’d had to spend with Thuggory the other day. And even though she tried to forget his words, they still lingered.

“*So here we are, Milady Astrid, in a close and intimate conversation, just like it should be. I hope you’re enjoying my company, because you’d better get used to it.*”

“I’ve said it before and I’ll say it again: I will never become your wife. There’s nothing you can do to make me choose you!” It had been nearly the only words she’d said for days she actually remembered.

*But Thuggory had only laughed. “Oh, you naive and stupid girl. You think I can’t force you to choose me? What if there’s nobody else left? What if I remove every other candidate until you see reason? You will become my wife, whether you want it or not.”*

A shudder ran through her at that memory, and she quickly buried it in the depth of her mind. Thuggory could talk all he wanted, and chances were that he’d get himself killed. She didn’t even really feel bad for *hoping* for that outcome. But even that wasn’t what really concerned her.

No, what truly occupied her mind was the same topic that was ruling her every thought since the moment the King had made his announcement on her birthday.
She could see him standing at the side of the battleground, holding Eret’s substitute shield and sword ready in case his master might need them. It was the first time she’d seen him since he’d fled from her in the armoury that night, and even though she’d known he would be here, the sight of him had floored her completely.

During the last few days, her heart had… No, it hadn’t started to heal, but it had become numb. She’d refused to think about him, hadn’t let her consciousness dwell on what couldn’t possibly be true. He couldn’t have been right! This wasn’t the first time they’d encountered difficulties or misunderstandings, like when they’d first started to get intimate and he’d more or less avoided her for days. Back then, they had only needed some good advice and the chance to talk openly until everything was clear again. This was no different… wasn’t it?

Her eyes were burning, her lower lip starting to quiver, and she turned her attention back to the fighting men before she would burst out into tears in public. *It will all be solved*, she repeatedly thought to herself. *We just need time to work it out.*

But deep inside, she knew that this was very different from the little problems they’d encountered before. Because they already *had* talked. And it hadn’t solved *anything*. On the contrary, as much as she hated to admit it, the words he’d said to her at the armoury were not ones she could easily dismiss.

‘*We’ve already lost.*’

Yes, she’d refused to believe those words, but she also couldn’t simply dismiss them as wrong. No matter how much she *wanted* to ignore them or how much she tried to come up with a solution… she couldn’t find one. Maybe he’d been right after all...

This was another thought she’d vehemently ignored during the past days, but now… Seeing him standing there tore all wounds open anew. No, she didn’t *want* to believe that their shared future had been nothing but a pipe dream. But arguing against it became harder and harder, especially with seeing the utter hopelessness in his posture. Oh, he might be trying to hide it, to appear unperturbed and focused on his work – but she easily saw through him just like he’d always been able to see through her mask. She could see how much he was suffering, saw the pain in his hollow eyes. He’d said that he still loved her, that their feelings hadn’t been just their imagination. And yet, he’d clearly given up. There was no fight in him anymore, no strength to even consider fighting. He was broken, and seeing him like that broke her, too.

Biting down on her lip, hard, she gazed down at her hands, clenched into tight fists to keep them from trembling. So, what if he *had* been right? She’d tried her best to find a solution, but everything she’d brought up he’d warded off as impossible, and rightly so. And he who was so much smarter than her, who was able to think so quickly and come up with solutions for every problem… had given up. Slowly and against her will, the realisation seeped into her heart.

They’d already lost…

Once more, she glanced at where he stood and it felt as if her heart was breaking all over again. It was over, really and truly over. Her hand wandered to her chest as if to catch the shards and keep them together, but it was no use. A fresh wave of pain tore through her and it only got worse when she saw him grimace and mimic her gesture, his hand pressing to his chest as if he could feel it too. For a short heartbeat, he glanced up at where she sat and their eyes met. It was like a last goodbye, a last shared moment, the acknowledgement that he felt the same but that that didn’t change anything.

There was no hope left for them, nothing they could do.
The realisation left her feeling hollow, even more so than the pain of the announcement and his words had before. There was nothing left for her. Nothing to look forward to, nothing to hope or to fight for. All that was left to her was a dull and empty future with a man she didn’t care for while always remembering what she’d lost, what could have been. It was a frightening thought, and for two days, it was all she could think about, making her tumble deeper and deeper into her misery, until Ruff put an end to it.

“This can’t go on,” she exclaimed when she spotted the plate of once more untouched tea and biscuits. “I get that you feel horrible and I’m sorry, I really am. But you’ve got to eat! You can’t let yourself waste away just because that boy turned your head and broke your heart. No matter how much you might despise this and how little I like to remind you about it, you’ve got responsibilities.”

Astrid snorted, the only reaction that gave away she’d listened at all with her standing by the window and looking out over Lake Vola’s calm surface. Responsibilities... Yes, that was all that was left to her. Fulfilling the expectations placed on her, marrying to keep the Kingdom stable and popping out children for her future husband until her body gave up. It wasn’t any different from what she’d been prepared for all her life, but where before she’d accepted the thought with a certain composure and even a hint of pride to fulfil this duty, it now only made her feel dreadful. But who knew… maybe she would be lucky; maybe she would end like so many other women and not survive such a life for long...

She flinched when, without a warning, a hand touched her shoulder. “Milady, you’ve got to move on,” Ruff said urgently. It could have come across as cruel and cold-hearted, but Astrid knew her maidservant well enough. Most of all, she was practical. “I know it’s not easy, but you have to. You have a few hours left before today’s hunting party returns and you’ll have to welcome them back; how about you try and get on other thoughts until then, take a break? You could visit your horse; Tuff can escort you there. Or the herb garden? Maybe there are a few plants that already grow, or you could clean it up for the warmer days?”

Swallowing, Astrid closed her eyes. Ruff was right, and she knew that. She couldn’t continue like this forever, like nothing but an empty shell. Eventually, she would have to go on, to get over him. A tiny voice in the back of her mind was screaming at her that this was wrong, that she shouldn’t have to get over him, that they were meant to be… But she ignored it and hoped that, one day, the voice would disappear. So far though, it only threatened to tear her apart – the logical knowledge that they had no chance against the denial still simmering beneath – and she wrapped her arms around herself in a fruitless attempt to keep herself together. Suddenly, seeking distraction sounded like an excellent idea.

“Oh, okay,” she whispered weakly. A slight frown crossed her face as she thought about Ruff’s suggestions though. The idea of visiting Markor was alluring, but even with him now housed at the main stables, he was too tightly linked to all those wonderful memories she tried to forget, and she wasn’t sure whether she could stand being near him yet. No, that wasn’t an option, and visiting the herb garden wasn’t an appealing idea either; it would only remind her of these last few days at the dead royal gardens where she’d been offered like meat to a pack of wolves. But what else could she do?

Something like a small smile tugged at her lips as she remembered another option, another place she could go and hide from reality, from who she was, and where she got treated like a normal person.
“Is Tuff ready?” she asked in a quiet but somehow steadier voice. “I’d like to go visit Fishlegs.”

Ruff reacted with an approving grin. She even went so far as to pack the biscuits and other pastries to take with her, even though Astrid felt odd bringing food Heather might very well have prepared herself as a gift. However, she understood that Ruff’s main motivation was her hope that Astrid might still eat something, so she didn’t say anything, and not even half an hour later she knocked on the door to her friends’ house.

There were grunts and the shuffling of cloth audible, even through the door, but it still took over a minute before a tired looking Fishlegs opened her. When he recognised her though, his face brightened. “Astrid! Now, that’s a surprise. Uh, come in, come in.”

He stepped aside and waved her in, threw a wondering look at Tuff but shrugged and closed the door again when her warder made no attempts to come in as well and instead stayed with the chickens outside. He hurried around on his short legs to which he owed his nickname, and picked up boxes and other stuff to make room for her.

Astrid hesitantly took the seat he eventually offered to her and watched him with a worried expression. “Is everything all right? Is this a bad time for me to visit?” she asked, a little self-consciously. She’d looked forward to coming here once the plan was made, but hadn’t spared even a second to think about whether her friends even had time for her. But Fishlegs directly warded her concerns off with a smile and a shake of his head.

“No, no, don’t worry. We were just taking a nap, but it’s time to get up anyway.” As if to contradict himself, he yawned. “Uh, sorry. ‘s been a tough few days, but who am I telling this… Still, it’s good to see you. How are you doing?”

Warding his question off with a grimace and a shrug, she began to unpack the parcel of treats Ruff had given her. She hadn’t come here to dwell even more on her situation though, so she directly changed the subject. “And you?”

Fishlegs gave a little shrug, then longingly eyed the biscuits. “May I?” He reached for one when Astrid nudged the parcel toward him without a word, and ate it with obvious delight. “Mmh, that’s good. Not sure when I last ate anything.” He took another one, and only continued speaking once it was gone, too. “I’m okay. Tired. Overworked. Usually, I wouldn’t take a nap at this time of day, but Master Mulch insisted on it. He claimed that I’ve been on my feet for over thirty hours – and the fact that I don’t know whether that’s true is probably proof enough. But there’s just so much to do! It’s like these men are actually out on getting severely injured. More than one even asked whether he’d keep a ‘cool scar’ out of it.” He shook his head and helped himself to another pastry.

Or others are out to get them injured, she thought, grimacing as she again remembered Thuggory’s sneer. She shuddered, but ignored Fishlegs’ inquisitive look. “So, what kind of injuries do you have to treat? Mostly cuts, I assume?”

“Aye. Or that’s my job, at least, while Master Mulch treats the more urgent injuries,” he nodded, then intently looked at her. “Do you remember how to treat such a cut?”

Astrid chuckled, surprising herself with the sound. It felt odd, as if her being happy was some form of betrayal. But that was a stupid thought; Ruff had been right in insisting for her to get distracted would do her good. And she also was incredibly grateful for Fishlegs to catch up on her mood so quickly.

“I think so?” she replied to his question, focussing on what he’d taught her. “First, you have to clean the wound, with clear water or maybe strong alcohol. Then you put willow bark tincture on
it, for disinfection and against the pain. Depending on how deep the cut is, you might need to sew it shut with a good needle. At last, you cover the wound with moss to soak up blood, put a tight-enough cast around it, and threaten the patient with your eternal wrath in case they don’t give the wound enough rest to heal properly,” she recited Fishlegs’ former lesson – even though the last bit was her own addition. It had the desired effect as it made him laugh and congratulate her on still remembering.

They chatted for a while longer, with Astrid feeling lighter by the minute, until Heather joined them. She looked even more tired than her husband had, and gracelessly slumped onto the bench next to him. At first, she eyed the pastries Astrid had brought with a slightly wrinkled nose, but then shrugged and picked one to nibble on.

“Hey, love. Had a good rest?” Fishlegs asked, then jumped up, startling Astrid. “Wait, I’ll make you a mug of that herbal tea. Astrid, what about you?”

“Astrid?” Heather asked, then shrugged and took a bite of her pastry.

“Astrid, what about you?”

“Astrid,” Fishlegs repeated.

“Sure, why not,” she replied with an amused smile, then turned her attention back to Heather. “Lots of work for you too, I guess?”

Again, Heather shrugged. “Yes, but it’s manageable, all in all. Mostly providing refreshments for those watching the tournament and preparing and preserving whatever those men bring from those hunts. It’s not like the crazy increase of work Justin has.”

Astrid raised an eyebrow at her, which made the other woman chuckle.

“Yes, yes, I know what you’re thinking. I say that, but still, here I am, looking as if I’d been up for over three days straight.” She shook her head, a soft smile spreading over her face. “But I still say it’s not the work. I’m just kinda always tired lately. Maybe I’ve caught some bug, or so. It’ll pass.”

Before Astrid could reply anything, Fishlegs returned and placed a steaming mug in front of each. “So, here you go. But I’ve gotta leave you now. I’m sure we’ll get new patients once the hunting party returns, and I need to help Master Mulch prepare for that. Bye, Astrid. Was great to see you again.” He waved at her, bent to kiss Heather goodbye, and left.

Astrid reached for her mug, and hummed. She knew that the brew was too hot to drink it yet, but she could still enjoy the heat as part of the comfort around her, and she basked in it all, in this small sanctuary.

Until Heather brutally tore her back into reality.

“So, you’re getting married,” she stated.

It wasn’t a question, and when Astrid threw her a short baffled look before quickly averting her gaze she thought she detected a strange expression in Heather’s eyes. Pity, determination, and… satisfaction? But no, she certainly had imagined that last one, she thought and shook her head, chiding herself. She, too, was overly tired and exhausted, that was all. “Yes,” she breathed, the only answer she could think of. What else was she supposed to reply anyway? It wasn’t a secret, after all. Not anymore.

Heather watched her for a minute, quietly, and then sighed. “I’m sorry,” she said, sounding weirdly formal. “I remember what we talked about some while ago, and… Well, judging by how you haven’t openly proclaimed your love yet and your gloomy mood… I guess the one you had feelings for isn’t someone your father would approve of?”

Astrid pressed her lips shut, her hands around the mug tightening. This was not why she’d come
here. She didn’t want to talk about this, about him, didn’t want to think. She wasn’t strong enough for that, not yet. “No, he’s not,” she mumbled weakly. “And-and it’s over anyway.” Saying it out loud, now that she knew it was true, hurt even more, and she hoped that Heather would drop the topic now. But apparently, she wasn’t that lucky.

“I see,” Heather sighed. “Well, again, I’m sorry for you. But this is part of what I meant, you know? When you asked me about how it feels to be in love and I told you to be careful? And it’s probably better this way anyway, that it’s over I mean.” She sighed again. “Gods, I sound heartless. I’d apologise, but what I wan– what I need to tell you won’t sound any better to you.”

Astrid wanted to make her stop talking, to order her if necessary, but she couldn’t find her voice. Unbiddenly, just thinking about him made images and memories flash through her mind, of his shining eyes when he smiled, of his touch when he cradled her cheek, of his warmth when he held her in his embrace. They flooded through her, leaving her powerless to rein them back in, and only Heather’s voice – even as it had caused this in the first place – was able to tear her out of it again.

“The thing is… I know that a marriage out of love is one of the best things that can happen to a person. But you are more than just an ordinary person! You aren’t just responsible for your own happiness, but also for that of your people. And even though I wouldn’t want to begrudge you a love match… I want to ask you to make a prudent choice. Please, think of your people.”

Astrid was trembling, but with the painful memories had also come the numbness of the last few days. As if her body and mind reacted on reflex, shutting down to ward off any harm. “What exactly are you asking of me?” she heard herself ask, her eyes on the little waves on the tea’s surface.

Heather gave a deep sigh. “I… I want to ask you to marry Dagur – or his horse-crazy boyfriend, if necessary. These two… with their impossible relationship and their refusal to marry and take responsibility, they’re a bigger threat to the Kingdom’s stability than those pathetic Malarians who can’t do anything but be an annoying pain at the border. Please, I-I’m begging you. It is within your power to separate them and end this selfish infatuation of theirs that so easily can turn half the Kingdom into chaos. Marry Dagur and give him an heir. It’s w-what the people need!”

There was a heavy silence once Heather stopped talking. To Astrid, it felt oppressive, like a thick blanket smothering everything; every sound, her thoughts, her movements, even the air to breathe. Only slowly, she managed to raise her head and to look at the other woman.

Heather was clearly afraid of having spoken her mind so openly. She was watching her with wide eyes, one hand over her mouth to cover it, the other wrapped around herself in something like a protective gesture. It was a funny sight, in a way. This woman, who had adamantly fought expectations and the people who had wanted to keep her in the place she’d been born into, was afraid of her, a powerless puppet who wasn’t even allowed to choose what she was wearing? It was ridiculous.

But Astrid felt too numb to laugh. Instead, she silently gazed at the woman who she’d thought of as a friend until now. “Thanks for the tea,” she eventually whispered, let go of the untouched mug, and rose to her feet to leave.

In passing, she heard Heather mumble another “I’m sorry!” but she wasn’t in a condition to accept the words.

Tuff looked up in surprise when she appeared next to him, but quickly caught on to her mood after he caught her expression. “Guess that didn’t go as Ruff hoped, eh? What a surprise… You wanna go back?”
Astrid nodded and mutely followed Tuff back to her chambers. And all the while, her head was spinning around what Heather had said.

How dare she? How dare she ask something like this of her? Essentially, it was the same thing the King had asked of her, the same he had suggested. But marrying Dagur – or Eret or Snotlout for that matter – that was insane! How could people even think of this option? It was ridiculous, and wrong, and simply impossible.

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No matter how much Astrid tried to dismiss Heather’s suggestion as pure idiocy, the thought kept popping up in her mind at the weirdest of moments. Over and over, she mulled it over in her head, all the reasons why it was a stupid idea and could never work out. It was annoying – but she was still grateful for it. Thinking about this kept her mind occupied and prevented her from drowning in pain. At night, she was still helpless to the onslaught of memories, crying until she had no tears left, but at least during the day she was managing better now. And during dinner two days later, she was even able to pay attention to what happened around her again.

“Hey, Dag. Could you hand me the cheese plate?”

The question came from Snot next to her, and Astrid reacted without thinking as she reached for the plate that stood right in front of her and pushed it over to him.

“Uh… thanks, Astrid,” Snot grunted, clearly perplexed.

She gave him a nod and something like a small smile, then looked around into the astonished but smiling faces of her brothers. “What?” she asked, a little defensively. It wasn’t as if she usually was too proud to help either.

Eret’s smile softened a little. “Nothing. It’s just good to have you back.” She frowned, but he didn’t elaborate and she was grateful for that. She really hadn’t been here lately, had she?

With a low sigh, she reached for a bread roll and the cheese as well. She did it out of reflex, to not get scolded again for eating too little, and only after taking a first bite did she realise how hungry she actually was. Maybe Ruff had been right after all. Maybe it was time for her to accept the lot fate had dealt her and roll with it. As always, the thought came with a hidden, painful sting, but she refused to let it hit her, to even let the tiniest of thoughts about… about this topic reach her consciousness. She might be more composed now, but she certainly wasn’t strong enough for that. So when Eret addressed the older men at the other end of the table a minute later, she happily focused all her attention on their conversation.

“Uncle Spitelout? I know I’m asking this every night, but have you received any news from Daniel today?”

At that, Astrid looked up with real interest now. Whenever Spitelout was at the castle, he happily took over overseeing the royal pigeonry for the time being. She’d never understood his fascination with the birds, but then, everybody needed a hobby, she assumed. It made him happy and also meant that he was always informed about what kind of messages had left or reached the castle through the homing pigeons. And even with how twisted her thoughts about Daniel were these days, she was still eager to hear from him.

However, Spitelout, who’d just pushed his plate away with a clearly satisfied sigh, just gave a little grunt and shook his head. “Sorry, boy, but there still was no answer. The last time we heard from him was a week ago when he informed us that everything goes as planned.” He shrugged. “Beyond
that, ‘No news are good news’. Besides, who knows whether your message has even reached him yet? My birds only fly to their nests in Westhill, after all, and from there a courier would have to be sent out to find him and deliver your message – and while we know where the Prince is supposed to be, itineraries in that region can be seen as little more than polite suggestions.”

“Looks like you’ll have to wait until he’s back, son,” Eret II added with an amused smile. “Just be a little patient, he’ll be back in two weeks anyway.”

Eret grunted, but didn’t ask anything else, and instead focused on his overly full plate.

Astrid had watched the short exchange with a bit of apparently obvious bewilderment, so Dagur, who seemed to have caught her puzzled look, now leaned over to explain in a low voice. “Eret sent a pigeon with a message to Westhill, a day or two after… well, after this whole mess started. I read a part of it and it was hilarious; a collection of not-very-nice insults and the repeated demand for what in the name of Hel’s pale tit Daniel had been thinking.” He shrugged, grinning. “To be honest, I wouldn’t be surprised if Daniel chose not to answer. I certainly wouldn’t. Either way, their next meeting is going to be fun. Chippy was fuming in the beginning, and I bet he’s still not entirely calmed down, though don’t ask me what exactly it was that had set him off like that. He didn’t even tell me.”

She threw a glance at Eret, and the tight grip with which he held his cutlery and the slightly troubled grimace on his face seemed to prove Dagur’s words true. It made her wonder. Sure, she didn’t have the most sisterly feelings for Daniel these days either; his knowing about this plan and not telling her felt like too much of a betrayal. But it made little sense for Eret to have the same reasons for his anger. She didn’t get the chance to further wonder about his behaviour though.

“I’ve got to agree, it’s good to have you back among the living,” came suddenly Snot’s voice from beside her, and when she turned to look at him, he had a wide grin on his face. “And since the kitchen provided us with this dish tonight… May I suggest you try this cold venison? It’s deer prepared after a recipe our chef in Westhill developed, and it is delicious.”

Perplexed, she watched as Snot placed a piece of the rosy meat onto her plate before she could even react. Then she grimaced, and shook her head. “No, thanks. No venison for me,” she mumbled. Snot couldn’t know her feelings there, of course. But she simply wasn’t able to eat any form of venison – or meat in general – lately. Not since her birthday.

“Snot, you really are an idiot, do you know that?” Dagur commented dryly as he reached over to pick the venison off her plate and devoured it whole. The sight made a small amused smile tug at her lips. Good manners weren’t exactly one of Dagur’s strong assets – and probably never would be.

Snot huffed, but didn’t further react to Dagur. Instead, he turned his attention back to Astrid and the cheese plate between them. “I’m sorry, how thoughtless of me. But… well, then how about this?” He cut off a piece of soft cheese with a greyish-yellow rind and held it out for her with a broad smile. “Father and I brought this on your father’s request; he liked it a lot the last time he visited Westhill. It has a rich and piney flavour that only develops when the cheese gets extra time to age.”

Hesitantly and with a slight frown, Astrid accepted the offered cheese, more out of reflex than of real interest. What was up with Snot? It wasn’t as if she didn’t know this behaviour from him; focussing all his attention on one person, being friendly and observant while more or less subtly advertising himself, his family, or his home. But so far, he’d never directed it at her! Was he actually flirting with her? He couldn’t be serious, could he? Surely, he had to be joking, overacting to throw it back into their fathers’ faces… right?
She looked at him, trying to detect something in his expression, a twitch of his lips maybe or an amused spark in his eyes. But there was nothing. Still trying to make sense of Snot’s behaviour, she took a bite of the cheese, but couldn’t help but grimace at the weirdly unctuous taste. “Urgh, sorry, but I think I’ll pass this one,” she said in as polite a tone as she could muster. She kind of appreciated Snot’s attention as it served as a good distraction, but it still left a strange aftertaste.

Hoping he would leave her be now, she wanted to reach for her glass of wine, but sighed when she found it empty.

“Here, let me get you a refill,” Snot directly prompted. He reached for one of the wine carafes at the end of the table, and before she could even blink her glass was filled again. “This one is another speciality we brought from Westhill, and if I remember correctly, you quite liked this one. ‘Rich-yet-not-overpowering berry fruit flavour surrounded with hints of cassis and cherry’ was your description, I think.”

Despite her annoyance at his renewed attention, Astrid couldn’t help but feel grateful, both for the wine and that he’d remembered. She tried a sip, and couldn’t help but hmm. The rich liquid tasted wonderful and made her relax almost instantly. Before she knew how, the glass was empty, and with a low, regretful sigh, she placed it back onto the table. She didn’t want to get drunk, couldn’t afford it, but the idea of getting rid of all her problems, if only for a few hours, was alluring. And the wine really did taste good.

So she didn’t object when Snot got her another refill, and didn’t even mind him directly diving into his next story about all the formidable vineyards they had in Westhill and how much more they could have.

With a resigned sigh, she settled on sipping her wine and tried to drone out his monologue. A part of her tried to reason that he certainly didn’t mean to annoy her into anger with his apparent flirting. Maybe she was just too over-sensitive and strained right now to detect the signs of joking.

Because he couldn’t be serious, right? He couldn’t be actually flirting with her. No matter what their fathers wanted, he was still her brother! But the longer the dinner lasted, the more plain his advances became and the more she wished to get away from him. Snot, like all of her brothers, had always been a source of comfort to her, but tonight she felt the opposite.

His behaviour reminded her of the impossible implication of her marrying one of them. Although, at least Snot didn’t seem to think it impossible, even though the thought made her shudder. Marrying one of her brothers… that was completely insane!

Wasn’t it?

Chapter End Notes

Right...Yeah, it still feels like not much has happened in this chapter, but it's actually been a lot, I think. Many little things, development, preparation...Sorry if it sucks...

And I promise this is still very much a Hiccstrid story!

*jumps back into hiding*
If I'm Not Made For You Then Why Does My Heart Tell Me That I Am?

Chapter Notes

This chapter... I'm incredibly curious about the reactions! It contains more scenes that have been planned for nearly a year, some were even already written out since November! And... well, I hope that I'm able to get across what's important for me in this chapter. I'll see...

Also, in November, I posted a small spoiler on Tumblr. I was asked to put a warning for when that spoiler would come into play, so that's what I'm going to do now. THIS is the chapter where that spoiler line comes up.

This week's title comes from the song If You're Not The One by Daniel Beddingfield. Ever since this song first came out, it's been one of my all-time-favourites. But it actually took me a while to discover how well it fits this story, especially at this point. I admit that, in the end, it even inspired an additional scene near the end of this chapter. You'll see what I mean.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Eret? Do you want to marry me?”

After she’d realised what Snotlout was doing, Astrid had wondered about that insanity for a couple of days now. His behaviour had become more obvious – and more obnoxious – with every time they met, and by now, it was impossible for her to pretend it wasn't happening.

He was flirting with her. There really was no other way to describe it, and even though she'd always thought fondly of him, she now couldn't help but cringe whenever she saw him. A part of her wondered how other women before her had endured and even enjoyed his attention – but she also recognised how different his behaviour toward her was from how he'd acted toward others. He was so sure, overconfident even. He obviously knew about the King's wish of her marrying one of the ducal heirs and seemed to think that advertising himself like this would make her choose him.

But did he really want to marry her? She still couldn't believe it, couldn't even think about it without dismay. How could one of her brothers want to marry her? No matter how long she thought about it, it made no sense, and eventually she acknowledged that thinking on her own wouldn’t get her anywhere.

Meeting Eret had been pure chance but a welcome distraction. It was early in the morning, hours before today's tournament would begin, and she'd wanted to enjoy at least a small sense of freedom by taking a walk over the castle's grounds. Now, they sat near Lake Vola, with Tuff acting as chaperone from a distance, and enjoyed both the peace and the comfort. But she didn't want to waste such an opportunity.

At her question, Eret, who was lying on a sunny but likely not-entirely-dry patch of grass next to the low stone wall where she sat, cracked one eye open and tilted his head to throw her a funny look. After a moment, he returned to his former relaxed position though, eyes closed and head resting on his arms behind his head. “You know, Swanja… In your current position, you should be careful with a question like this,” he said, sounding utterly unperturbed. “One might think you just
proposed to me.”

Astrid rolled her eyes and made a half-annoyed and half-amused noise. Eret would know better, after all. “Don’t be daft. You know what I mean.”

Sighing, he turned his head to look at her in earnest. “Yes, I know what you mean. But the answer is not as easy as the question.”

Astrid wanted to snort. She'd fully expected Eret would laugh and answer with a resolute ‘No!’ He had to be joking, right? Because it was insane and impossible and… and…

Except that he didn’t look as if he was joking.

He seemed to notice her bafflement, because he sighed once more and made himself comfortable again before he gave her an explanation. “I see that’s not the answer you’ve expected,” he began, strangely quiet. “And I’ll admit I didn’t expect to have this kind of talk today. But it’s better than not talking about it, I guess…” He paused, gazing into the light blue sky overhead as if it was the most interesting piece of art he’d ever seen. “I’m not in love with you, if that’s what you meant,” he eventually went on. “That hasn’t changed.”

Astrid nodded, even though he couldn’t see her. They’d already been through that three years ago, after all. After Thuggory’s constant teasing over the span of one summer about how close they were and what a cute couple they would make, they’d almost believed it themselves. What followed had been a few awkward days of blushing, of averting eyes and stiff conversations – until they’d decided to put their feelings to the test. They’d kissed, the whole program with gazing into each other’s eyes and cradled faces, with lips and tongues. And then, they had decided that was definitely not what was between them.

Thinking back, the thought made her smirk inwardly. Kissing Eret had felt weird, unnatural. Not really unpleasant, if she was honest; just… not right. And now, comparing that kiss back then with how it had felt to kiss–

Stop right there!

“So, you don’t want to marry me?” she asked, mainly to force her thoughts into another direction. She couldn’t think about that, not now. Not ever again.

“I… didn’t say that,” Eret muttered, still refusing to look at her.

He wasn’t making any sense. “What do you want then?” The question came out more aggressive than intended, but Astrid wasn’t in the mood for beating around the bush, not now, not after everything. She was tired, having cried for almost the entire night again, tired of the games, tired of the verbal dancing and indirect responses. By Thor, she was going to get a straight answer out of someone, even if she had to shake it out of them!

“What I want…” Eret scoffed. “Since when does it matter what anyone of us wants?” He sighed again, shaking his head, and Astrid knew all too well how he felt… “If it were about doing what we want, Dagur and I would just… leave. We’d go, and start a simple life somewhere far away.” Now, Eret threw her a wary glance, as if to see how she would react. But even though the words surprised her, Astrid was beyond showing any reactions, especially not emotionally, and after a minute of silence, Eret continued in a softer tone.

“We’ve even talked it through, you know? What we’d do if we had the options… We’d go somewhere remote where people wouldn’t know who we are. We’d approach the local lord, get a
land tenancy, settle down. Build a paddock for a couple of horses and a garden, maybe an orchard. I’d earn us some money by breeding and breaking in horses for the locals, and Dagur would distil his own alcohol from the fruits in our garden.” He chuckled weakly. “It would be a simple life, without much luxury to speak of. Calm.”

Astrid swallowed. “That sounds beautiful,” she whispered. Eret’s words reminded her of other plans, other ‘what if’s’…

Quickly, she again shook those thoughts off and concentrated on Eret and his words again. On how they puzzled her. She’d always thought Eret and Dagur wouldn’t mind becoming the next Grand Dukes.

“Right?” Eret agreed, but then shook his head. “But it’s nothing but idle dreams. We can’t just drop our responsibilities and leave our homelands in such a chaos. We wouldn’t want to do that. Lavo would become Head of House Jag’r, and while he’s a good man, he’s certainly not a good leader. And House Berserker… If Dagur doesn’t inherit his father’s title, Hel herself will show up down in Southshore to collect the bodies.”

Again, Astrid nodded; the precarious situation with the two Grand Dukedoms was well-known to her, after all.

Eret let out a deep breath. “But that’s not what you wanted to hear right?” He slightly shook his head, lips twisted into a grimace. “The thing is… we eventually have to marry one day. If we stayed bachelors forever, we could simply continue like now, spending time together every now and then. But for the sake of sustaining a line of heritage, we can’t inherit if we refuse to ever marry. And once we’re married…” He shrugged, and Astrid remembered the words she’d heard some nights before.

*Marriage is a sacred vow, and one does not break it. I won’t turn you into an adulteress.*

Astrid felt as if she couldn’t breathe, the memories like a crushing ring around her chest. But luckily, Eret didn’t seem to notice.

“You asked whether I’d even want to marry you,” he went on, suddenly sounding eerily solemn. “And the honest answer would have to be yes. Yes, I’d like to marry you. Not because I love you, and I’m sorry about that. But marrying for love has never been a real option for us, so I’d opt for the second-best choice – marrying my best friend.” He turned to give her a brief smile, but then continued to stare into the distance. “You’re my best option for a good future. I mean… I know that I won’t be the best of husbands. But unlike any other wife Father could pick for me, you at least already know that. You know that I won’t be your ardent lover. You wouldn’t be disappointed or angry. Or at least I hope you wouldn’t be.” He swallowed, and when he continued to speak, finally looking at her after all, he sounded incredibly vulnerable.

“If you were to choose me, Swanja, then I can promise you that I’d be a good and loyal partner to you. We’d live a happy life together. I won’t be your lover, but I’d be your partner, your friend. I’d do my best to hopefully be a good father to our children, and I’m certain I’d treat you better than most of your other suitors. And… and the same goes for Dagur, if you were to choose him.”

It seemed like Eret was waiting for a reaction, but Astrid was unable to speak, stunned. He was *serious!*

Eventually, he exhaled a deep breath, and pushed himself up on his legs. With his back turned toward her, he said, “I do love you, Swanja, just not like that. And I want you to be happy. If… if you have someone else in mind, someone you want to choose for yourself… then by all means,
please do so. Neither Dagur nor I want you to be miserable for our sake. We will all go our way, one way or the other. But know that we are an option, and hopefully not the worst there is. I’d be happy and proud to bring you back to Eastervale as my wife, and I dare say that living at our stud farm would suit you.”

And with these words, he left her.

For she couldn’t say how long, Astrid sat on that low wall, eyes unseeingly cast over the lake’s calm surface, as tears ran down her cheeks in never-ending streams. Gods, she was such an idiot, had only thought of her own problems.

But Eret was right… For all her life, she’d been prepared for a loveless political marriage. And yes, if she couldn’t marry the man she loved…

...then her best friend would certainly be a good second choice.

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For once, she didn’t need to ponder endlessly. In fact, it was more as if she’d known what to do for a long while already without being able to see it. But when she reached the fighting ground a couple of hours later and saw him hustling about among the other squires and, as always, not even once glancing in her direction… it all became crystal clear. He wasn’t an option anymore – and maybe never had been. She would have to pick another path, one that, hopefully, would be bearable.

She paused in her steps, pondering for one last moment, and then gestured Tuff to follow her. Instead of directly going toward her usual seat under the pavilion, she headed for the large tent where the men were getting ready for their fights. Many eyes turned toward her when she entered, confusion and anticipation in most of them, and the tent fell completely silent.

"Sir Eret?" she called out as firmly and clearly as she could manage. "May I asked you to keep me company today?"

Eret met her eyes with an unreadable look, but nodded after a seemingly endless heartbeat. “Of course, your Highness.” He took off his heavy gloves and handed them, his helmet, and his sword to his squier before following her. And not even now, he would look at her.

Astrid’s lips twitched, but she quickly turned away, and, with Eret at her side, made her way toward her pavilion.

At first, they sat in heavy silence, but eventually, Eret audibly cleared his throat. “Are you sure about this, Swanja?” he asked in a subdued voice.

He didn’t need to elaborate; the meaning of his words was clear enough to her. Her inviting one or more of her suitors to sit with her during the tournament when they weren’t fighting was something she was allowed to do. Without a doubt, it was considered an honour, but the fact that she had never bestowed it on anyone before made her singling out Eret now even more noticeable. She could practically feel the countless eyes on them, could hear the hushed whispers all around the arena. But she didn’t care for any gossip her action might start. She’d never cared about the rumours they’d caused by acting like a couple. At least this time the rumours would be true.

She swallowed, and, unable to meet Eret’s eyes, instead gazed down at her hands in her lap. “You were right,” she whispered. “Marrying for love has never been a real option for either of us. So I’m going to pick the option with the best prospect of happiness and follow the path everyone
apparently wants me to take anyway.” Now, she looked up after all and threw him a tentative smile. At least, she wouldn’t have to pretend with Eret. They weren’t in love and never would be. But they would give each other comfort and that had to be enough.

He returned her smile and, as if to prove her thoughts right, reached for her gloved hand and squeezed it. It made her smile turn a shade brighter. Yes, they didn’t love each other. But friendship was a good basis for marriage too, right?

They watched the first rounds of the melee without saying anything more. Five times, ten men entered the arena and fought until nine had either been knocked prone, unconscious, or had a wound sufficient to spatter the grass with blood. Snot’s turn was in the second round, and he won without any difficulties, sending his opponents sprawling or bashing their faces in so that their noses bled freely onto the grass. There was something to his boasting after all, Astrid reminded herself as he blew her a kiss across the arena before he left it. Growing up in Westhill had turned him into a better fighter than most.

Then it was Eret’s and Dagur’s turn to fight, and it wasn’t until she saw the other eight fighters all ganging up on them that she realised what her open act of favouring Eret had done. Now he had a target on his back, and more than once she gasped or froze when one fighter launched at him. People died in these tournaments! What if someone managed to injure, maybe even kill him, just to get him out of the way? It would be her fault, and hers alone.

She watched the fight with more attention than she had before – and also with a fair bit of anxiety. But her worries were unfounded... for now at least. With Dagur and Eret fighting back to back, the other men had no chance and when it was only the two of them left, they shared a look, a handshake, and then Dagur went to his knee, placing his weapon to Eret’s feet.

The sight made her throat tighten even further. To everyone else watching, it would look like Dagur forfeiting to the Princess’s favourite, probably in hopes of gaining her good will for the future. But Astrid knew it was more than that. So much more… It wasn’t just Dagur giving the victory of this melee to his friend. It was him freely giving up his lover, giving in to the inevitable without struggling and without hard feelings. He knew that he’d lost, and what he’d lost, on the altar of the Kingdom’s Hel-spawned politics. If Astrid would have had any tears left, she’d have cried.

When Eret returned to her after being cleaned up and his armour having been removed, he seemed weaker and more beaten than the fight alone would explain. This time, it was she who placed her hand on his lower arm, in an attempt to comfort him but also to apologise. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled weakly.

She was relieved when Eret placed his hand over hers and asked, “For what?”

“For everything. For making you a target and… and for…” She didn’t dare to phrase the rest, to mention Dagur. Her pavilion offered a certain amount of privacy so that she didn’t expect anyone to overhear their low conversation, but that wasn’t the point anyway. She didn’t want to hurt Eret further.

He hissed out a low and unamused laugh, almost a pained groan, but gave her a reassuring smile nonetheless. “Don’t worry,” he replied. “We always knew it couldn’t last. And as for the target… You don’t need to worry about that either. It’s not that much different than before. They always knew me, Dag, and Snot where your most likely choices, so not that much changed now. Besides, as much as they want to see me defeated… well, let’s just say that my status still offers a certain amount of protection. They wouldn’t dare to attack one of us for real, simply out of fear of repercussions.”
Astrid nodded, but only felt slightly eased by his words. There had been too many accidents already. “I hope you’re right,” she sighed. “And… and I hope this wasn’t the wrong decision – for both our sakes.”

He squeezed her hand once more and scooted a little closer to her. It was weird in a way how easy it was to just continue their usual comfortable closeness under these strangest of circumstances. But then, that was part of why she’d made this decision. She knew Eret, knew that they got along. There’d never been any real shyness or awkwardness between them, and she was relieved that that hadn’t changed.

“We’ll see,” he eventually replied. “But at least we know that Daniel will be pleased.”

There was a certain bitterness in Eret’s voice at these words, one that made her frown in confusion. “What makes you think that?” So far, she hadn’t spent much time thinking about Daniel, not beyond the burning pain she felt over his betrayal.

Eret snorted, and made a vague waving gesture between the two of them. “Well, this is what he wanted, what he’d planned for all along.”

“He… what?”

Now, Eret grimaced, but also noticeably put in an effort to stay calm as he explained. “Oh, he didn’t tell me anything, in case you were wondering,” he scoffed with the same bitter tone as before. “But after that announcement on your birthday and realising that he knew about all this… it started to make sense, you know? A while ago, he became strangely gloomy from one day to the other, and there were so many things he said before he left, things that made me wonder what was on his mind. It all started a few days after Dagur’s accolade. The day we first went to meet Cami, remember?”

Astrid sucked in a breath at those words, but instantly shut her mind down. No, no, no. She didn’t want to remember that day, couldn’t bear it. The first night they’d talk more openly, the first time he’d touched her…

Her hands were trembling, but if Eret noticed, he didn’t react. He just went on with his explanation, suppressed anger tinting his voice, and she was grateful for the distraction.

“Daniel was supposed to come with us, but was forced to cancel his appointment when he received a note. I don’t know what it was about, but it was then when he changed. Late that night, we met him in the corridors. He wouldn’t tell us what bothered him, only that we would learn about it soon enough, that it was better if we didn’t know right away… and that he ‘very much counts on my loyalty for all this to end well’. I didn’t know what he meant back then, but now… And there were other comments, too. Like how he asked me to keep an eye on you until he comes back from Westhill. Or how he blatantly asked us whether we could imagine getting married anytime soon when we all went to the tavern that last night.” He swallowed thickly. “All those small things came back to me lately, but they only started to make sense when… when I talked to Hiccup the other day. Apparently, Daniel told him that he was hoping for us to marry. That we would be good for each other.”

At the mention of his name, Astrid’s mind turned numb out of sheer reflex, but there was still a small functioning part that registered what Eret was telling her. That Daniel apparently hadn’t been happy about this plan and that he’d hoped for her to find comfort and solace with Eret, her best friend. A sob tore itself from her body, making her shiver and tremble, and this time, Eret noticed. His hand around hers tightened, offering her comfort from amidst his own pain and sending a wave of gratitude through her hurting soul.
They didn’t speak much more until the tournament was over, but the companionable silence was proof enough to her. Living with Eret would be effortless. It would be good. Not what either of them truly wanted but better than the alternatives.

Daniel had been right, she realised with a grimace. She and Eret were good for each other, the best option they had to ever live a somewhat happy life. Even with how betrayed she felt, she still couldn’t shake off a budding sense of gratefulness that her brother had at least planned this far. And he couldn’t have known better, after all. Daniel didn’t know about the feelings Eret and Dagur had for each other, didn’t know about her and… and… him. He didn’t know how much pain this solution brought to so many people he cared about. But he was right in that it still was the best solution they had.

When the tournament was over, she accompanied Eret back to the tent. She’d meant to directly move on to her own rooms, to get ready for tonight’s dinner. She expected it to be an awkward meal, with the older man congratulating them and the younger all suffering. Idly, she wondered how Snot would behave now, but quickly decided that she didn’t care.

Especially not when someone else stepped into their path all of a sudden.

Nervously biting her lip, she met Dagur’s gaze, expecting to see hurt and pain or maybe anger in his eyes. He, too, had been hurt by this development after all. But he, who always wore his heart on his sleeve, now wouldn’t let his feelings show. He made a hesitant step toward her, even had a small smile on his face, and pulled her into one of his usual bear hugs once Eret had let go of her arm.

Overwhelmed, she clutched at his back, and couldn’t keep herself from sobbing into his tunic. “I’m sorry,” she whimpered against his shoulder. “So, so, sorr–”

“Shh, shh, it’s all right, little sis,” he interrupted her in an equally low voice. “I wasn’t expecting anything else. And I won’t embarrass either of us by asking you to make him happy, but… But I’m asking you to both be happy, okay? As happy as you can be.”

She sobbed again and for a heartbeat clung even tighter to him before they let go of each other. She took a step away when Dagur turned to Eret next, giving them a bit of privacy, when she noticed another figure standing a few steps behind Dagur.

He didn’t say anything, didn’t move. He only looked at her with those incredibly green eyes of his, really looked at her for the first time in days. It made her freeze, with only a fleeting thought about how Dagur and Eret hopefully would be too occupied with each other to pay them any attention. She held his gaze and tried to convey what she felt. Not her pain, but an apology. The apology for, finally and ultimately, betraying their bond and turning down every plan they might have had. She expected to receive some form of pained accusation in return, but none of that happened.

Instead, he just stood there, a weak smile around his lips that wouldn’t reach his eyes, and nodded.

That night, Astrid stayed awake for a long time, but in opposition to past nights, she didn’t cry. She felt too empty for that. Her eyes were fixed on the wooden figurine in her hands, the one that resembled Markor and that he had given her.

“It’s not much, I suppose. But it’s something… personal? Something to remember me by when I can’t be here with you anymore.”
His words rang clear and true through her mind, but for once the pain didn’t hit her as hard as she’d expected. ‘...when I can’t be here with you anymore...’ He’d only meant the months of separation, but now, it felt so much more relevant. Without her help, her hand wandered to her chest, the other caressing over the smooth wood. No matter how much she wished it would be otherwise, she could still feel his warmth in her chest; even though the blazing inferno had simmered down like a glowing coal. A reminder of the former fire that would never extinguish.

“I will always love you, Hiccup,” she whispered into the darkness of the night. It was a last confession before she stowed the wooden figurine away into her treasure coffer. “Goodbye, my love.”

Then she went to bed, determined to move on. From now on, she wouldn’t let herself be in pain all the time anymore. Her mind and soul were so frail and thin by now; more pain would eventually break her apart. So she clung to the only solace left to her. She would be Eret’s bride now, and... and it was good that way. The only path she could take.

She closed her eyes, willing herself to sleep – even as the small part deep inside her was still screaming. And she couldn’t make it stop.

.o O o.

Hiccup hadn’t expected for the pain to be this unrelenting. He’d expected that it would take time, time before he could even consider getting over her. He had expected that seeing her at Eret’s side, her arm wound through his and their obvious closeness, wouldn’t exactly help either. But the reality was so much worse. No matter how many days had passed or how often he’d seen them together since her open preference during that tournament, it was still like sharp pokes to an open wound. Over and over he told himself that it was good, that it was better this way, the best he could hope for for her. And it was! He knew that it was the truth. In Eret’s presence, she was less tense, at least a little more at ease.

But it hurt!

Because he remembered the time, not too long ago, when all he’d wanted was to be the one to make her happy one day, and the constant reminder of how that would never happen felt like getting stabbed over and over again.

Every time he felt her presence or spotted her amidst the crowd, all he wanted was to make her happy one day, and the constant reminder of how that would never happen felt like getting stabbed over and over again.

The worst were the nights. When he was laid out on the couch in Eret’s rooms, so close to where she was, under the same roof and on the same floor even, and yet unable to ever be with her again, he felt the full weight of their loss. It pressed down on his chest like someone sitting there and keeping him from breathing. More than once, he’d caught himself idly playing with her key, which he still wore around his neck on a simple leather cord. He’d thought about taking it off multiple times already but he’d never found the strength to actually do so. He knew that he should, that holding on to it was only his weakness of not being able to fully let her go. It was him clinging to some elusive hope that only kept cutting and hurting him over and over again. Occasionally, he even caught himself getting up, a half-baked plan to sneak through the corridors and into her rooms in his sleepy mind. If only he could see her, talk to her, hold her one more time. Odin, he would do everything if only it meant they would get another chance.

But there was nothing for him to do.
All he could do was watching her attend one event after the other, with Eret always at her side, and remind himself that this was the only way for her to be happy.

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“Ah, good evening, Sir Eret,” Fyrir Mala greeted them as they entered Freya’s Temple a few days later. “Sir Dagur, Lord Hiccup. Welcome. You can go right through to Cami’s rooms; she’s already waiting for you.” She nodded at them all with a friendly smile which they all returned dutifully – even as neither of them truly felt like smiling.

More than anything else, Hiccup felt weird to be here again, even though he probably should have seen it coming. Eret’s and Dagur’s days were numbered, so it wasn't really a surprise that they'd wanted to ‘visit Cami’ as long as they could. And of course, they’d invited him to come along too, just like they’d always done. They didn’t know about his own pain after all.

But right now he dreaded the thought of Cami and interacting with her, of the conversations that would inevitably come up. Of how unexpected it was that they were all still here after all, of the latest developments in Eret's life… and her usual questions after his lady love once Eret and Dagur retreated. Because he didn't feel strong enough to lie, to make up some tale about how they enjoyed the reprieve, no, certainly not. Instead, he felt brittle, as if he'd break apart and crumble at even the slightest nudge. He’d even welcome that over the constant pain.

But of course, he wouldn’t simply fall apart and stop existing. There was no way to escape the inevitable.

“Oh, dear Freya!” Cami exclaimed as soon as they entered her rooms and the door closed behind them. She threw herself around Eret’s and Dagur’s necks, pulling them into a tight hug. “I’ve heard what happened, of course I have. And… I know everyone else would deem congratulations in order–” she pulled Eret a little tighter “–but I’m so sorry! For both of you. How are you feeling?”

Carefully but firmly, Dagur and Eret pried themselves out of her arms. They looked miserable and Hiccup was once more reminded of how he wasn’t the only one in pain. As much as he might want to hate Eret for having everything Hiccup wanted – he just couldn’t. Eret was as much a victim of this entire scheme as he and she were, and he was suffering from it too.

“What do you think how we feel?” Dagur asked, noticeably missing his usual joyfulness. “Even with always knowing that it would eventually come to this, it’s…” he broke off, and turned away from them, his arms crossed in front of his chest.

Hiccup almost expected he’d turn away further when Eret stepped toward him to place his hand on his lover’s shoulder. But instead, Dagur sighed, relaxed, and leaned into the touch, and Hiccup couldn’t help but look away at their moment of intimacy. Yes, they were both suffering just like him.

“I’m sorry,” Cami said again, sounding truly miserable, but Eret cut her off directly.

“It’s all right. Dag’s right, we knew it couldn’t last. All we can do now is make the best of it.”

“I sure hope you do,” Dagur threw back, an odd mixture of sadness, joking, and sincerity in his voice. “If I hear only one complaint from Swanja about you, I’m going to come and rip off your head!”

Eret chuckled, if a little strained. “Hey, I already tried to do her a favour by convincing her father to arrange that ride tomorrow. I mean, it can’t be long with the ball in the evening, and it won’t be
a fast ride either with her having to use this horrible side saddle and at least some members of the party not being experienced riders. But I still think it’s better than nothing. Or I hope so, at least.” He sighed. “Anyway, I’m holding you on to that promise, just so you know. Making sure she’s happy will be my highest priority from now on.”

Eret’s reply made them share a weak but true smile, and even with how numb and hollow Hiccup felt, he still was grateful for the reminder that they did care about her. She was in good hands. That was all that mattered.

“Anyway,” Eret went on. “Before we leave you alone, I wanted to thank you, Cami. For taking our request for an appointment on such a short notice. It’ll probably be the last time anyway.”

She gave him a comforting smile. “Of course. I’ll always have time for you.” Then she frowned. “But why do you think it’ll be the last? It’s still over six weeks until the wedding.”

“Aye.” Eret shrugged. “But the betrothal will become official in two weeks already, and me coming here after that won’t be regarded with any form of leniency. And then there’s the ball tomorrow night. Even with it just being meant as an entertaining diversion, her choice of partner for the opening dance will still be regarded as her making an unofficial choice.” He shook his head, a despondent expression on his face. “No, this will be the last time we come here. It has to be.”

Again, Hiccup had to avert his gaze – to give them privacy when it now was Dagur’s turn to comfort Eret, but mostly to hide his reaction to Eret’s words. He’d effectively pushed aside every thought of this, but he was right. After tomorrow night, she would be considered betrothed to Eret, no matter how unofficially. The thought gave him a new sting, and he almost laughed in surprise at how his heart could still hurt more.

“I see,” Cami sighed. “Well, then off with you two. If you want, we can talk more later. I hope you can enjoy this night as much as possible.”

They didn’t need another invitation and only seconds later, Hiccup was alone with Cami. And no matter how painful the previous conversation had already been… What came next would be worse.

“So, and what’s up with you?” she asked in a noticeably more cheerful tone. “I get why they are so depressed, but I honestly didn’t expect that from you too, not even out of sympathy.”

With his lips pressed into a thin line, Hiccup ignored her words and walked past her to where wine and glasses were already standing ready for them on the small table. He poured himself a glass and downed it in one. Maybe the alcohol would make enduring this easier. Behind him, Cami said his name, clearly confused, but he kept ignoring her. It was only after he’d nearly emptied his second glass of wine before she more firmly demanded an answer.

“Hiccup, what’s up with you?” Her hand was on his arm, keeping him from turning away as she stepped in front of him. “After our last conversation about how much you and your lady love dreaded the separation, I thought you’d be happy about this postponement.”

Snorting, he turned his head away from her anyway. Right… Oh, how much they’d hope for just any way for them to not have to part. Once again he thought about how the prospect of being separated for weeks and months had felt like the worst that could happen to them. How foolish and naive they’d been. And how much he’d give to return to those times…

“Hiccup?”

This time, Cami sounded worried, and almost despite his own will, he turned to look at her. And
even though he’d sworn to himself to lock his pain deep inside him, to never let anyone see… right now, he couldn’t hold it back anymore.

“Hiccup, what happened?” she gasped when his mask crumbled away to reveal his pain. She pulled at his arm until he sat down in one of her chairs. “You look… horrible. Gods, did something happen to her? Is she alright? What—”

“She’s fine,” he mumbled, if only to keep her from worrying further. And it was true, wasn’t it? Physically, she was fine...

For a short while, Cami was quiet, watching him closely. “What is it then?” she eventually asked, softly. “You seemed so sure, but… Did you two break up?”

Again, he snorted. “In a way,” he mumbled, remembering the conversations they’d had, at the stables on her birthday and at the armoury on the day after. They had broken up, even as that phrase sounded too weak to describe what happened. Once more, pain flooded his mind and body, and he reached again for the wine, refilling his glass and taking a big gulp. Why couldn’t he turn numb already?

“Why?” Cami probed, and no matter how gentle that one word had been, it still felt like a sting, as if it had torn a hole into his thin layer of protection. From one heartbeat to the other, he wasn’t able to hold back any longer.

“Because she’ll marry someone else!” he burst out, eyes stinging. “Not by choice, but what does that matter? In six weeks, she’ll get married to Eret, and there’s nothing we can do. I lost her.”

There, he’d said it. And now, the desired numbness sat in with full force. He slumped down in his chair, too weak to even hold his head up anymore. For the first time in almost two weeks, tears were welling up in his eyes and he didn’t even try to hold them back. It didn't matter. He’d lost her, forever, and now nothing mattered anymore.

He wasn’t sure how long it took Cami to react again. He was dimly aware of her staring at him with wide eyes and her jaw dropped, but he just didn’t care...

“The Princess,” she eventually whispered, and a tiny sarcastic part of his mind wanted to applaud her. After so many weeks of her trying to pry for any information about his lady love, she now knew. So what? It wasn’t as if things could get worse. “You… are you trying to tell me that this girl you talked about, the one you spent nearly every night with, and who I encouraged you to introduce to sex was the Princess?”

All Hiccup could do was nod weakly, but it seemed to be enough for Cami.

“Are you insane?” she nearly shrieked. “The Princess? H-how… how did that even happen? And what were you thinking? You said you were certain to marry her one day, but… But she’s the Princess, for fuck’s sake. Everyone knew that she would marry for an alliance one day, even she. What in Loki’s name made you believe you could circumvent that?”

Hiccup groaned. Every single one of her words felt like another blow to his battered soul. Yes, they really had been stupid to hope and to dream, hadn’t they? But it had all felt so real...

For a few minutes, Cami went on with her tirade, scolding him, but after a while, it stopped affecting him. He couldn’t take any more, and he also understood that by now, this was more Cami venting out her shock than anything else. Eventually, she stopped, and a heavy silence covered them like a blanket.
“We thought it would work,” he eventually murmured into the silence. “We were so sure… Because… because it had to work…” He could feel that Cami didn’t understand though. And how could she? If he listened to himself now, it barely made any sense to him either. Except… “She and I… we share a bond, one that I can still feel even now when all hope is lost. And we thought… If the Gods bound us like that, doesn’t that mean that we will be together? That it’s our inevitable fate? Isn’t that part of what being soulmates means?” He shook his head, the hopelessness of everything once more crashing down on him.

“Oh, Hiccup…” Cami reached out her hand, hesitated visibly, but then placed it onto his arm after all. “I… I don’t doubt that you thought you’d be soulmates. There are many young couples so madly in love that they feel like that. But… but true soulbonds are rare. So rare that I haven’t even heard of a true one happening in the last thirty years or so. I’m sorry, but… but that wasn’t real.”

Hiccup groaned. He’d known that this would be the most likely reaction to them ever telling anyone. But it still stung to hear her say it. She was wrong, though, he knew that deep in his heart. What he and she shared, that was real. Wasn’t it? “I don’t believe you,” he whispered.

“I’m sorry, Hiccup. But… Let’s think this through. If yours was a true soulbond… then you would have been right. Nothing on Midgard can keep apart what the Gods forged together – not even a King’s decision. So how can you be soulmates when, as you all pointed out, she will marry Eret instead? Her decision falls tomorrow at the ball. Not officially, but binding enough. What made you even believe your bond would be true?”

Almost against his will, his hand wandered to his chest. He could still feel her heartbeat and that spark of her soul deep within him. How could that not be real? But he couldn’t make Cami feel what he felt, so he had to try and put it into words. “I… just know it’s true,” he explained in a whisper. “I can feel her, even now. Right here. And… and I felt her before, too. You remember how she got attacked shortly before Midwinter? I was miles away from her then, asleep at the outer stables. But I still felt her anxiety – her fear and her pain – strong enough to wake me up. There is a bond between us, a connection,” he insisted. Cami still didn’t look convinced though, so he tried to think of what else to tell her. “And we had visions! Well, one vision, but it was the same for both of us. We saw the same thing: our future together in a small house, me coming home after a journey, and she and our son greeting me at the door. That was real!”

In what was probably meant as a comforting gesture, Cami squeezed his arm. “I don’t doubt that you believe that,” she repeated her words from earlier, sighing. “But that doesn’t change the facts, Hiccup. She will marry Eret, as it had always been meant to be. Your bond can’t be real.”

Until deep into the night – with Eret and Dagur still not having returned from the temple – Hiccup kept pondering over Cami’s words.

They made no sense.

He knew, without a doubt, that their bond was real. Vividly, he remembered how her fears had reached him even though he’d had no idea that something had been wrong. He hadn’t made that up. And it was the same with their vision. They both had seen the same future without even knowing each other. That hadn’t been a coincidence. It can’t have been!

No, their bond was real. The longer he thought about it now, staring at the decorated ceiling above him, the clearer it became to him. It wasn’t just a fluke or a pipe dream. It couldn’t be.

But if Cami was right and nothing could ever overcome a true soulbond, what did that mean in
return? Did that mean that... *that there was still hope after all?*

The mere *idea* made Hiccup’s heart stutter painfully. Had he given up too soon? Should he have fought for her after all? But *how*? If only he knew what to do. He’d do *everything* for her, whatever it would take.

The facts remained the same though. He couldn’t think of a solution, no chance, no way for them to be together. And he was running out of time. If there was something he could do then what was it?

So what if Cami had been right after all and he was chasing nothing but a dream. Was it possible that they’d interpreted too much into their feelings? Or maybe it was something else entirely, something he’d thought about before and that Cami hadn’t mentioned. Not even a King’s decision could overrule the Gods’ will, she’d said. But what if the Gods changed their mind? Was it possible that them getting intimate had angered them enough to part them again?

Groaning, he covered his face with his hands. All this pondering wasn’t doing him any good. It wasn’t as if he *hadn’t* thought about uncountable options already. But he couldn’t think of a way out and he wasn’t optimistic about getting an epiphany anytime soon either. And it would *have* to come soon, before tomorrow night preferably.

“Please,” he murmured a prayer into the darkness of the empty room. “Please, if it is your wish that we are together then send me a sign. I’d do everything for her, but I need your help. Is there still hope for us? What can I do?”

But it didn’t seem as if the Gods had heard him, or maybe they just didn’t care. There was no sudden lightning strike, no foreign voice speaking in his mind, nothing. For over an hour, he kept pondering and wondering before sleep eventually overcame him.

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He found himself in a forest that he didn’t recognize. Pine, fir, some oak, with light underbrush. Nearby, a mighty tree had fallen in some years past, and there was a cluster of saplings reaching up towards the gap and the light, with blackberry bushes around them. He noticed that he had a heavy basket in hand, filled with the berries, and without thinking, he set off down the well-beaten path behind him. Birds fluttered around in the air above him and he heard squirrels and woodpeckers hard at work.

Then he emerged into a clearing, and the moment Hiccup recognised the small but neat house with a garden of flowers, vegetables, and herbs around it, he knew that he was dreaming. He’d only seen this place once before, and just for a fleeting moment, but it was enough. His heart was beating furiously as his feet led him closer. If this was the same like the last time, then there should be the noise of a barking dog at any moment and then the door would open to…

But this was not a repetition of the vision he’d had some months ago, he realised. There was no barking dog, not even when he reached the still-closed door. He waited, and when nothing happened he lifted his hand to open it himself. It was locked though, so he knocked instead, eager to see her. Maybe indulging in this dream wasn’t a wise idea, but he honestly didn’t care. He only wanted to see her…

But still, the door didn’t open. Instead, he heard a voice in his head, old and gnarled somehow.

*I am locked.*
With a start, he looked around, but there was nobody. Shaking his head in puzzlement, he knocked again but had no time to even wait for a reaction from inside when the voice spoke again.

Still locked.

Somehow, it sounded amused this time, and finally the words started to make sense, even as nothing else did. But this was a dream, Hiccup reminded himself. Things didn’t need to make sense…

“Can… can you open up for me?” He felt stupid talking to a wooden door, but it also felt weirdly right.

The voice in his mind chuckled. No, I can’t do that.

Hiccup’s shoulders slumped. He had the strong feeling that this was more than just an ordinary dream. The answer to his questions was inside this little house, their future home. But if he couldn’t get inside, then–

But you can open me.

Hiccup blinked and reflexively tried to open the door again. But it wouldn’t budge, only rattled a bit. “No, I can’t. You’re locked.”

Don’t you have a key?

“No, I don’t. Why would–” he broke off when the door’s voice again chuckled in his mind. I think you do.

Hiccup didn’t understand. How was he supposed to have a key, either to this enchanted door or it’s future counterpart? He had no keys at all, had nothing on him except the clothes he’d fallen asleep in – the basket had vanished at some point without him noticing – and–

With a start, he scrambled for the cord around his neck. For her key.

See? the voice chuckled again, then faded away. He didn’t expect to hear it ever again.

Instead, he looked down at the key in his hand. It was bigger than in reality, sturdier, but it very clearly was the same key. With shaking fingers, he pushed it into the lock and wasn’t even surprised when it fit perfectly. With an audible click, the door unlocked and opened without his doing, revealing the person standing behind it.

“I’m so glad you made it,” she said in her usual slightly nasal voice, her blue eyes beaming and her pink lips stretched into a loving smile.

Hiccup could do nothing but stare. It was her. She was here! Joy bubbled up inside him and a wide grin stretched over his face. It might just be a dream, but still. Looking at her, openly and without having to hide anything, was balm for his soul.

“Come with me,” she said, smiling, and took his hand to lead him around the house and into the garden. It was bigger than he’d realised, with a patch of soft grass beneath an old tree where they made themselves comfortable. The branches and leaves build something like a roof above them, with only small spots of sunlight dotting the ground and dancing when the breeze caught in the tree overhead.
On their way, he took the time to look at their surroundings, her hand in his warm and reassuring. To their left, there was a stream and a little lake and to the right, he spotted the edge of the thick forest he’d come out of. Behind the building and the garden was a steep wall of solid stone that stretched to surround the clearing in a wide arc on nearly all sides except for a narrow opening somewhere in the forest. A caldera?

He shook his head, inwardly laughing at himself. Finally, he had the chance to spend time with her again, or something close to that at least, and he wasted it by looking at the scenery? Quickly, he focused on her again, on her hair, her face, the feeling of her hand in his – and frowned. Clearly, it was her, but at the same time, she was… different. He looked at her more intently, trying to pin down what exactly it was that threw him off. She certainly didn’t look the same as when he’d seen her earlier that day. She was older by some years, more grown up. Her face had lost a bit of its roundness and was more defined, her golden hair a shade or two paler. But that wasn’t what bothered him.

Somehow, she didn’t feel right. Of course, she wasn’t real, was just a product of his dream, but still there seemed to me more. She was too alive for a dream, and she was different. As if it wasn’t his soulmate at all sitting there at his side, but instead someone else.

He pushed the thought aside as something ridiculous. This was a dream. None of this was real and nothing needed to make sense. A part of him tried to convince himself that it would be better to simply wake up. It would be too easy to get lost in this fantasy and the longer he indulged in it the more it would hurt when he woke up again. But even with her not feeling right, being here in this beautiful garden with her to simply enjoy their time… it was too wonderful, and he couldn’t bring himself to even try to wake up.

She didn’t say anything, only watched him with that warm smile of hers that he loved so much as his hand cupped her cheek, his eyes taking in her achingly familiar features. He savoured every moment of the illusion of being so close to her, of feeling her warmth beneath his hand, and of the faint mayweed scent surrounding her. Even if nothing of this was real, it still felt real enough to pretend. For a few minutes, they continued like this, with him marvelling how well their hands fit together and how their soft caressing each other made him shudder, until he invited her into his embrace and she followed without a moment’s hesitation. At that moment, he didn’t care how much this dream might pain him once he woke up. Simply holding her like this was worth everything, and it only strengthened his resolve to keep fighting for her in case he ever got the chance.

“I miss you,” he murmured a good while later. It was hard to tell the passing of time, but he would say that at least an hour had passed with them simply cuddling in the comfortable grass. By now, he lay with his head cushioned in her lap, her hand carding through his hair. It felt good, so peaceful and right. He never wanted to leave again.

“I know,” she replied. “I felt your pain and I heard your plea. That’s why I came to you.”

Hiccup frowned at her odd choice of words. She’d come to him because of his plea? What plea? And how had she come to him, when this was only a dream? It didn’t make sense, unless–

“But don’t give up,” she went on, interrupting his line of thoughts. “You were right right from the beginning. Don’t give in to doubt now.”

With wide eyes, he looked up at her, at her face, beautiful as always yet with an intense, almost divine inner glow... None of this made sense, unless it wasn’t a dream after all. Was this the answer he’d asked for?
He took a deep breath to calm himself. If he was right...

“Is there still hope then?” he asked breathless yet carefully, unsure what he even was allowed to do in her presence.

Smiling, she nodded. “There is always hope.”

Hastily, he scrambled up to his knees to look at her. “Please. I... I need your advice, Oh Fair One. I don’t know what to do.”

She smiled at him, and there was no question to him that this wasn’t Astrid, for all that She wore his love’s form. “Do what comes naturally to you.”

“I... I have been,” he said, pained. “But it isn’t enough!”

“I know it feels that way,” she said, and her eyes seemed to gleam with an inner radiance, blue like the sapphires he’d once seen in a shop held up to sunlight. “Foresight is a painful gift, but We had a purpose in Our selection...”

“My Lady...” Hiccup began, and her head jerked towards him, a wry smile on his beloved’s lips.

“Yes?”

“Please. Please. It hurts so much being parted. All I want is to hold her again. Is there a way?”

She scoffed. “You are strong enough for the work ahead, although I know the path is difficult. Do Our work and know that your reward will be yours.” She motioned to the clearing and the house inside it. “Success–or failure–is entirely in your hands.”

“Then why are you here?” he asked.

“You called,” she said simply. “And in answer to your question... do you want to know? Truly? Foresight is a painful gift, as I said.”

Hiccup didn’t hesitate and knelt. “My Lady, please. You bound my heart to her. Just tell me what I must do to hold her again.”

She patted his head and said softly. “So We did. Well then. Yes, you can hold your beloved in your arms again. Soon. But first, you will end the life of someone dear to her.”

It was strange, Hiccup thought the next morning, how little it bothered him to prepare Crusher for Eret. Even though he was incredibly grateful Eret had rescued him, it had always pained Hiccup to tend to his father’s former stallion and to hum his mother’s lullaby to calm the beast. But today, it barely affected him at all. His mind was too occupied with that dream. That vision.

* You can hold your beloved in your arms again. Soon. But first, you will end the life of someone dear to her.

She’d said that and he’d woken, and in the hours since, the words of the Goddess had continued to echo through his thoughts. There was barely anything else that registered in his mind. Every stroke down Crusher’s silken black fur and every movement to bridle and saddle him was done through pure force of habit, just like it had been with Cassie before. What did those words mean?

Was he supposed to kill someone for her? That... that seemed rather crass and he couldn’t see how
that would be good for her in any way. She hated pointless deaths... Besides, he didn’t even know who. Eret maybe, so he couldn’t marry her in his stead? Or her father, in revenge for his decision and to render it useless? Or someone else entirely; Dagur, or Daniel, or someone he couldn’t even think of right now?

His heart was thrumming with hope, with the prospect of how maybe they still had a chance after all. But the circumstances were daunting, to say the least. He’d thought he was ready to do everything for this chance, but this... Could he kill someone, just out of the hope that it would somehow get them back together again? And if he could do it... Who and how and when?

The whirling thoughts in his mind made him dizzy, and he had to sit down for a minute. More out of reflex, he rubbed his twinging leg as he gazed into the distance with unseeing eyes. *End the life of someone dear to her...* Was this really what he had to do? Or had he just imagined it all, had it been nothing but a dream made up by his desperation? Gods, he couldn’t even trust his own mind anymore!

His hand wandered to his chest, feeling for the key and her warmth beneath. Last night, in that dream or vision or whatever it had been, holding her in his arms had reminded him of just how much he needed her in his life. If there was a chance for them, then he just had to take it.

But did that mean that he could murder Eret if it came down to that?

“Hey. You all right?”

Hiccup jumped when, unexpectedly, Eret’s voice cut into his thoughts. He looked up at his cousin, a spark of panic flaring up inside him. Would he be able to read Hiccup’s thoughts from a moment ago on his face?

“H-he,” he stammered in greeting. “Yeah, everything’s good. Fine. Uh, Crusher is ready, but if you want you can check him over again. I’m feeling a bit fried – rough night – so I’m not all here right now. I-I hope I made no mistake.” Oh, wouldn’t that be ironic? If he killed Eret by accident simply because he hadn’t correctly taken care of his kit? Or would that even count as an accident, with a small dark voice in the back of his mind demanding him to do it? A shiver ran down Hiccup’s spine, and he averted his face when he felt Eret’s scrutinising look on him.

“Hiccup... what’s wrong?” He paused for a moment before he went on with a low sigh. “Listen... You don’t have to come along today if you don’t feel like it. This is just a joy ride, nothing more. You’ll really be needed as squire at the ball tonight, so you’d better rest until then.”

Hiccup grimaced as Eret’s words brought a new idea to his mind. Could he kill Eret simply by not being around when he needed his help? These thoughts were driving him insane!

“No, I’m good, really,” he muttered and tried to force something like a smile on his face. “But still, you better check that all buckles and straps are where they should be.”

“As if you’d make a mistake when it comes to horses,” Eret snorted. “No, I trust you. Besides, we don’t really have time for that anyway. I’m... well, I slept too long and I fear the rest of the party is already waiting. Let’s get going.”

With a tight smile, Hiccup nodded and was glad when turning to get Cassie provided him with a welcome excuse. Interacting with Eret had never felt this awkward before, and he was certain that his unusual tension hadn’t escaped Eret’s notice.

He had to admit, however, that going for a ride was a wonderful diversion from their other
activities lately. Hiccup rarely ever felt as free and relaxed as when on horseback, and even with how anxious he was today, Cassie’s familiar movements beneath him filled him with a certain calmness.

As Eret had predicted, it was nothing but a slow ride through the countryside, hardly a joyous ride; in fact, it was more of a discomforting plodding, which Hiccup knew that she and her brothers all hated from how they’d reacted over the last few months. But it couldn’t be helped, given the number of riders in the party. Most of the hundred and more suitors were riding with them, and their horsemanship left much to be desired, especially as they crowded around her, unable or unwilling to just yet accept that they’d lost. But that was understandable, as they were the survivors of the contests so far, after the injuries during the tournaments and hunts had killed nearly two dozen, with that one boar having accounted for four deaths all on its own, and another two dozen-plus were wounded or maimed. They wouldn’t give up that easily, not now, not after everything.

From his place close behind Eret, he could barely even see her on Markor’s back where she rode at the front of the party next to the King. And their speed wasn’t helped by her having to use that ridiculous side saddle for this official event. He figured she wouldn’t be all too happy right now from that, but hoped that she’d at least find some form of comfort by being allowed to ride again for once.

Trying not to focus too hard on her and trusting in Cassie to stay in her place amidst the group, the slow pace gave Hiccup the chance to further brood over the riddle She had given him – even as the sober thought of the Goddess Herself having appeared in his dreams nearly made him hysterical. It all felt so surreal, impossible, and only left him more confused than before. Yes, he’d asked for help, for a hint at whether and what he could do, but had that vision – if it had been a vision at all – really helped him? He wasn’t so sure about that. She’d been right. Foresight was a painful gift.

For well over an hour, they rode along the shore of Lake Vola while Hiccup’s thoughts still whirled around in circles. He hadn’t paid their surroundings any mind, but from one moment to the other that changed. There was a commotion at the front of their party; a horse whinnied and others snorted, men yelled, and there was abrupt movement among the packed riders, some halting and others urging their steeds on.

Then a sudden shriek of pure agony rent the air, and it was only by dint of long experience that Hiccup kept Cassie from bolting in panic. A number of horses did bolt, sending their riders tumbling out of their saddles or carrying them off, and shouts of surprise and dismay joined the agonized cry of someone in mortal pain.

And from the sound, Hiccup knew, knew who it was...

Chapter End Notes

Right... and i'm back into hiding...
Interlude 5: The Ride

Chapter Notes

Ah, yes, this is why I don't like posting too long chapters... Judging by the reactions, the points that were important to me seemed to have drowned in everything else. Ah, well... Splitting the previous chapter and drawing it out longer wouldn't have been a good choice either, so I'll have to live with this now.

This week, the summer holidays started here. That means that I will have even less time to write, but I'll try to stick to the schedule nonetheless. I can't make any promises though, especially with me and my family going on vacation in the week before the next planned update. All I can promise is that I will try.

But! Chapter 41 is one of the most important chapters of this entire story to me and I want to get it right! Meaning, I won't update in two weeks if it's not in a state I'm satisfied with. Sorry.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

With a tired sigh, King Osmond of House Hofferson, ruler of the United Kingdom of Volantis, took a moment to rest his head in his hands. Sometimes he wondered just how much time exactly he spent in this room, sitting at his desk and brooding over reports, lists, and requests. But then, did it matter? Someone had to do this and as King it was his duty to make decisions. And if he made the wrong decision, or even let anyone else make these decisions, thousands could and would suffer. No, it was his responsibility to make sure the right decisions were made – or at the very least the ones that offered the minimum amount of harm…

However, it looked as if his recent decisions were paying off positively. Going through the reports of the last two weeks helped bring a grim smile of satisfaction to his face. He still wasn’t happy with the solution he and his friends had settled upon some months ago, but he couldn’t deny that it was working. Before they’d begun these festivities, he’d compiled a single list of the men they knew were in the conspiracy, and another list of those they reasonably suspected of being in it by association and personal reputations. Those two lists had composed the core of the guest list. And now he was crossing off names from both. Nearly two dozen dead so far, and nearly all of them were on one of the two lists. From what it looked like, the greedy agitators were even murdering each other for their chance at the prize, presumably getting rid of their most dangerous competitors first, and making the upcoming work of the King’s Guard that much easier. Indeed, aside from the incident with the boar, where his huntsman had deliberately set a group of the known traitors after a boar – when they had only been prepared for hunting deer – every other death had come from their fellow men.

The next report listed the injured and the maimed. Here, the divide between the innocent and the guilty wasn’t quite as favourable, but he knew the patients would get the best possible care, which was all he could do for them. Injuries were a common risk, after all.

Yes, as much as he detested having to use this approach to get rid of the traitors, he had to admit that it was working out splendidly. The highest priority target, Duke Thuggory, might still be alive – and had, annoyingly, been the one to finish off the boar – but there was plenty of time to remedy
that fact.

He put the list aside, took a sip of his wine, and reached for the next report. It was the account of the guards that had been sent out to look for the missing tax collector. Neither the man nor his coach had been found by now, so the question remained whether he’d been attacked or had gone into hiding himself. Osmond’s gut told him that it was likely the former, as the man had been loyal for many years now, but that wasn’t why this report made him grimace. This incident wasn’t directly related to the current events at the castle, but... The money and goods this specific man had gathered had been meant to pay for Astrid’s wedding, both for the celebrations and also her dowry. And while the castle’s treasury was filled well enough to compensate the loss, this report only reminded him of what he tried not to think about too often – that this entire charade was being paid at the expense of his beloved daughter.

Osmond leaned back in his chair, rubbing his face, but then stood up and, almost without thinking, walked over to a large painting that hung in the more comfortable corner of his office. With tired eyes, he looked up into the face of his beloved Brenna; it was so similar to Astrid’s that he sometimes, when she entered a room or they met in the corridors, thought it was her.

“I wonder what you would have to say if you were here, my love,” he murmured, reaching out to let his fingers glide along the gilded frame. “I assume you’d scold me for using our daughter as bait, especially after the price you paid for her life. But that’s the lot of the royal family, isn’t it? To make sacrifices for the good of the people. And from what it looks like, she’s going to marry Eret’s son; that isn’t too bad, right? Not what you and your best friend had hoped for, not her marrying her son but only her nephew. But given the circumstances, this is the best option for her. I just wish I could already tell her why all this is necessary, but I promise that I will do so eventually. I hope she may forgive me one day, and... and I hope you can, too.”

But, of course, he got no answer. Brenna just kept gazing down at him with those beautiful deep blue eyes and that slightly cheeky smile of hers. Gods, how much he missed her...

For a little while longer, he stayed where he was, gazing up at the painting, before he returned to his desk. He knew that Astrid wasn’t thrilled about any of this, but at least she seemed to be better now that she’d apparently made her choice. All he could do was hope that, over time, the close friendship she and young Eret shared would turn into more; that was why he’d instructed to grant her more time with him and Oswald’s boy during the weeks before her birthday, after all.

Although... given how much pain love had brought him, he wasn’t so sure whether that was really something to wish for. Losing Brenna, the love of his life, had nearly killed him too. It had certainly maimed his heart for many years. Only reluctantly, he’d agreed to marry again ten years later, and it had taken three more years to overcome his aversion against the woman his advisors had picked for him. And just when his heart had started to love again, she’d been taken from him, too. Logically, he knew that the bad days were only bearable because he could remember the happy ones... but he also hoped that none of his children would ever have to suffer the pain of burying their loved ones way too early.

. o O o .

“Ah, there’s nothing quite like a good ride through the countryside, don’t you agree?”

Osmond glanced at his friend Eret II from the corner of his eye, a small smile tugging at his lips. “I do. But you do remember that not everyone feels the same way, yes? There’s no need to tease Oswald tonight for not wanting to come along.”

“Ah, but where’s the fun in that?” Eret pouted.
From the side, Spitelout approached them on his white stallion. Out of the four of them, he was the only one not riding one of the Jag’r horses, as he’d never had the patience to learn how to deal with one of the demanding beasts. “No, really, Eret. You shouldn’t tease Ozzie; he gets enough riding of another sort, after all. Grapevine has it that he and his mistress are expecting again.”

“Oh, is that so?” Eret laughed. “You really do have your spies everywhere, don’t you?”

Spitelout shrugged with a wide grin. “I like to be well-informed.”

Osmond joined in into the laughter that followed, though only half-heartedly. His eyes had fallen on someone dressed in a wide flowing dress of blue and turquoise, and after a murmured excuse to his friends, he led his horse to her side.

“Good morning, Astrid,” he greeted her, smiling warmly, but just as he’d feared and expected, she barely even looked at him in return.

“Good morning, Sire,” she replied obediently, making a perfect bow on the back of her broad gelding.

Her formal address pained him, but he didn’t let anything show. He was aware of her current opinion of him, and as much as he’d liked to explain and maybe redeem himself in her eyes – he knew that this wasn’t the time, not yet. Maybe it would come one day – when the traitors were dealt with and secrecy wasn’t as crucial anymore – but for now, it was better she focused all her anger on him. It hopefully meant that her heart was otherwise free to find warmth and comfort in young Eret’s arms.

“I hope this ride is to your liking,” he tried nonetheless. “I know how fond you are of riding, so I hope this is a welcome diversion to the latest events for you.” The necessary hunts and tournaments might be supposedly to her honour, but Osmond was no fool. He knew his daughter well enough to know that she wasn’t enjoying those, which was why he’d done everything in his power to follow young Eret’s suggestions and squeeze in this ride between the other planned events.

Astrid, however, merely shrugged. “I’ll try to enjoy it if that is your wish. With this saddle, this company, and the expected pace, I can’t make any promises though.”

With these words, she directed her gaze to the side to where now the last members of the party, young Eret and his squire, Stoick’s boy, came to join them. Her turning away without a word in public was borderline discourteous – he hadn’t dismissed her, after all – but she hadn’t turned her back on him. So, Osmond didn’t reprimand her. He wanted her to focus on the newcomer, after all.

Instead, he simply gave the signal for the group to get started. He rode at the front, with Astrid at his side and a few guards loosely around them, but soon the formation shifted and changed and he could only watch her from a bit of a distance as he made way for the young men around them to talk to her. For a short while, young Eret rode next to her and it was obvious how much more relaxed she was around him. But soon, voices got louder that demanded their share of the Princess’s time as well, and so her attention was taken up by the ever-changing and increasingly desperate conversational partners.

“They haven’t given up just yet, eh?” Eret II muttered as he rode next to Osmund and shook his head.

Spitelout snorted. “Of course, they haven’t. Many of them came a long way to court her, and so far,
nothing is official. I doubt even tonight’s ball will change that.”

They all watched as young Snotlout took his place at Astrid’s side next and it didn’t escape anyone’s notice how she pursed her lips at that. Osmond threw Spitelout an inquisitive look, interested in how his friend would react to the obvious rejection, but either he didn’t care much or he was way better at hiding his opinion than he’d thought. There was no reaction in his friend’s face whatsoever, so Osmond just shrugged and for a while, they rode on without much in terms of conversation. It really was a lovely day, and spending it outside with a leisure activity like peacefully riding along the shore of Lake Vola instead of brooding over even more reports was a great diversion.

“Oh, I can’t believe it!” Eret exclaimed after what had to be nearly two hours into their ride. Soon, they would take a break to eat the picnic the servants riding with them had brought along before they would return to the castle.

Curious about what agitated his friend so much, Osmond followed his eyes to the young man who now approached Astrid – and gritted his teeth. Duke Thuggory of Meathead. If he could, Osmond would have forbidden him to come close to his daughter. But he had no legitimate reason to do so, nothing but assumptions, suspicions, and secret information. No, all he could do was watch and silently apologise to Astrid for making her endure this.

But apparently, his friend’s agitation had another reason.

“I wonder how that piece of filth got his hands on one of our horses,” Eret hissed. “Because he certainly didn’t get it directly from us. I’d rather take a good stallion back to our farms again before I hand him over to someone who wouldn’t treat him right. But with his influence, it probably wasn’t difficult for him to find a middleman. Odin, I wish I could demand the poor beast back from him. See? He can’t even control him right!”

Osmond’s eyes narrowed to slits as he watched the hated nobleman. Eret was right, the stallion the duke was riding was barely under his control, prancing left and right and throwing his head around. The sight wasn’t exactly reassuring – although it did come with the hope that the Duke would get thrown from the saddle and break his neck, thereby removing the biggest threat to the realm, as Thuggory’s lands were a knife poised at the heart of the kingdom, only a day’s ride from Lake Vola. But there was the fact that he was so close to Astrid, and riding so haphazardly. It was only his knowledge about Astrid’s exceptional riding skills that kept him from interfering then and there.

A decision he regretted only seconds later – and probably would for the rest of his life.

It happened in an instant, too fast for him or anyone else around them to react. When Thuggory rode closer to Astrid, his stallion threw its head up and tried to bite Astrid’s gelding without warning. Astrid’s horse shied away from the aggressive stallion with a distressed whinny. She tried to reign him in, but couldn’t hold him when Thuggory’s stallion attacked again, his jaws snapping with a harsh click! that Osmund could even hear from his place yards away. When Markor bolted away from the attacking stallion, his panic infected many of the horses around him, but Osmund was less concerned about the sudden stampede than he was about the fact that Astrid was at the head of it, barely able to keep her seat as Markor ran for his life.

“After them!” he bellowed, unable to get to his daughter himself with all the jumbled horses around him. But his words drowned in the general uproar, all men around shouting over one another. It was chaos, and he barely managed to keep sight of Astrid and her horse as they set off across a field and toward a nearby copse of aspen. Again, he tried to push through the chaos, but to no avail. Thor, keep her safe! he prayed desperately, helpless to do anything.
Then he lost sight of her completely and only a few moments later, a bloodcurdling scream thundereed over the plain. The chaos grew as even more horses panicked at the noise, running off in all directions. But Osmond froze even as his steed beneath him pranced left and right, his heart stuttering painfully. No… No, he couldn’t lose her too!

Frantically, he tried to push through the mass of milling horses and riders; most of the mounts weren’t battle-trained and were running wild, resulting in utter chaos. He kept having to halt and turn or risk a collision, but he didn’t dare stop; his eyes were darting to and fro, looking for that patch of blue and turquoise that would tell him where his daughter was. He couldn’t find her, but a moment later he spotted something else that, while still telling him nothing about where Astrid was or whether she was alright, at least somewhat eased his mind.

There were two riders darting past the general throng, one on a big black stallion and the other one astride a smaller chestnut mare. But unlike most of the others on this ride, they were clearly still in full control of their horses, heading in the direction Astrid’s gelding had disappeared to.

With knowing that young Eret was already coming to her help, Osmond was able to calm down somewhat, enough to concentrate on his own surroundings again. It took him a few minutes, but eventually, he managed to find a way out of the chaos as many men got their horses under control again.

When he and a group of other men reached the copse, it took them a minute to find Astrid and Eret, the sounds of her wailing and of soft whispers leading their way. The sight that greeted them was reassuring – but still bad enough.

From what it looked like, Astrid was unharmed with only her hair and dress ruffled from the fall. He couldn’t be entirely sure though as she was largely hiding from everyone’s view, encased in Eret’s embrace and her face buried against his chest. The same couldn’t be said for her horse though. The gelding lay a few steps away from the couple, unmoving, and with Stoick’s boy kneeling near his head.

“Oh, by Thor’s hammer!” Eret cursed as he reached his side a few moments later. He’d apparently seen the obvious too – the unnatural angle in which the gelding’s left hind leg dangled, a bloody splinter of bone sticking out from the skin, the bloody dagger lying next to his head, and the equally bloody hands of the boy stroking the dead horse’s mane. From the looks of it, the horse had stumbled, possibly in a burrow or on other uneven ground, and thrown Astrid off, who had miraculously landed uninjured... but Markor had broken his leg, and badly. Stoick’s boy had given the only mercy available to the poor beast.

During the next minutes, more men appeared around them, taking in the scene with gasps and hushed whispers. Some offered their sympathy even though nobody dared to get any closer, and Osmond doubted that Astrid heard any of that between Eret murmuring into her ear and her own sobbing and wailing. It was a strange sight and it took Osmond a minute to understand why.

Astrid was crying.

He tried to remember when he’d last seen her in such a state but came up empty-handed except for very early memories of her toddler years. No matter how dreadful an occasion, be it her stepmother’s funeral or the assaults on her during the past year, she’d always kept up her facade when in public, had always shewn nothing but strength. For her to break down like this now… His eyes wandered back to the dead gelding, and only slowly did it dawn on him how hard this must have hit her. He wanted to go to her, too, to take his daughter into his arms and comfort her. But she wouldn’t appreciate that – even her warder kept his distance, leaving her the space she needed – so he held back.
Instead, he ordered to no-one in particular, “We will return to the castle immediately.” That would give her at least a little privacy.

Around him, the men hustled about, delivering the message to those standing farther away. Young Eret tried to pull Astrid away from the site of the accident, and Osmond heard him murmur “Come, there’s nothing left we can do for him,” when she weakly fought against him. Eventually, she gave in though, and let him lead her toward his own horse. She was already on the stallion’s back, young Eret about to climb up behind her, when a highly unwelcome voice spoke up near them.

“Isn’t this an unfair advantage to Sir Eret if the Princess rides with him? It’s not as if her choice is official yet, she could still change her mind.”

Osmond gritted his teeth but kept his expression neutral as he turned toward Duke Thuggory. There was no hint of remorse on his face, even though he and his lack of control over his stallion were to blame for this accident. If only he’d interfered sooner – or had gotten rid of the traitor already.

He was about to form an answer when he caught sight of his friends’ expressions standing nearby. Eret was grimacing, clearly as enraged as Osmond was about the Duke’s behaviour, but Spitelout looked more cautious, and when he caught his eyes, he shrugged apologetically. “He has a point.”

Osmond pressed his lips into a thin line. Of course, he had a point. Not only about giving an advantage to one of her suitors, but letting her ride on a stallion was also highly inappropriate. Letting out a low sigh, his shoulders slumped down. As much as he wanted to grant her the comfort of riding with her soon-to-be-husband, he couldn’t allow it yet. His eyes wandered around, pondering the alternatives. If it were only about not giving an advantage, she could ride with him or one of the Grand Dukes, but they were all riding stallions, too, and it wasn’t really becoming of their status anyway. Her warder would be a better option, but Osmond doubted the old pony the man was riding could carry two people over such a distance. His eyes wandered on, over the guards who also all rode stallions and the servants with their full picnic baskets. None of them were suitable options either and he wasn’t sure whether to trust them with Astrid in her brittle state right now anyway. He was at a loss as to what to decide – until his eyes fell on the lonely figure still kneeling next to the horse’s corpse.

The boy rode a mare, didn’t he? In addition, he had no further weight to carry, and hadn’t he become something of a friend to Astrid, too? Also… he didn’t know the boy at all, but with what Osmund remembered about his parents, how his upbringing must have been, and how highly Daniel was thinking of him – he couldn’t help but trust in the boy’s character.

Being satisfied with this decision, he declared in a voice which clearly didn’t tolerate protest, “The Princess will ride with Sir Eret’s squire.”
time to write, but I'll try to stick to the schedule nonetheless. I can't make any promises though, especially with me and my family going on vacation in the week before the next planned update. All I can promise is that I will try.

But! Chapter 41 is one of the most important chapters of this entire story to me and I want to get it right! Meaning, I won't update in two weeks if it's not in a state I'm satisfied with. Sorry.
AN: Yay, we're back again! Thank you all for your patience.

This chapter... I'm going to say a little more at the end, but just this: It didn't turn out as I imagined it since last summer. But due to reasons, I had to change things, leave things out, or right out ignore entire points, so, yeah... I just hope it's still good enough.

As for the title... This too changed many times over the past year. I was never in a situation where I wouldn't have a title, it was more like I have too many that would fit. Up until last week, I was sure it would be Your Arms Are My Castle from Cascada's Every Time We Touch. But, well, things changes. A lot! So now it's from Don't Let Me Go - Acoustic by RAIGN. With the theme I Only Want You from the Castle TV-show as the underlying soundtrack... probably...

Hiccup reacted without even a heartbeat's hesitation. Without a doubt, that scream had come from Markor, and there were few reasons why he would scream like that. And none of them meant anything good.

Before anything else around registered in his mind, Hiccup rode Cassie to the side. A nudge of his heels and she was galloping freely past the general chaos of frightened horses and confused men, and towards the direction of the scream. He was so focused on getting there as quickly as he could that it took him a moment to notice Eret riding directly in front of him, and then to remember that him rushing to the Princess's aid like this might draw unwanted attention. But right now, none of that mattered, not when Astrid was in possible danger – and with Eret around, he even had a valid excuse anyway.

The sounds were coming from a small copse of aspen trees, and Hiccup directed Cassie to it. As they approached, he spotted Astrid quickly, her colourful dress standing out starkly against the muted browns and greens of the forest, even though she was covered in dirt, grass, leaves, and twigs. Thankfully no reds, though. She wasn’t moving as if injured, just impeded by her dress, as she crawled over the ground in a hurry towards–

His breath caught in his throat as his eyes followed her path and instantly took in what had happened. Markor was lying on the ground as well, and as Hiccup watched, was trying to get back on his feet, even as more cries of pain came from him. But Hiccup didn’t even need to take a closer look to know that, with an injured leg like that, the gelding would never stand again...

The realisation made new pain shoot into his heart, and not just for Astrid's sake but also for his own. Behind his mind’s eye, the months Hiccup had spent with the horse rushed past him in a heartbeat; how he’d first met the late yearling upon his arriving at the stud farm, how they’d built a bond of trust and friendship that had only grown stronger when Hiccup had trained him to be gifted to the Princess, and that first meeting in the stables months ago where rubbing down the gelding together had brought him and Astrid closer. All that were happy memories, memories Hiccup
treasured – and now, there was no way to save Markor...

"Swanja, don't," cut Eret's voice into his mind. He'd dismounted Crusher and was already at her side, holding her back from the reeling horse. "Don't get any closer, he might hurt you."

"B-but I have t-to help him," she sobbed. "Please, I... let me..." She was fighting against Eret's arms around her, trying to get past him, but he wouldn't let her.

"We can't help him anymore," he implored. "Not with an injury like that. You know that, Swanja. All we can do now is end his suffering. Please, let me--"

"No! No, please no! You can't do that, please!" she wailed. However, she stopped fighting Eret, and as Hiccup dismounted, she turned and clutched at Eret’s tunic, her knuckles standing out white against the dark red fabric, and as he wrapped his arms around her, she sagged into his embrace and started to weep.

Hiccup just stood next to Cassie, watching it all with a sense of painful hollowness in his chest. He wanted to push his cousin away, to be the one to comfort her. He wanted her pain to go away, to distract her or offer her something to make it easier. But none of that was possible. It wasn't his place to hold her in his arms, not anymore, and there was no way to lessen her pain. His eyes flickered back toward the injured horse, and the lump in his throat grew even bigger. He knew what they had to do, and the sooner the better. But that didn't mean he had to like it.

Hiccup glanced back at Eret just as his cousin cleared his throat and gave him an indicative nod. He knew that Eret would have done it himself, having spent his entire life around horses. But with Astrid still holding on to him as if he was all that kept her together he couldn't move, and they both knew that Hiccup knew what to do well enough, too.

With a curt nod, he took a dagger from his riding pack, hid it in his boot, and approached Markor, humming and with his hands raised to calm him at least a little bit. "Shh, it's okay, boy. It's okay. Calm down." The words came automatically and without him even thinking about them. He couldn't think right now anyway, could only function. He had a task to do. With the soothing noises and the familiar hands on his head, Markor soon calmed down until he lay still with only the occasional low whinny. For a minute, Hiccup kept stroking his fur and talked in a low voice, further calming the large horse while his left hand reached for the hidden dagger. It was done quickly, just one well-placed movement, and only a few heartbeats later, Markor lay entirely still.

Behind him, he could hear Astrid cry out again and Eret's low whispering, but in that moment, neither of that truly reached him. Instead, the words from his dream suddenly echoed through his mind again.

“You can hold your beloved in your arms again. But first, you will end the life of someone dear to her.”

Hiccup's breath caught in his throat as he stared down into Markor's lifeless eye, at his own hands covered in blood. Could this be it? Was this what the Goddess had meant? But how?

Slowly, he shook his head. He'd thought he'd have to kill someone who was in their way. He’d struggled for hours whether he could do that, whether he could become a murderer just to be with her again, and whether he'd even still be worthy of her if he did. His mind had conjured up one scenario after the other in which him killing someone who was about to stop them might be acceptable, self-defence, but they all had felt hollow and surreal.

But now that he thought about it... that hadn't been what the Goddess had said. She hadn't said that
he'd 'have to kill someone to be with her'. No, she'd only said that 'he would end a life before he could hold her again'.

A low sob escaped him and he slumped down until his head rested against Markor's. "I'm so sorry," he gasped into the still-warm fur. "You didn't deserve this." But none of this was about what anyone deserved, the slightly more practical part of him realised. Markor's death hadn't been a condition for their happiness, just something that would happen before they could hope again.

But still, he found himself wishing it had been something else. It wasn't that he wanted Eret or Daniel or anyone else to die – but he hadn't wanted Markor to die either, and even though he understood that it made no logical sense to blame himself, he felt guilty nonetheless. Foresight was a painful gift indeed...

Hiccup had no idea how long he'd knelt there next to Markor's still body. He wasn't paying attention to what was happening around him beyond the assurance that Eret would care for Astrid, so he flinched when a heavy hand landed on his shoulder.

"Hey, you better get up," Dagur muttered in a gloomy voice. When Hiccup looked up, a hint of confusion in his empty eyes, he added, "We're all heading back. And Uncle Osmond decided that Swanja is to ride with you."

From one breath to the next, Hiccup's heartbeat accelerated from barely there to a stampede. "What?" he gasped, his eyes unerringly darting to where she was still hiding from everyone against Eret's chest.

"Don't ask me," Dagur replied with a shrug. "She was about to ride with Eret, but there was something about not giving advantages, and... I don't know, but this is what the King decided."

With his mind reeling, Hiccup struggled to stand back up onto his legs, and stumbled as his left cramped. Only Dagur's quick reaction kept him from falling again.

"Careful there. And... can I give you a bit of free advice?" He waited, and when Hiccup didn't object seemed to take that as agreement. "First, you should be careful. I know that she wouldn't mind the touch of a friend, but they're all looking for something to discredit Eret with. You better make sure not to touch her more than absolutely necessary, or this all might turn into an even bigger mess. And second... well... you might want to clean up before you go over there."

Dagur gestured down at his hands, and when Hiccup's followed the gesture, he found them still covered in red. Mechanically, he nodded. "Yes... Yes, I'll..."

"There's a stream over there," Dagur pointed helpfully. "But you better hurry, we're all just waiting for you."

Hiccup nodded again, then staggered in the direction Dagur had indicated, quickly finding the stream. The water was cold, but it felt good after the heat of Markor's blood, and he cleaned his hands as best he could, not wanting to upset Astrid further by letting her see any traces. That done, he headed to where the others were waiting for him. Upon Eret's sign, he mounted Cassie then made room for Eret to lift Astrid up until she sat in front of him. And only then did the full weight of what was happening truly hit him.

She was going to ride with him? The whole way back to the castle, the entire two hours? And he wasn't to interact with her in any way, let alone touch her? How was he supposed to do that, when all his heart, mind, body, and soul longed for was to hold her close and never let go of her again?
With his entire body trembling, he led Cassie until they rode in the centre of the group of guards assigned to them. The stern looks the men gave them only reinforced Dagur’s warning – they wouldn’t treat any breach of decorum lightly, not in Astrid’s currently brittle state. So he was careful to keep his arms in an awkward half-bent and raised manner, holding Cassie’s reins without touching Astrid – even as the mayweed scent wafting from her hair made him dizzy and he had to fight the urge and longing to hold her tight at every single second. Again and again, he kept reminding himself that this wasn’t the right place to do so, not with so many people watching them...

–and not without knowing how she feels about me, he realised with a start. It was two weeks now since they’d last talked of some sort, one week since she’d at least moved on a little and had turned to Eret for comfort. For Hiccup, last night had been a turning point, the realisation that he couldn’t simply give up on them and the revelation that there still was hope… But that didn’t mean that she felt the same.

“You can hold your beloved in your arms again.”

Holding her in his arms… Wasn’t that what he was doing right now, in a way at least? Was this all the Goddess had referred to? Had Markor died just for him to spend this last ride with her?

A shiver ran down his spine and he choked back a sob as a spark of desperation rose inside him. Was it possible that he’d deceived himself like this, that this ride was all they would ever get? But no, that couldn’t be. That hadn’t been all the Goddess had said. She’d also said that there was always hope, that he only had to do what came naturally to him, and that he would hold his prize in his arms if he did the Gods’ work – whatever that would be.

He would have to hold onto that thought, or he would lose his mind.

However, the question about how she thought about him was burning at the front of his mind, especially as her face was nothing but a stony mask with rivulets of silent tears running down her cheeks. He wished he could ask her or even comfort her in any way... but that wasn’t possible. Not now, not when they were surrounded by so many people, with so many eyes watching them intently for any slip-ups.

And thus went the ride; Hiccup felt every moment as they blurred together like grains of sharp glass under his bare feet, each one distinct and painful, yet identical to the others, as they stretched on and on... He didn’t even try to distract himself from the thought of how the only thing separating them was their clothes and a finger width's space between them, knowing that that would be futile anyway. With every step Cassie made, they swayed and shook, just a little but it was enough for her shoulders to brush against his arms or for her hair to tickle at his neck every now and then. It was wonderful and agonising at the same time, being so close to her and yet unable to do or say anything. All he could do to ward off the rising desperation in his heart was to focus on his love for her, on the warmth and tenderness and comfort, and try to send all those emotions through their bond, hoping that they might reach her…

… and to pray for a miracle, for a chance to talk to her – before it was too late.

Astrid felt as if she would break apart at any moment now.

No, that wasn’t true. She’d already fallen apart. It was only her well-trained mask that followed Tuff through the corridors and to her rooms, while inside she'd already crumbled into a million tiny pieces.
This day… she’d looked forward to and dreaded it at the same time. The ball tonight with her unofficial choice was supposed to give her comfort, stabilising her in the path she’d taken. But the closer the day had come the more simply thinking about it, about renouncing everything that had been between her and Hiccup, had seemed impossible. And the ride… The ride had been a gift from Eret to her. It had been meant to be at least a tiny bit of freedom, of doing what she loved amidst this entire mess. Contrary to what she’d told her father, she had been looking forward to spending a few hours on Markor’s back, even with knowing that the pace and the company would be annoying.

But now, the ride had turned into her worst nightmare, and within only a few short moments everything had changed. Thuggory approaching her and his stallion snapping at Markor who'd already been skittish all day. Him shying away from any stallion had happened so often before and she’d always known how to rein him in again. But today, with her heart and mind being entirely somewhere else and with the cursed side-saddle having given her less control, she hadn’t been fast enough – hadn’t been good enough. She hadn’t been able to keep him calm, Markor had run away from his attacker, and the only thing Astrid had been able to do about it had been holding on to him as best she could. Then she’d lost her balance as the broad back beneath her had suddenly dropped. She’d fallen, landing painfully on the ground, and that scream…

It had all happened so fast and she barely remembered anything of what had happened afterwards, but that sound… Never in her life would she be able to forget that scream.

When they reached her chambers, Astrid barely registered how Tuff warded off any questions his sister tried to ask her. Instead, she stumbled past her maidservant and… she didn’t even think about where to go. It seemed inevitable, like there was only one place to go, one object that could soothe her in her current state.

Unable to hold herself on her legs any longer, she slumped down into the chair in front of her desk. Her fingers were trembling when she opened the lid to her treasure chest but still didn’t waver as they reached for her trusted music box. The familiar tune would help her, it always did. She just needed a few minutes to pull herself together again, just watching the tiny dancer for a few rounds. Surely, this would centre her enough to, somehow, survive the ball and everything attached to it.

Taking the music box out of the coffer and getting it started happened without her even having to think about it. But even as she was doing that, her eyes had fallen on another object in her box, a simple object that was still able to stir up new emotions inside her whenever she looked at it: the wooden carving of a horse that looked so much like Markor and that Hiccup had given her – as a reminder.

Astrid’s entire body shook as she fought to keep her feelings locked deep inside her. She couldn't let them loose, not ever, or she wasn’t sure whether she would be able to contain them again. But...

Markor – her beloved horse, Eret’s gift, the witness to those first hours she’d spent with Hiccup, the tiny grasp of freedom her father had granted her – was dead! Nothing could return him to her. She would never see him again, never hear his happy snort when she came to visit him, never again feel the warmth of his fur beneath her hands or the simple comfort they could give each other when he playfully rubbed his nose against her chest. And she hadn't even been able to say goodbye.

A desperate sob tore itself from her throat at that realisation, of how utterly insurmountable it was to retrieve what was lost forever. How was she supposed to pull herself together enough for the ball? It was only an hour or two before she would have to be presentable and face all those men again. It felt impossible, and she wasn't sure whether her soothing music box would be enough.
On the pure reflex of having done the same motion countless times before, she reached out to shake the music box as it approached the usual sticking point in the music – except that it didn't get stuck.

Because Hiccup had repaired it.

With wide eyes, Astrid gazed at the music box, at the tiny dancer as it twirled in time with the unfamiliar tune. She could feel it as the last dam insider her cracked at that moment. All she got out was a weak whimper before the flood wave of sorrow crashed down on her, drowning her in all those memories and emotions she'd tried to lock away forever.

**Hiccup.**

She'd forbidden herself to think about him. For roughly a week now, she'd tried to convince herself that she was okay, or would be at least. That she could be happy with Eret, could live a life other than at *his* side. But she'd been deceiving herself, she now realised – and probably had known it the entire time.

Even when she'd tried to focus on talking to Eret or had found some form of comfort in his closeness, she'd still been so aware of Hiccup, of where exactly he stood or whether he was in the same room at all. Even without her help, her eyes had wandered through the room only to glide over him in passing, never lingering but unable to stay away from him either. Yes, she'd been a fool… but it had taken *this day* to realise it.

Losing Markor had hurt like nothing else – and still did – but in a strangely *different* way, the ride back to the castle had hurt just as much. Hiccup had been so close! His warmth had radiated toward her even without him touching her, and his breath on her neck had sent pleasant shivers down her spine. It could have been perfect; she'd just needed to lean back a tiny little bit then she could have basked in his embrace, could have imagined his love and comfort around her like a blanket. She could have imagined that there was still hope for them.

But there was no hope.

Hiccup had made it clear that, no matter how much they both might long for it, there was no way for them. He'd given up. And no matter how desperate she still might be for there to just be *something*, his behaviour today had proven that nothing had changed. He hadn't even made a single attempt at talking to her or holding her; not even a hug or the comforting words of a friend. Just silence and distance despite the longing she thought she'd felt thrumming through their bond.

It was then when she broke down for real, half-draped across her desk and with the melody of the music box taunting her until it ran out. She cried, harder and more abundantly than even during the nights before. Markor was lost forever and so was Hiccup and their future. Over and over her mind circled around the same thoughts, unable to find a way out.

She couldn't go on any longer. Markor was dead. Her future with Hiccup was lost. And yet, every fibre of her being still longed for him, his warm embrace, his sweet kisses, and the ease and comfort of simply being with him. She needed him like she needed the air to breathe. She couldn't go on any longer…

**. o O o .**

Astrid stood at the head of the big ballroom, hidden from everyone by a thick curtain. She only dimly recalled how she’d gotten here; Ruff had eventually shaken her out of her stupor and whispered the only words that still held *some* meaning.
Her own life had no worth to her, not anymore. All she still could do was help to make her best friend's life easier. It was only a small comfort, but it would have to be enough. It was all that was left to her. So she'd let Ruff make her presentable; she'd gotten her hair and makeup in order and had dressed her in the most extravagant outfit Astrid had worn so far; the bust had a beautiful intricate pattern of different shades of blue, ranging from dark midnight to a rich sky blue, while the skirt was made of countless layers of the lightest silk she'd ever seen, floating around her like a cloud of nearly white light blue. Her silver swan coronet and a pair of silken dark-blue gloves that reached up to her elbows completed her appearance, and under different circumstances, she probably would have complimented the exquisite handiwork of the dressmaker.

Now though, she simply stood there behind her curtain, apathetically waiting for her sign to join the celebrating crowd. She could hear them talking and laughing, and there was music too, many couples certainly dancing already.

A part of her wanted to charge into the room and scream at them all; how could they celebrate on a day like this?

But, of course, to them, nothing bad had happened today. Nothing but a small accident with no casualties except for a dumb horse. Nothing serious. Nothing but exciting gossip on this day of socialising and forming bonds. There was a reason the invited guests had also brought their daughters, after all; with so many eligible noblemen looking for a bride, her unofficial choice tonight would certainly discourage some of those who'd been courting her, enough so that they might turn their attention to other young noblewomen instead. Hers wouldn't be the only betrothal that would soon be celebrated.

Astrid was torn between hating having to wait here and dreading the moment she would have to step in front of the crowd. People would expect a decision from her – and she wasn't ready! How could she ever be ready to renounce their divine connection? But all too soon, the music paused and with a whispered "It's your turn now, milady. Make me proud," her governess shooed her out of her hiding place. If Astrid had possessed the energy, she would have wanted to scratch the woman's eyes out for her words. But as it was, all she could do was mutely take her place at her father's side, her heart nearly jumping out of her chest, and she felt dizzy as all eyes in the room turned toward her. She was sure that the King said some important-sounding words, announcing the next dance to be ladies' choice with only implying the deeper meaning of her choice, but she didn't hear any of it.

Slowly, as if in a trance, she took the couple of steps leading down from the dais to the dance floor. She couldn't hear anything over her blood rushing through her ears, could barely see more than blurry faces swimming in a sea of meaningless colours. And then, even those were gone, and even though she could feel her body moving on, the scene playing out behind her mind's eye was another.

“One day, we will dance together,” he promised, murmuring against her skin. “I'll come to you, open and for everyone to see, and ask you for a dance. Maybe they would stare and wonder, but it won't matter. There will be only you and me. Forever.”

Astrid chuckled at his mellow words, even as the picture they painted was a beautiful one. “What makes you think you'll be the one to ask?” she replied, and turned her head to seek his skin with her lips. “Maybe it'll be ladies' choice. I'd walk along the line of waiting men, not seeing any of them, only you…”

A hiccupy sob tore itself from her chest before she could hold it back and recompose herself. Oh,
how she wished those words from what seemed to be another life could become reality.

Without her help, her eyes landed on his and for the first time in days stayed there as she kept walking along the line of watching people. And what she saw there nearly broke her all over again. She saw his longing that found its echo in her own heart, saw his love and warmth just like she felt it all thrumming in her chest. She had no doubt that he'd remembered their conversation about dancing together just now too, knew that he wanted it to be real just like she did.

But that was impossible. This wasn't about what they wanted anymore, and never had been. There was no hope for their dream of a shared future, and indulging in this wish of at least dancing with him this one time would only cause problems, possibly even his death.

There was no hope...

She'd almost reached him before she managed to squelch those thoughts and turn her eyes away from him. It was lucky, really, that Eret would stand right next to him, or people would have wondered why she'd come here in the first place. With her last strength, she turned her head, her hollow eyes finding those of her friend. Her hand reaching out to him was only half asking him for the dance; the other half was seeking something to hold on to as the entire room started to spin around her.

She felt as if she was falling; when Eret took her hand, when he led her back into the middle of the room, even when the music started and they began to move in time with the melody. She was falling, falling, falling, and not even Eret's arms around her were able to hold her anymore. The whole room around her was spinning faster and faster, and not just because of their dancing. Everything around her was nothing but a blur – except for one single face amidst the crowd, the only face she would always find, no matter what. He was moving, walking away from the dancefloor and the crowd and toward the large glass doors that led out into the garden. Before he left her sight, however, he turned and their eyes met once more.

And the way he looked at her… sadness and pain mixed with desperate longing, the same turmoil of emotions she was feeling too. But there was also something else, something more, another emotion she couldn't quite name right away. It took her another moment or three, time in which he slipped out of the room, before she understood. And when she did, the sensation of falling and of the world around her spinning too fast became even worse.

Hiccup had looked disappointed.

As if he'd hoped!

It was all too much... Astrid couldn’t take any more, and from one moment to the other, everything around her turned black...

. o O o .

Astrid awoke to a mild headache, a bitter taste on her tongue, and the room still spinning around her. It wasn’t as bad as before though, which was good. She blinked, trying to clear her head and remember what had happened. But after walking past the waiting men, there was nothing.

The room around her was only dimly lit by a small lamp somewhere to her side. It wasn't her bedroom that much was clear, but it took her a moment before she realised where she was: in one of the smaller parlours that were attached to the ballroom and that usually provided space for people to talk more privately. Someone must have brought her here, after…
"Are you feeling better, milady?"

Astrid flinched at those words – she’d thought she was alone – but it was just Ruff who leaned over her, concern clear on her face. Instead of an answer, Astrid tried to sit up, groaning, and only managed when Ruff took hold of her hand and shoulder to help her up.

"Careful, don’t rush it now. You’ve been out for about twenty minutes. Here, drink this and give yourself a few minutes before you get up." She handed her a glass of watered wine, but also placed her other hand on her shoulder to keep her from standing up.

Astrid accepted the glass gratefully and took a careful sip. She could practically feel how her body absorbed the liquid; had she eaten or drunk anything at all since breakfast? She couldn’t remember. After a minute or so of silence, she asked in a weak voice, “What happened?”

Ruff watched her with a concerned grimace. “You fainted during your opening dance with Eret. He caught you – which, granted, wasn’t too hard with you already being in his arms, I guess – and directly brought you here. I’m a little impressed, actually. Another man would have gotten annoyed at this grand moment – your first official dance as nearly-betrothed – getting interrupted. But he acted more like an apprehensive mother hen; it got so bad that I sent him away to fetch… whatever I was thinking about at that moment. Tuff is guarding the door, so you can rest here until you feel better. He won’t let anyone in for now.”

Astrid nodded mutely and slowly sipped her wine, her lips twitching into something like a faint smile at Ruff’s words. She wondered how Tuff would react if the King himself demanded entrance – not that that was very likely – and was fairly sure that her warder would even try to keep him away if he thought it necessary.

As she drank, memories of what had happened before her blackout slowly came back to her though, even if only in fractions. The sensation of falling, and a single face in a sea of colours with an impossible expression on it. He’d made it clear that there was no hope left for them, no chance of ever being together. And yet, he’d been disconcerted when she turned to Eret after all. He still hoped!

“I need to talk to him,” she murmured, startling Ruff when her words broke the silence between them. She placed the glass on a low side table and pushed herself up onto shaky legs, her eyes darting to where another set of doors led into the gardens, before Ruff could hold her back. She couldn’t let anyone hold her back now! If there was even the tiniest bit of hope left for her and Hiccup, then she had to take it.

“Wait, wait,” Ruff tried to interfere hastily. “Who do you mean? Eret? I can tell Tuff to call him in, no problem. No need for you to–”

Astrid interrupted her. “No, I don’t mean Eret.”

She didn’t elaborate, just threw her maidservant a desperate look. Ruff had witnessed her crying into her pillows night after night; she had to know who she was talking about. And she clearly did. Astrid could see the understanding dawn in her eyes. Her hand on Astrid’s shoulder tightened, and for a second, it seemed as if she would hold her back, would call Tuff back in and whoever else might be waiting for her to come back to her senses. One witness, and Astrid sneaking out into the night would become impossible. But then she drew her hand back and gave her a tight nod.

“Go. Do what you have to; Tuff and I will buy you as much time as we can.”

Astrid swallowed, touched by Ruff’s words. She’d never doubted the twins’ loyalty to her, and
after learning that they’d known about her sneaking away but hadn’t told anyone, Astrid had begun to understand that this loyalty was stronger than she’d thought. But only now did she realise just how deep it really went. She would have to find a way to thank them later. But for now, all she could do was breathe a heartfelt, “Thank you,” before slipping out into the night. The cool air bit into the skin of her bare upper arms; maybe it would have been more prudent to take some form of cloak with her, but she didn’t care. She had no idea how much time she would have; she wouldn’t waste what she had with something that trivial.

Logically, she should have been worried whether Hiccup would even still be out here or how she was supposed to find him among the ample labyrinth of hedges and flower beds and bushes and trees. But somehow, she knew exactly where to find him; it was just like it had been in that first night, Eret’s accolade, when some inner sense had told her where he was at any moment. Maybe it was the separation that had let their bond intensify like this or it was the Gods’ interference that guided her, she didn’t know – but she also didn’t care. All she cared about was that she could feel how she got closer to him with every step or turn, that it would only be a matter of a few more heartbeats, until–

She stopped dead in her tracks when she reached an opening amidst the hedges and spotted him standing at the other end, only a handful of steps away from her. So close and they were entirely alone out here. This was exactly what a part of her – the part that still was and always would be his Astrid – had longed for ever since he’d fled from the armoury almost two weeks ago; the chance to talk freely, to be just them again.

But now that it was here, she didn’t know what to do or say. He’d clearly noticed her arrival; his shoulders had visibly tensed and, surely, he had felt her approach just like she had felt him, too. He didn’t react though, didn’t say or do anything, and for a moment, Astrid feared she might have read too much into that moment of shared desperate looks. What if she’d been wrong, if nothing had changed? She wasn’t sure whether either of them would be strong enough to live through another meeting like their last one.

So she stood still, eyes fixed on his hunched-over figure and uncertain what to do, before she reminded herself of something she’d learned during the happy months she’d spend with him: that she could ask him everything, that with him, she didn’t need to hold back. She only hoped that was still true.

“What just happened in there?” she blurted out before she could overthink again.

At first, she thought Hiccup wouldn’t respond though, his shoulders only growing even tenser. But eventually, he did react, if not as she’d hoped he would.

“What do you mean?” he asked in a low, nearly inaudible whisper. His back was still turned toward her and with a breeze rustling the twigs around them, she shouldn’t have been able to understand him. But right now, she would’ve picked out his voice amidst a thunderstorm.

“I mean… I mean the way you looked, right before you left. Wha-what was that supposed to mean?”

Hiccup grunted out something like a harsh and unamused laugh before he finally turned his head to look at her. It was dark out here, the lights of the castle barely reaching them, but she could still see that his eyes were hollow and tired. “I know I suggested it,” he murmured. “But… it’s so hard to watch you two together. I’m sorry that I’m not strong enough; I didn’t mean to let you see this. You… you should go back, I’m sure everyone is missing you already.”

And what about you? she wanted to demand, but kept herself from blurting out those harsh words.
They weren’t necessary, she didn’t doubt that he was missing her too. But that wasn’t the point.

“That’s not what I meant,” she replied instead, her voice gentle and soothing, if a little weak. If he only felt half as brittle as she did, then harsh words wouldn’t help right now. “You looked… disappointed, as if you’d expected me to do something else. And I… I just…” she trailed off, again unsure of what to say.

Hiccup turned a little more, eyeing her with the intensity she’d missed dearly. “You… what?”

“I… I need to know what you were thinking,” she added. “Please…”

There was an uncomfortable pause in which nothing but both their breathing was audible, his getting heavier by the second, as if he was struggling with some inner fight. Then he sighed, his shoulders slumping, and he gave a weak nod. “You’re right,” he murmured. “For a moment, I thought… I thought you’d come to me instead. I know how stupid that was, given everything that happened, but–” he paused, shrugging helplessly– “I guess I was hoping for a miracle, for this nightmare to end. I just… I don’t know what to do anymore.”

Astrid could do little but stare at him as her mind tried to work through his words. Oh, they were simple enough and she knew what he meant, had felt the same. But there was one thing he’d said, one single word that threatened to make everything around her fall apart again.

“You’ve… You’ve been hoping?” she gasped, her knees going weak.

Hiccup obviously understood the implication and met her eyes with a clear look. “Yes.”

For the second time this night, the whole world around her was spinning. Everything she’d done lately – giving up her dreams and giving in to the expectations placed on her, accepting the thought of becoming Eret’s wife and trying to find comfort in that fate – all that she’d done based on one single fact: that Hiccup had given up and that there was nothing she could do either. That there was no hope left for them. But if that wasn’t true, if Hiccup still…

The feeling of spinning got worse, as if she might pass out again at any moment. This was too much. The day had been too much, worse than any before, and the thought that she might have given up too soon… She was falling again, idly wondering whether hitting the soft grass beneath her would hurt or whether she’d even still feel the impact – but it never came to that.

From one heartbeat to the next, she was suddenly caught in an embrace she’d thought she would never feel again. His warmth and closeness washed through her like a healing wave that made her whimper helplessly. It felt so good. Weakly, she huddled closer against his chest, seeking more of what she’d missed so desperately: His warmth, his scent, his closeness, the feeling of rightness and security he always gave her. She didn’t say anything for a while, only basked in it all until the world stopped spinning and her mind became a little clearer again.

“I thought there was no hope left for us,” she eventually mumbled against his chest. They were both back on their feet now, but still entangled in a tight embrace with one another. Her arms wrapped around his waist to hold on to him. She never wanted to let go of him again.

“There is always hope,” he seemed to mumble into her hair.

Her mind went blank for a moment. No. She must have misheard him. Her mind was playing tricks on her, taunting her. “What?” she gasped out and turned her head until she could look up at him. She needed more than just words, needed to see it for herself.

Hiccup looked at her as well, a mixture of soft adoration and desperate longing in his eyes. “There
is always hope’,” he repeated and loosened his hold around her to brush a few loose strands of hair out of her eyes. “That’s what the Goddess told me.” He paused, hesitantly licking his lips. “I… had another vision last night,” he explained upon her confused look. “She visited me in my dreams and, among other things, told me that there’s always hope. That… that I would only have to do what comes naturally for me and then we can be together.” He shrugged self-consciously.

Astrid leaned her forehead back against his chest as she tried to grasp what he’d just told her. She wanted to believe him, only the Gods knew how much she wanted. But did she dare to do so? She took a minute to try and make sense of it all, all whilst holding on to him as tightly as she could. She wanted it to be true, wanted to be with him for the rest of her life. But could she rebuild her hope based on nothing but this? Could she give in to the growing longing that was about to burst through her inner walls and tear down the brittle construct of another life she’d build over the last week? Did she even have a choice?

“Are you sure it wasn’t just a dream, just wishful thinking?” she asked, her voice close to breaking. His heartbeat was thrumming in her ear as her hands tightened in his tunic at his back, desperate to believe it as well but also afraid of renewed pain. She wasn’t sure if she’d be able to endure that.

“Yes, I’m sure,” he eventually murmured, hesitantly, and when she looked up again, he had his face averted, chewing at his lip in thoughts. “It’s a… a long story. Not something to tell you now. But yes, I have enough reason to believe that it wasn’t just an ordinary dream. She told me things, knew things that…”

He trailed off when she began to tremble uncontrollably, keening, and his arms around her tightened until he was almost crushing her. It still wasn’t enough. In that moment, as the emotional tide she’d tried to hold back burst through her and washed away every reasonable thought left, she only wanted him to hold her tighter, closer, until they were merged together, inseparably.

For a few minutes, neither of them spoke. They didn’t need to. For now, it was enough to just hold each other, to be this close again after a separation that had lasted for far too long. Again, Astrid was basking in it all, his warmth and comfort, in the reassurance and safety she felt radiating from him. But it was so much more intense now compared to earlier as it came with the hope that their suffering might be over. She was amazed at how simple it was, at how easily they clicked back together. The torn pieces of her heart slid back into place, the edges reconnecting as if nothing had ever happened. She was back in Hiccup’s arms and, for this moment, everything was perfect.

But she knew that reality couldn’t be warded off forever. Even with how good and right it felt to be with him again, they couldn’t stay out here in the cool gardens forever. Sooner rather than later, she would have to get back. People would start to look for her, if they hadn’t already; Ruff wouldn’t be able to appease them for much longer. She had to get back to the ball before someone noticed her absence, had to get back to her mask, to playing her part. She had to get back to become Eret’s wife.

She sobbed as this realisation hit her. She loved Eret, as her friend and her brother, she really did. But the idea of actually marrying him now that new hope for her being with her soulmate had taken root inside her…

“I can’t do this,” she whispered weakly. Hiccup tensed up and made attempts to pull away from her, but she wouldn’t let him and instead clung to him with all the strength she had left. “I can’t go back in there and pretend anymore,” she elaborated instead. “Not when this is still possible. Please, Hiccup. What can we do?”

“I-I don’t know.” He sounded incredibly brittle, vulnerable. “All I know is that there must be a way, but I don’t know what it is. Nothing has changed there. But… but I will find a way through
this!”

His words, muffled into her hair, did little to calm her. Without a doubt, it was soothing to know that they were on the same page again. But he was right; nothing had changed. There still was no way out for them, and their time to find one was limited. Not marrying Eret after tonight would cause some turmoil, but it would pass. Her choice at the ball hadn’t been binding, after all. But that left them only two more weeks until that choice would become official, until going back on her word would cause a great amount of trouble, no matter how close the Houses Hofferson and Jag’r were. But if they couldn’t find a way...

“Take me away from here.” The words were out before she could think about it. It didn’t matter that they’d talked about that option before, didn’t matter that, logically, she knew it was insane. It was the only solution she could think of.

“Astrid, that’s–”

But before Hiccup could say any more, object to her idea as she expected, she cut him off with a quick shake of her head. She wasn’t sure whether some part of her had thought this through before or whether she was making it up as she went, but from one second to the other, the idea was in her head, crystal clear and simple.

“Not right now,” she clarified. “We have a few days to plan ahead. When we choose the right moment, some busy time over a longer hunt, for example, it could take up to an entire day before someone notices I’m gone. We can pack provisions to last us a few days and then we can hunt and live off the forest until they give up. There’s no need for us to stick to taverns and inns where people can easily find us. We can stay away from the roads, travel through the forests and fields to avoid search parties, at least for a while. It’s possible, I know it is.” And if someone finds us, she added mentally. Then they will have to get through me to get to you. Out loud, she added, “And once we’re free of any hunters, we can go somewhere safe, build that simple home we saw. I’m sure you can find work wherever we go, be it working with livestock or as a mechanic, or maybe even as a blacksmith’s apprentice. And I can learn how to cook, I’ll take care of our home and raise our children. I know it won’t always be easy, but together we can do it. Please, at least consider it.”

Hiccup had listened to every word she’d said, quietly and without interrupting her. She had fully expected him to do so or to object now, to come up with some logical reasoning why that wouldn’t be possible. But nothing like that happened. Instead, he lifted one hand to cup her face, his thumb gently caressing her cheekbone.

“I wasn’t going to turn that idea down,” he said in a low, hoarse whisper, his eyes fixed on hers. There was a sincerity in them, a determination that she hadn’t seen there before. “If I’ve learned one thing from these past weeks, then it’s that I’m ready to do everything to not lose you again. Even something as crazy as eloping with you.” His lips twitched into something of a smile despite his somewhat sad expression. “But you’re right, that won’t be easy. I’ve lived on the road for long enough to know how hard it can be, how cold the nights can get and how merciless hunger can become. And we wouldn’t even simply live on the road, but on the run; that would make everything so much harder. So let’s keep that as a last resort, okay?”

Smiling, Astrid relaxed a little more. “Okay,” she breathed, smiling. A ‘last resort’ was good, a backup plan, the assurance that nothing could separate them. It was hope. However, there was one thing she needed before she could go back, one more assurance. “Just... promise me one thing.”

“Everything!” he replied without hesitation, a weak chuckle vibrating through his chest. “Whatever you want, Milady, the answer is yes.”
Oh, it was so good to see and hear and feel him like this again, so light and free, with at least a spark of confidence. Astrid wanted these minutes with him to never end. She knew that they only had a little time left though, and she didn’t want to waste that. This was important to her, important for her sanity. “Don’t let me go,” she pleaded. “Not ever again. Whatever happens, there’s no giving up anymore.”

Pain sparked up in his eyes at the reminder, but it disappeared almost instantly and got replaced by burning sincerity. “I won’t let go,” he vowed. “Not ever again. Whatever happens, I will fight for us.”

Him wording his reply exactly like her request before made her smile turn a few shades warmer and softer, and with a sighed, “Thank you!” she rested her head back against his chest. She would have to go back any minute now, but until then, she wanted to soak up as much of his warmth and closeness as she could. She was sure that she would need it.

The minutes stretched though, and every time she felt as if the moment to part, at least for now, had come, she found another reason to stay just a tiny bit longer. Like how much she’d missed his scent of leather and sunshine, how good his fingers felt as they caressed her bare upper arms, or how much the even sound of his breathing calmed her. Gods, she’d missed him so much! Being here with him now after all the pain of the past weeks, it almost felt like a dream in itself, like it was too good to be true. But it was true; it had to be with the cool breeze slowly getting uncomfortable through the thin fabric of her dress and with the distant music of the ball echoing toward them no matter how hard she tried to tune it out.

She was about to retreat, for real this time, when some unexpected sounds made them both flinch.

No, not unexpected, not really, but… but… Astrid felt panic rise inside her as the noises, footsteps and the low whispering of clearly more than one person, came closer and closer to where they were ‘hiding’ – in a separate clearing, yes, but still in full view should someone enter.

Shaking with the old fear of getting caught, Astrid’s eyes darted around over the hedges and scrubs. She was looking for a place to hide, making a step backwards – or tried to, at least. Hiccup’s arms around her didn’t loosen to let her move away; on the contrary, it felt as if he held her even tighter.

“Hiccup, what… Let me… I need to hide!” There was panic in her voice now as it was in her eyes as she looked up at him, pleading, begging him to–

“I won’t let go,” he whispered urgently, something like frantic desperation gleaming in his eyes. “Not ever again…”

For a moment, her fear grew even stronger as she tried to struggle free. They mustn’t be found like this, in full view of whoever might happen upon them and tightly entangled, without leaving any doubt about the nature of this meeting. They had to part, to hide, had to pray and hope that whoever was coming in their direction wouldn’t spot them. It would only make everything worse.

But then, she remembered her own thought from earlier. ‘Then they will have to get through me to get to you.’ In an instant, she stopped struggling and sought his eyes with her own, sought confirmation. Her hand landed on his chest, over his heart, at the same moment as he touched her in the same way, and they shared a short but decisive nod. If necessary, they would fight every battle for each other, for their right to be together.

All of a sudden, she felt incredibly light, with all fear and worries having evaporated in a heartbeat. This was where she was supposed to be, where the Gods had placed her. Where she belonged. It wasn’t even a choice when she stretched then, her free hand moving up to curl around his neck, and pressed her lips to his. It was inevitable, the only logical thing to do.
Hiccup didn’t even seem surprised, welcomed her even with a soft sigh that sounded as if an incredible weight had been lifted off his soul. And Astrid felt the same. The moment their lips met it was as if she could breathe freely for the first time in a long while, as if she’d been drowning and now had broken through the surface again. She’d meant for this to be a gentle kiss, one that spoke of reconciliation and reassurance. But after only one heartbeat, it became something else, something more. Reconciliation turned into reconnecting, reassurance into the promise that they would never deny their love again. Their lips and tongues moved together, more eager and demanding after the long break, just like their entire bodies thought more contact, clutching and pulling. Hiccup’s hand curled around the base of her head, and for once neither of them cared that he might ruin the intricate pattern of her braids. It didn’t matter. Nothing mattered to them except each other.

Maybe it wasn’t the powerful connecting of their first true kiss, not the meeting and melding of a thunderstorm and a flood wave. But it felt like so much more, like the force of nature brewing between them had finally reached its full power, ready to strike out at whoever dared to get too close. At that moment, with them clutching at each other and with their moans and their gasping breaths mingling between hungry mouths, she felt invincible.

And not even the footsteps behind her coming to an abrupt halt and the whispering turning into stunned silence could change that.

Chapter End Notes

So, yeah... This last scene didn't turn out as I always imagined it. In my mind, it always was a highly emotional and tragic scene, still a reunion, but not as hopeful as it is now, but more one that happened by luck. Ah, well. It now is as it is. And I’m still kinda happy how it turned out, even with aaaall the things I had to cut out because they didn't fit to how the story had developed anymore or wouldn't work with these characters at all.

I hope it was still satisfying enough...
Urgh... I don't know what to think of this chapter. I really wrote a lot in these past two weeks, but barely anything for this story. In times, the words simply flowed down into the document - but only when I wrote something else. On this story, I was entirely blocked. According to my plan, there'd been supposed to be at least twice as much plot in this chapter, maybe even more. Ah, well, but it looks like there might be a few shorter chapters to come instead. *sigh*

Anyway, thanks to the changed content of this chapter, I also had to change the title, since the one I had planned in for such a long time only fits the next part. Thankfully, someone recommended 'Rewrite The Stars' by Zac Efron and Zendaya from the movie *Greatest Showman* to me a while ago. That song fits these last few chapters perfectly, and I think this quote fits this chapter quite well, too.

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Hiccup hoped with all his heart that he wasn’t dreaming again. Her lips were moving with his, he could taste her on his tongue, and he could clearly feel her soft and warm body safely encased in his arms – but it still felt too good to be true.

He’d been so sure that Astrid’s choice at the ball would seal their fate. Markor’s death had confirmed that he’d really seen a vision and had talked to a Goddess instead of only having made it all up. But to be certain that She had meant more than just holding Astrid during the ride back, Hiccup had thought that Astrid would have to ask him for her dance instead of Eret. Otherwise, the social pressure on her to stick to her choice and not switch to an impecunious squire would have been too great – or so he’d told himself. And for those few moments, when she’d slowly walked through the ballroom with her eyes fixed on his and their bond thrumming like a thousand drums, he’d believed she actually would choose him. For that handful of breaths, all the pain and longing and desperation of the previous weeks had vanished at the prospect of their dream coming true, of them dancing together in front of everyone, not caring what anyone else might think. For that short time, he’d hoped!

But then she’d turned toward Eret after all, away from him, and everything around Hiccup had fallen apart. She’d made her choice and it wasn’t him. He barely remembered how he’d made it out of the ballroom and into the dark night. Everything had hurt – be it brushing against another guest, his stumbling steps over uneven ground, or even the air itself. It had all hurt like a million shards of glass cutting into his mind, his flesh, his soul.

At that moment, dying hadn’t felt like such a bad option.

But then she’d suddenly been there, He’d felt her approach, and the sight of her, her closeness, her voice, and her words and promises had been like sweet honey on his hurting soul, and now, everything was perfect again. She was in his arms, and her hand on his skin and her lips against his were all the reassurance he needed. Hot tears of pure relief ran down his cheeks; he hadn’t thought to ever kiss her again, much less hold her with the assurance that nothing could come between them again. He wanted this moment to never end...
Of course, it felt like a dream. But it was one he intended to hold on to with everything he had. *Whatever happened, he wouldn’t let go of her again.*

“Well, fuck me slowly with Heimdall’s mighty horn!” came like a thunderbolt, for all that it was hissed through clenched teeth.

The words cut into their blissful bubble like a knife. Hiccup was reluctant to separate from Astrid and he sensed that she felt the same, but the magic of the moment was gone. She whimpered as he drew back, quietly, barely more than a vibration rippling through her, and buried her face against his chest, unwilling to face their intruders. Despite their silent agreement to not hide but to fight this time, she was still afraid – and Hiccup couldn’t even blame her. All those months of secrecy and hiding had left their mark, and it wouldn’t go away in the blink of an eye. A spark of that fear rose inside him, too, but he forced himself to ignore it as he looked up, stern determination in his eyes as he faced the newcomers. He was ready to fight for her, ready to do whatever it would take. Nobody would be able to separate them again, not after what they’ve been through. If the last two weeks had taught him one thing, then it was that a life without her wasn’t worth it.

When he looked up, his eyes directly landed on Eret, who was at the front of the small group at the edge of the small clearing. For once, though, Hiccup couldn’t pay him the respect he deserved as his knight. This was not about who was the knight and who was the squire. This was about something so much more important, and Hiccup didn’t budge or cower, didn’t avert his eyes and bowed but instead met his cousin’s gaze straight on. However, the expression on Eret’s face didn’t tell him anything. He was calm as he took in what he saw, the woman who’d been meant to become his wife in the arms of his squire, his cousin, his friend. Hiccup had expected – no, feared there would be disappointment, hurt, and anger. But if Eret felt any of that, then he didn’t show it.

Briefly, Hiccup’s eyes flickered to those standing behind Eret – Dagur, whose disbelieving curse had interrupted them and who now stared at them with his mouth open and his eyes wide, and both of Astrid’s servants – but they didn’t really matter. Right now, everything depended on how Eret would react. Deep inside, Hiccup hoped that what he’d believed before Astrid’s birthday was still true; that Eret wouldn’t mind, would maybe even support them in some way. But since then, many things had changed, especially Eret’s relationship to his little sister, and he had every right to be furious, to demand their separation. Hiccup and Astrid might be ready to stand up for their feelings for each other… but that didn’t change that things would become very difficult if a ducal heir would be their opponent.

For some endless seconds, their gazes were locked. Hiccup’s arms around Astrid trembled and he swallowed as one scenario after the other flickered through his mind; everything from having to fight his cousin right here and now to getting thrown into the royal dungeon for his boldness within a matter of minutes.

But then, Eret closed his eyes and, letting out a deep sigh, slowly shook his head. “You two,” he snorted into the silence that encircled them all, “are unbelievable, do you know that?”

At first, his words made no sense to Hiccup, and it took for Eret’s face to twitch into something of a soft grimace before their meaning sank in.

And even then, Dagur was the first to react. “You knew?!” he sputtered, his head whipping from Hiccup and Astrid to Eret and back again at an almost comical speed. “Bu-but I thought he… he said… in that tavern! And… all this time, you–”

“Oh, be quiet!” Astrid’s warder, Tuff, hissed as he threw up his arms in exasperation. “Or do you want to draw even more attention? It’s bad enough already as it is…”
“And you knew too?” Dagur went on, though in a quieter hissing voice now as he turned to look at the twins in disbelief. They both gave identical shrugs and nods, and Dagur groaned. “Great! So I was the only stupid one around here?”

“Isn’t that how it always is?” Tuff threw back, a mischievous grin on his face.

But their bantering got lost in the background as Ruff pushed past them. Her eyes were firmly locked onto Astrid’s back who still wouldn’t look at anyone. Hiccup wished he could shield her from all that seemed to trouble her, but he knew that, right now, he was powerless. All these people knew each other since childhood, with only him being the odd one out. Whatever happened now, he could only watch, could only try to support Astrid in case it came to some form of fight between her and those she considered her closest friends. All he could do was keep his arms tight around Astrid’s trembling shoulders, assuring her that he was here with her.

“I’m sorry, milady,” Ruff sighed. “We couldn’t keep them out any longer. And the doors to the garden stood still open, so…” she trailed off, shrugging.

Finally, Astrid stirred. She stayed as close to Hiccup as she could, but still turned her head until she could look at the others. “It’s all right, Ruff. I don’t blame you,” she whispered in a brittle voice.

Then her head turned a little more. It was clear that she was looking at Eret now, and Hiccup followed her eyes, still unsure of what to expect from his cousin. Was he angry? Disappointed? Hiccup wouldn’t even blame him… Up until about an hour ago, there had been no doubt as to who the Princess would choose as her husband, after all…

"Did you really know?" Astrid asked in a small voice, and Hiccup could feel how much she trembled. She'd been close to blacking out earlier, and all this had to be tough on her. Almost without thinking about it, his hands shifted, less holding her tight but more supporting her weight in case she needed it. His gaze stayed on Eret though, anxiously waiting for his reaction.

However, Eret's expression was unreadable as his eyes roamed from one to the other. It probably only took him a few seconds before he replied, but those seemed to stretch out forever. Then he closed his eyes and sighed. "No, I didn't know," he emphasised in a quiet voice. "I didn't want to. If I'd known about the looks you shared whenever you thought nobody was looking or how you'd make out whenever you got the chance, then I'd have been forced to lie to my best friend and future king whenever I looked him in the eye." He sighed again and shook his head. "But seriously, if it was your intention to keep what's between you a secret, then you did a horrible job!"

In Hiccup’s arms, Astrid was trembling even harder. Hiccup felt the same, little shockwaves running through his body as the meaning of what Eret just said sank in. They’d thought they’d been so careful…

“And-and you never said anything?”

Eret’s expression turned sad. “And end up being torn between my loyalty toward you, my best friend and little sister, or Daniel, also my friend and future liege?” He shook his head, even as his lips twitched into something of a smile. “I’d thought about it,” he eventually added in a low voice. “And I tried… You know… Ever since the… the incident with Harold, I had my suspicions. And even though I didn’t want to know the truth, I was still searching for some form of… of confirmation, I guess. But every time I tried to probe for a reaction, carefully, either of you warded off my approach with some excuse or other. I have to grant you that, every time I thought to be sure, you managed to throw me off just enough so that I had doubts again. Every now and then, I also thought about simply confronting you directly, to stop all the hiding. But you apparently wanted to keep this secret, and I… well, after you’ve kept our secret for over two years now, I
thought it was only fair to respect your secret as well.”

Astrid’s head dropped, though whether it was some kind of nod or simply in defeat, Hiccup couldn’t tell. A moment later, she looked up again though, and her hands on his chest tightened into fists, clinging to his tunic. “And what about these last two weeks?” she asked, her voice close to breaking.

Hiccup still felt unable to contribute anything to the conversation, but he had to admit that this was a valid question. If Eret had, well, not known but highly suspected there was more between him and Astrid… why hadn’t he said something then? Why had he let her favour him?

Eret’s expression turned pained. “After your birthday…” he whispered, “it was just the same. I saw that something was wrong with you, and understandably so. But I couldn’t be sure, didn’t know what was up, whether you had a fight or whether it was something else… Again, I tried to get a reaction, just anything that would help me understand. But you wouldn’t talk to me, just warded off my questions all over again. And when I tried to get some reaction from Hiccup, he even encouraged me to…” He shook his head. “I wanted to help you, but I just didn’t know how to do that, what exactly had happened between you two, whether you’d even want me to know, and…” He paused and threw his hands up in a helpless gesture, the pain on his face getting even more intense before he added, “I’m sorry!”

Hiccup listened to his cousin’s words with mixed feelings. On the one hand, he was still anxious and overwhelmed by the fact that so many people now seemed to know about them – and apparently had for quite a while. But on the other hand, he also felt a weird mix of relief and anger. Relief that they didn’t need to hide that desperately any more… but also the anger about how much pain both him and Astrid could have been spared if only Eret had said something!

However, it only took one look into Astrid’s eyes as she turned to him again for this anger to evaporate. In a way, they both had needed this pain to understand, to see clearly that living apart wasn’t an option, no matter the circumstances. And in the end, it was Eret who’d lost… Hiccup could see it in the reassurance that sparkled in Astrid’s eyes, felt it in how her hand pressed harder against his chest for a moment before she wriggled out of his embrace to make a step toward her brother. She’d made her choice and that meant that she would have to hurt Eret.

“I’m sorry, too,” she said in a weak voice. “But… but I can’t become your wife. A part of me wants to. I want to help you out of this awful situation you’re in. I want to help you both at once. But this, I can’t do.” She paused, taking a deep breath, then gasped, “I love him!”

Hiccup’s heart swelled at her words. She’d said it before already, to him, but this was different. This was what he’d dreamed of ever since he’d discovered that she was the Princess. It was openly declaring their feelings for each other, in front of witnesses and without holding back. And I love her too, more than anything, more than my own life, he added mentally, but didn’t dare to interrupt them.

When he looked up at Eret again, the sadness from before was almost entirely gone though. Instead, he smiled, his eyes warm as he held his arms open, inviting her into a hug.

“I know,” he murmured, barely audible, after his arms had closed around her. “And Swanja... I’m not mad. Do you remember the day we talked? Down at the lake? I meant every word I said, that day and on every other day. I’d be happy and proud to call you my wife and I do believe that a life on our stud farm would suit you. But I also want you to be happy. I told you that, if you have someone you want to choose for yourself, then do so. And…” he trailed off, shared a quick glance with Dagur, and then added, “And there’s something else I also meant when I said it. If you have a problem, you only need to say it, and we’ll help you, whatever it is.”
Eret’s words had touched Hiccup, had made him feel stupid and grateful at the same time. Of course, her brothers valued Astrid’s happiness, he shouldn’t have doubted them. It took a few heartbeats before the last words fully sank in though, and when they did, they left him stunned. It was one thing to accept her choice and, hopefully, to not out them publicly. Eloping, their last resort if they wouldn’t be able to find another way, would become impossible if everyone knew about them. But Eret – and Dagur, if Hiccup had interpreted that look correctly – appeared to be willing to do so much more, to even help and support them in finding a solution. Maybe – just maybe! – they actually had a chance…

In Eret’s arms, Astrid began to cry, quietly and with tremors shaking her body, but for once, Hiccup didn’t feel the urge to go and comfort her himself. He’d thought that seeing them like this again would hurt as it had before, but it didn’t. Not with the reassurance of the past half hour. It was only Eret comforting his adopted sister – and if he was honest with himself then it had never been anything else anyway. A soft smile tugged at Hiccup’s lips as he watched them now, and he couldn’t help the warmth spreading through him at the sight in front of him. Eret cooed and murmured into her hair and rubbed her arms and back until she calmed down again. A faint memory rose to Hiccup’s mind, about how she’d once told him how she had nobody she could fully trust, how she was alone when it came to her innermost problems, and how liberating it was for her to have found him. But she’d been wrong. She’d never been alone, had always been protected and cared for.

For a minute or three, they were all silent save for Astrid’s servants murmuring in the background. Dagur had stepped closer, but, to Hiccup’s surprise, he hadn’t said anything yet. However, his hand on Astrid’s shoulder offering comfort and support said enough. Everything Eret had said was true for him, too, apparently. And when Eret eventually lifted his head to look at Hiccup standing a few steps away, he understood that this support wasn’t just aimed at their sister. Eret’s eyes were soft, his smile warm and true as he nodded at him, including him as well.

It didn’t need any other form of communication then, Hiccup stepping closer just as Eret loosened and dropped his arms. Astrid threw one last grateful smile up at Eret before she returned to Hiccup. To never leave him again.

Hiccup couldn’t really help himself then; holding her close and feeling her hand directly land over his heart again felt good, but it wasn’t enough. His hands curled around her face, her neck, and he pulled her into a kiss instead. When she was surprised, she caught herself before he noticed, melting into him, humming and smiling against his lips. It wasn’t the most passionate kiss they’d ever shared, just soft lips sliding and tugging at each other. But that didn’t demean the sense of liberty that overcame Hiccup. As simple and easy and playful as this kiss was, it still held so much more meaning, and it was overwhelming. Because they didn’t need to hide anymore, at least not from everyone. Among this group of friends, they could stop pretending, stop lying.

“Okay, but what are we supposed to do now?”

At Tuff’s sudden question, Hiccup and Astrid parted, ruefully, and everybody turned to questioningly look at the lanky man. His eyes wandered from one to the other, before he shrugged. “What?” he asked, defensively. “We can’t stay out here forever. Sooner or later someone will notice Astrid isn’t resting in that room anymore. So what’s supposed to happen now? Are you just going to go back and announce that you changed your mind?”

“Duh, of course not!” Ruff exclaimed and even swatted the back of her brother’s head with her hand. “If that was possible, all this drama wouldn’t have been necessary. He’s not eligible, and you know that perfectly well.”
“Well, yes, I do,” Tuff grumbled and rubbed his head. “And you know I wasn’t serious. But my question still stands. What do we do now?”

The short exchange pulled Hiccup out of his emotional high and back into reality. Sure, it was good to know that they weren’t alone, that they had support, but what was that worth? Not even Eret and Dagur were able to elevate him to a rank that made openly courting Astrid possible. Their situation was just as hopeless as it had been before. Nothing had changed...

After a short pause, Eret sighed. “I’d say that, for now, we should continue as planned, at least act as if nothing had changed.” He raised a hand to ward off any protest before it could come up. “I’m not suggesting to go through with the betrothal and the wedding in case we can’t find a solution. Honestly, I… I know you two well enough to have an idea of what you’re planning. But maybe we can find another solution, something that won’t leave a mess in its wake. As for now though, just consider one thing: men have already been maimed and died in this competition. My rank keeps me safe from open assassination attempts, but if anyone, and you all know who I mean, even so much as suspects Astrid might prefer a certain squire, then I’m not sure we’d be able to keep Hiccup safe.”

Hiccup’s heart sank at those blunt words, and he could feel how a shudder ran through Astrid’s body. From the corner of his eye, he saw how she paled, her hand clenching in his tunic again. As much as they might prefer it otherwise, Eret was right; keeping up at least the appearance of her going to marry Eret would be the wisest thing to do for now. So Hiccup nodded when Eret’s eyes met his, agreeing if reluctantly.

“And you know I hate to admit this,” came Dagur’s voice, drawing everyone’s attention. “But I think Timothy was right.” They all looked at him. “Time’s a wasting. Get back inside posthaste or try explaining that,” he motioned with his chin towards Hiccup and Astrid holding each other, “to a patrolling guardsman. Or worse.”

Astrid’s shoulders slumped, but she nodded. “Yes, we should go back,” she whispered, hesitantly. “But… but can we meet again soon? To talk, to find a solution? Please?” Her hand in his tunic tightened even further, and Hiccup raised his hand to place it over hers, to rub her arm until she relaxed again. The look in her eyes as she gazed up at him told him enough about how she felt; anxious and unwilling to let go of him so soon. He couldn’t even blame her, but the others were right. Staying here wouldn’t get them anywhere.

“Maybe…during the hunt in a couple of days?” he suggested. “I don’t think we’ll get the chance to talk unobserved during the tournament tomorrow and the day after. But during the hunt, we can sneak away and meet somewhere else; the stables, for example, o-or somewhere else,” he added hastily when something like a small whimper escaped Astrid. He wanted to kick himself; of course, mentioning the stables wasn’t a good idea, not after what had happened this morning. But he couldn’t take his words back anymore and no matter how hard he tried, he couldn’t come up with something–

“Tonight,” Eret threw in, distracting Hiccup from his thoughts. “After the ball has ended. It will be late and everybody will be too tired to care much. Rachel, do you think you can smuggle her over into my rooms without anybody noticing? There, we could talk freely.”

Hiccup’s heart began to race and he could tell that Astrid faired little better. This was better than everything he could have hoped for. Maybe, they would already find a solution tonight.

Ruff snorted and rolled her eyes. “Given that she managed to sneak out of the castle and to the stables all on her own and pretty much every night without anyone noticing… Yeah, I’d say that won’t be a problem,” she said sarcastically.
Apparently, this was news to Eret as well – the looks on his and Dagur’s faces were priceless.

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As they approached the castle again, Astrid was reminded of the fact that she would have to let go of Hiccup’s hand eventually. She didn’t want to, wanted to stay close to him for the rest of her life, wanted to never be separated from him again.

But, of course, that wasn’t possible. Eret was right after all; it was bad enough that she’d put a target on his back by choosing him over her other suitors. It wouldn’t do anyone any good if Hiccup got the same attention now.

No, all she could do as they were back in the room she’d been resting in earlier was squeeze his hand and throw him one last smile before letting go and winding her arm through Eret’s instead. He must have felt her discomfort though, because as they walked back to the busy ballroom, Hiccup, Dagur, and the others a few steps behind them, he leaned toward her and whispered, “Don’t worry, Swanja. I promise we’ll find a way out of this.”

Astrid had no idea how he wanted to pull that off, but she believed him at least so far that he would do his best to help. Maybe he’d even cover for them in case of their last resort. And even though they still had no solution, she felt lighter now. So much had changed over this past hour. She was sure of Hiccup’s and her own feelings again, was sure of their future. And the fact that she didn’t need to hide anything from Eret anymore, that he knew and was even willing to support them, to play his part to keep her soulmate safe... She would never be able to express just how relieved and gratefully she was to him. Lying to him over all this time felt so trite and stupid now, and she just hoped that there would be a way to somehow make it up to him one day.

The rest of the ball passed surprisingly fast and ended with Astrid in a much better mood than she’d ever thought she’d be. Repeating her official dance with Eret was light and fun, just like dancing with him used to be before all this madness had started. They were back to being best friends, close as siblings, and she hadn’t known how much she’d missed this easiness until she rediscovered it now.

She found herself beaming up at him as they whirled through the room, laughing and enjoying herself. Every now and then, her eyes flickered to where Hiccup stood, and the spark in his eyes told her all she needed to know. Earlier, he’d said that watching her with Eret had pained him, but it was clear that that wasn’t the case anymore. Everything was different now. Better.

“That’s it, the Swanja I want to see. I missed her,” Eret whispered once the music died down, and he leaned in to place a soft kiss on her forehead that made her giggle.

A sigh went through the watching crowd at the tender gesture even though they thoroughly drew the wrong assumptions from it. But Astrid happily let them believe what they wanted to believe. It didn’t matter as long as everyone who did matter knew the truth. She smiled up at him again, trying to express all her gratitude and love for her friend, before they parted and the ball continued as it had before.

She danced with Dagur next, and he too reassured her that they would support her and how happy he was to see her smile again. He also managed to make her – and part of the watching crowd she guessed – laugh when he made a show of not letting go of her again. Gods, it was so liberating to fool around like this again, to have her brothers back and to have fun without caring what other people might think of them.

She danced with many other men as it was the custom, men whose names she barely remembered.
But where on the days before she’d dreaded this idea, it now barely bothered her. Some of them were nervous and excited, some stiff in their attempt to make an impression on her. She wondered whether these men really still held some hope now, or whether it was their fathers pushing them. Either way, she felt pity for them where before she’d hated every single one of them. Most of these boys – because some of them were barely old enough to be called more than that – probably had gotten thrown into this just as unwillingly as she had and she made an attempt to turn their dances into something enjoyable. She was just too happy to let anyone else mope around.

Eventually, she danced with Snot, and while the thought had made her uncomfortable at first, she soon realised that there seemed to be no reason for that anymore.

“I congratulate you for the choice you made,” he murmured into her ear at a quieter part of the music. “I think it’s a good one, no matter how much my old man might object.”

His words surprised her, and she didn’t know what to reply except a simple “Thanks.” These past weeks of incessant flirting on his part had alienated him to her, and Astrid wasn’t ready to forgive and forget it yet. But even though she still felt tense in his arms, certainly not as comfortable as in Dagur’s or even with all those other strangers, she had to admit to herself that dancing with him now at least felt a little more like it used to.

At some point though, she even was made to dance with Thuggory, and no matter how good she felt, this did make her uncomfortable. She didn’t want his hands on her waist, didn’t want to be this close to him, ever. But she would endure it, there was no other way anyway. And there was even some fun in it for her too, if only in knowing that all his vague threats were in vain.

“You’re going to regret choosing that horse-crazy idiot,” he sneered, his breath on her skin making her shudder. “You’ll see.”

But Astrid wasn’t feeling like giving in or even just ignoring him today. “I doubt that,” she replied with a sweet smile. “On the contrary, I’m certain that the choice I made today was the best of my life.” He couldn’t know that she wasn’t talking about Eret but instead about going after Hiccup, but that only made her rejoice even more. Thuggory was nothing but a toothless dog, barking and annoying, but unable to actually do anything.

At her words, his eyes contracted into slits, his sneer turning even more menacing. “We’ll see, Princess. We’ll see.”

But not even that was enough to darken Astrid mood tonight.

Chapter End Notes

So, that was that...

I can't say that I'm happy with how this chapter turned out. Not that I don't like this scene, but it feels incomplete without the one that's now going to come in the next chapter. Like, the rest of the ball had been meant to be a bridge between the two main scenes... Writer's block is so annoying!

Anyway, I hope some people are calmer and more relaxed now, nothing bad will
happen right away. ;)

Chapter Notes

Hey everybody. Once again sorry that there was no update last week. As announced on Tumblr, neither I nor athingofvikings had the time and energy to get it done in time. By now, I’m relatively satisfied though, so I hope this chapter will make up for the waiting. Also, thank you all for being this understanding. You're great! :D

But at this point, I’d like to make an announcement. It's quite possible that in future, more chapters might come in later as well. The reason is that I'm pregnant. :) 7 months in now. The baby, a little girl, it due in December. So yeah, I have a lot of other things on my mind besides writing these days, and focusing on one thing gets harder and harder. ^^"

As mentioned before, this entire part was meant to be in the previous chapter... In the end, it turned out so long that I probably would have split it anyway, so... it's okay as it is?

And I want to make two things clear...Many people are speculating about Daniel, when he'll return, and how he'll be able to help our couple. A few questions in this regard will finally get answered in his chapter ;)
And I've mentioned this before a few times, but since it came up THREE TIMES in the reviews and comments to this chapter alone...

YES, TOOTHLESS AND A FEW OTHER DRAGONS WILL EVENTUALLY PLAY A ROLE HERE, TOO.

Maybe everyone reads this now... but I won't bet on it.

This chapter now has the title I'd planned for the previous already. It's from ‘I Don't Want to Miss a Thing’ by Aerosmith, and I think it fits really well here. ;)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Even though the ball ended up being much more enjoyable after her trip out to the gardens, Astrid was still grateful when it finally ended with the last movement from the band and her father’s formal speech. No, not just grateful. She was excited. She was practically trembling with anticipation for the planned meeting in Eret’s rooms, and would have liked nothing more than to go there directly after the party.

But Ruff’s words of caution, of not starting those kinds of rumours made her see reason. It was expected that women would wait until their wedding night, and while the social expectations were different in different regions – from what she’d heard, over in eastern regions, long betrothals and sex during the betrothal were not unheard of – here in the capital, it was ironclad. Women who were outside of the Temple waited. Period. Rumours of her being seen entering Eret’s chambers would be the height of scandal, especially given the still-ongoing competition over her hand. However, if that had been the only reason, she wouldn’t have cared much. No, what was even more important: if people believed that she’d already slept with Eret, then gaining acceptance for
her actual choice later on would be even harder.

So, reluctantly, she accepted the necessity of having to return to her own rooms first, in order to change out of her extravagant and recognizable ball gown and into one of Ruff’s simple maidservant outfits in nothing else. But even with that disguise, she had to wait until the castle had calmed down for the night, just like before when she’d sneaked out to meet Hiccup at the stables. Once it was time though, there was nothing that could stop her. She’d expected to go alone, that Ruff and Tuff, who also had a long day, would be tired. But they insisted on coming along regardless.

“We’re in on this now, whether you want it or not,” Ruff had commented dryly, her brother simply nodding at her side.

Astrid wasn’t sure whether three people on an errand might be a little too obvious, despite the twins’ assurances that it would actually be more effective. But thankfully they didn’t have far to go and also didn’t encounter anyone in the dark corridors, and once they’d reached Eret’s rooms, she found that she couldn’t care less about such thoughts. The moment she stepped inside, out of view of whoever might be walking the corridors, and spotted Hiccup standing at the far end, awkwardly shifting his weight off his left leg and biting his lower lip, everything else around her seemed to fade out of existence.

With a soft gasp, she flew through the room and into his arms, her lips on his before anyone could react in any way. Some part of her had feared that everything that had happened out in the gardens had been nothing but a dream, just wishful thinking. But at that moment, she fully realised that all of that – talking to Hiccup, reconnecting with him, and the whole conversation with Eret and the others – had really happened. She was back in Hiccup’s arms, where she belonged, and nothing would ever be able to separate them again.

It took him less than a second to catch up to her mood, his hands on her back hurling her closer, their kiss turning deeper and more heated. This was different from the sweet reconnecting out in the gardens, not hesitant or careful but instead filled with all the longing of the past two weeks. It was wonderful, everything she’d missed and longed for: his hands on her waist and back, his lips and tongue moving with her own, the stubble on his jaw scraping pleasantly over her skin. She could feel his warmth seeping into her body, heard his low gasps and moans against her mouth, could smell his achingly familiar scent of leather and sunshine, could finally taste him again. The force of their kiss even made him stumble a step or two backwards before he caught himself – and her – again, gripping even harder, and Astrid wanted nothing more than to stay in this moment forever.

But, of course, time wouldn’t stand still for them.

“Oh dear, get a room, you two,” Dagur commented from behind her, reminding Astrid of their audience.

Embarrassed and also a little breathless, she pulled back from Hiccup after all – reassured by the expression of joy and love she spotted in his eyes – and turned to look at their friends again.

“Be careful with what you wish for,” Tuff groaned at that moment, letting his head drop back in one of his theatrical gestures. “Giving them a private room might result in more noise than even you would want to hear.”

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Despite the joy and happiness buzzing through Hiccup’s body after her kiss, he involuntarily
tensed at Tuff’s words. How much did Astrid’s warder know? Spotting the fierce blush on her cheeks, he figured that the man at least had to know **something**, and he threw an apprehensive look at how Eret and Dagur would react to this information. Knowing about their feelings was one thing, but learning that Hiccup apparently knew **very** well how the Princess – their little sister – looked beneath her expensive robes was something else entirely.

But before either of them got the chance to say anything, Astrid beat them to it. “I don’t think that’s why we’re here, is it?” she asked, quickly and in a way that made her intentions to change the topic more than clear. However, none of the others objected, allowing Hiccup to relax again. This was **really** not the moment he wanted to discuss the extent of their intimacy – not that he felt like **ever** discussing it with anyone present!

Waiting for her here in Eret’s rooms for the past hour had been awkward enough already. There was a certain tension, especially between him and Eret, and Hiccup knew that, at some point, they would have to talk about it. But with Dagur around as well, there hadn’t been time so far, so he pushed all those mixed feelings aside. Now was not the time to dwell on them.

“You’re right. **That** is not why we’re here,” Eret agreed after a short tense pause.

“Related, though,” Dagur commented dryly.

Eret scoffed and he shook his head as if to shake off an unpleasant thought, then ran a hand through his hair before he pulled over a chair to sit down.

Hiccup could hardly blame him. After the long night of dancing and the ride earlier in the day, his legs ached as well; the left one especially was cramping now that the tension of waiting for Astrid had ebbed off. He looked around, but the only seating accommodations were the other chairs, which quickly were occupied by Dagur and Astrid’s servants, and the couch that usually served as his bed these days. He hesitated, but with Astrid still refusing to let go of him – and frankly him feeling the same reluctance – a chair wouldn’t have suited them anyway. So he guided her the few steps to the side to sit down there, not caring what the others might think.

Eret threw them a thoughtful glance when Hiccup looked up again but didn’t comment. Instead, he went straight to the point, taking Astrid’s heavy-handed suggestion without rancour. “All right, let’s see what we have,” he began, unusually sober compared to his usual rather relaxed nature and the joking atmosphere of only a few minutes ago. “First, I’d say we need to all get onto the same page. I mean, the main problem is obvious; Astrid has to pick a husband, but Hiccup isn’t eligible. We could make some excuses to postpone the betrothal, by faking an injury or an illness, for example. But that wouldn’t **solve** the problem. What we **need** is a way for Hiccup to rise in rank sufficient to be eligible. So what **was** the plan you had in mind before Astrid’s birthday – assuming you had one?”

Astrid nodded enthusiastically, apparently eager to get started. But although Hiccup felt the same energy, at least to some degree, he wasn’t fooling himself. For sure, maybe Eret and Dagur would have some brilliant solution that had evaded him – but he doubted it. Not because he didn’t think them intelligent, but after he’d already spent so many nights desperately searching for an answer, it seemed unlikely that they’d spring on it. What was left that he might not have thought about already?

“To be honest, I wasn’t really thinking about this at all at first,” Astrid admitted sheepishly. “All I knew was that there **had** to be a way and that Hiccup had a plan.” She shrugged, her hand squeezing his as everyone’s attention turned toward him.

Slowly, he nodded. “Yeah, I had a plan… or something in that direction, at least.” His eyes focused
on Eret. “I planned to... well, to simply do my best as your squire,” he said, self-consciously. “I wanted to make a good impression, on you but mostly on Daniel. I... I hoped I could earn his respect and maybe get him to like me, enough so that when I would ask for land and title when Astrid came of age, he’d support me.” He gave a helpless shrug. “That sounds so stupid now, but I thought it could work. It had to…”

The last words, he only added in a low and sad whisper so only Astrid would be able to hear him. His eyes met hers, and he couldn’t keep the pain out of them, the renewed sense that he’d failed her. Yes, he’d been so sure… But even with the Goddess’s assurance, he still wasn’t able to feel the same again, not after what had happened. There still was this tiny sting of doubt, of the fear that he might not be able to prove himself worthy after all.

“I see,” Eret sighed. “You’re right, it sounds pretty foolhardy. But… well, given how quickly you and Daniel already became friends by now, it could have worked, I think – with enough time.”

Hiccup nodded, swallowing. “Which is the problem. We don’t have that time anymore,” he muttered, his voice weak and breaking. Only dimly he was aware of Astrid reaching up to caress his face, even her soothing touch barely enough to pull him out of his thoughts. He’d been over this so many times during the past weeks, and talking about it now didn’t feel like it would help at all. On the contrary, it just made everything more real.

“Well, we could still approach Daniel with this proposition together, right?” Dagur now threw in, looking from one to the other until his eye stayed on Eret. “As you said, Daniel certainly likes him. That in addition to Astrid’s feelings and our support might be enough, don’t you think?”

“No!” Astrid gasped. She became rigid in his embrace, her face suddenly pale even in the dim light of the lanterns. “No, you can’t tell him! He-he would get Hiccup hanged! Just like Harold and that other– No, please, he can’t know! Please!”

Hiccup tried to soothe her as she started to tremble violently, but knew that there was little he could do right now. This had been her fear right from the beginning, and even though he hoped that it wouldn’t come to that, he also couldn’t be sure. He and Daniel might have become something like friends, but that didn’t mean he knew how the Prince would react to such a violation of his own law.

However, Eret seemed to be less concerned about that. “Is that why you never said anything? Because of Daniel and his law?” he asked, grimacing.

Whimpering softly, she nodded. “You’ve seen how hard he’d become, how mercilessly he executed Harold. Not… not that he didn’t deserve it, but… what if he does the same to Hiccup?” Her hand around his tightened, nearly crushing it. “I won’t take that risk. We can’t tell him, not until it’s all settled.”

Slowly, Eret shook his head at her. “Oh, Swanja,” he sighed. “I really wish you would have said something sooner. You got it all wrong. This law… it’s about people who touch you without your consent, against your will. Harold tried to rape you, for Odin’s sake; of course, Daniel showed him no mercy. But he’d only need to take one look at you two to see that this is what you want. Believe me, he wouldn’t punish Hiccup for making you as happy as you’ve been at the ball earlier. On the contrary, Dagur is probably right. If he knew, he might very well support you.”

Next to Hiccup, Astrid seemed to deflate, and he pulled her even closer until she leaned against him again, her face hidden against his chest. He’d seen the sheet panic in Astrid’s eyes at the idea of her brother catching them. Maybe Eret was right and Daniel wouldn’t even mind, but that didn’t mean that her fear hadn’t been real. And he could only imagine how it looked inside her head now.
But whether Daniel would punish him for their love or not, Hiccup felt a certain hollowness of his own at Eret’s words. In a low voice, he murmured, “I wouldn’t count on him supporting us either way. He made it pretty clear who he wants her to marry.” His eyes flickered to Eret, who flinched at his words but didn’t contradict him. “From what I learned about him, he doesn’t believe in love at all, even called it a fickle thing when we talked once.” His head turned toward her on its own volition, leaning a little closer. He wanted to hold her forever, to never let her go. But with every minute they talked, his hopes sank.

“And if Daniel thought Hiccup to be a suitable candidate, wouldn’t he have arranged for him to at least be eligible for this stupid marriage contest?” she added bitterly, apparently having caught herself again, and shook her head. “No, I won’t count on his help.”

Eret grimaced, and even though it looked as if he wanted to object, he didn’t. “I wish I could contradict you there,” he muttered. “I mean, one thing’s for sure, he does care for your happiness, and greatly so. But…” He let out a heavy sigh. “But you’re right, counting on that to be enough might be a mistake. Because Hiccup’s right, he made his preference regarding your choice clear, at least retrospectively. And while he certainly wouldn’t approve of a strictly political marriage with, say, Thuggory, he still has to keep the safety of the Kingdom in mind as well. As future King, he needs you to forge a beneficial alliance through your marriage.” He gave a small, apologetic shrug. “That being said, we can at least keep this option in mind; it would have to be some kind of last option anyway. Daniel isn’t due to return until a few days before the official betrothal, and since it’s apparently impossible to contact him – or he actively refuses to answer; I’ve sent him three letters by now – we can’t approach him with this earlier anyway.”

Astrid tensed. “I don’t think relying on his support as some last option is a good idea,” she murmured, and even without having to look at her, Hiccup knew what she was thinking. And apparently, he wasn’t the only one.

“I know where this is going, Swanja,” Eret said, shaking his head at her. “But I really hope there’ll be another solution.”

His and Astrid’s eyes met, the sudden tension between them tangible to everyone around. Hiccup swallowed, waiting. A major part of him wanted to support Astrid in this, to simply run away, right now, and not care for any consequences. But he just couldn’t do that.

“Eh, what’s he talkin’ about?” Tuff asked as the silence stretched on.

His sister let her head drop back with a groan. “Isn’t that obvious? They want to elope. Might be the only realistic option anyway.”

From the corner of his eye, Hiccup saw how both Tuff’s and Dagur’s heads snapped around to stare at them. But he didn’t dare to turn his gaze away from Eret, anxiously awaiting his reaction.

However, it was Astrid who spoke first. “I won’t take any chances,” she said, her voice low but urgent. “I won’t wait and hope until it’s too late! The past two weeks gave me a taste of the life awaiting me if I do, and–” she turned in his embrace until their eyes met– “and I won’t lose you again!”

Hiccup’s throat tightened at the raw emotions in her eyes. Desperation. Determination. Love. He pulled her closer until his forehead rested against hers, holding her tight “You won’t,” he whispered, and added mentally, Not if I can help it.

With a soft sigh, Astrid pressed herself closer to him. It helped to reassure and calm him, at least a little bit. There was a way, no matter how hopeless things seemed right now. There had to be…
“I know that it’s pointless to try and talk you out of this plan,” Eret eventually said in a quiet voice. “But please, can you at least consider other options, too? If you really pull this idea through… I don’t even want to imagine the chaos that would follow.”

There was a spark of resistance in Astrid’s eyes as she turned her head back toward the others, toward Eret, and Hiccup braced himself for an intense argument. Because he knew what Eret meant – but he also knew that, if running away with her really turned out to be the only option, then he would not hesitate to follow through with it.

“Just think it through, Swanja,” Eret implored when she didn’t say anything, painting the mental picture despite his former words. “If you two were simply gone one morning, it won’t matter who knew or suspected what you’re feeling for each other or what your reasons were. It will be seen as an abduction. There would be a hefty bounty on Hiccup’s head and a reward waiting for whoever brings you back – you alive, and him dead. I assume you think you can hide until nobody is looking for you anymore, but I promise you, that won’t be easy. And for how long are you planning to hide anyway? A year? Five? Twenty? And even if you manage to not be found… have you thought about what would happen here? Even if Dagur and I can convince our fathers that he didn’t kidnap you against your will, it would be impossible to turn that into a public announcement. You’re the Princess! You’re in the focus of the public eye; people won’t simply forget that you existed. And there are enough influential people out there who’d love to use this to tear apart the alliance the Kingdom is built on. I… I don’t even know how people would react. Hiccup’s my squire, so maybe some would blame House Jag’r for working against the Kingdom and try to drive a wedge between us. Or maybe someone would remember that Hiccup is from the Tribes and blame them. Can you imagine the chaos, no matter whether people would just openly protest, for example against the palace guard being made up by tribesmen, or would even demand your father reigns them in for good? It’s all—”

“Don’t you think I know all that?” Astrid interrupted him all of a sudden. She was shaking all over now, her fingers digging into Hiccup’s arm almost painfully. “Because I do! I’ve known for all my life that I have responsibilities. And it’s because of the people that I haven’t run away from it all long ago. But…” She threw a quick glance up at Hiccup before resting her head against his chest, hiding from everyone. “I don’t want to cause this kind of trouble. But I just can’t live without Hiccup.”

Hiccup’s arms around her tightened further as he tried to silently reassure her. However, a small part of him was actually glad that Eret had brought up all these problems that could come up if they ran away. Yes, he’d agreed to this option as a last resort, but he really hoped they would somehow find another way.

With a heavy sigh, Eret drew their attention again. “I know,” he said in a surprisingly soft voice. “I’ve watched you these last two weeks, Swanja, and believe me, I wouldn’t want to toss you back into that state. But… just promise me that you won’t simply be gone one day. Promise me that you’ll wait, that you’ll let us look for another solution in earnest. And even if we can’t find one, there still might be ways to… I don’t know, to prepare your disappearance. Just don’t do something stupid, okay?”

After a short but tense moment, she nodded. “I won’t...”

A small wave of relief wash through Hiccup, something he hadn’t known he really needed until that moment. Eret’s concerns were real. And yes, he’d do everything to be with her. But he also knew that he would hate it if their love came at the expense of others, and he was sure that Astrid felt the same. Or would feel once things settled down.
Eret didn’t repeat his question to him, just threw him an inquiring look and was satisfied when Hiccup gave him a firm nod in return.

“Okay,” he then sighed, and settled a little more comfortably in his chair. “Now that that’s settled, let’s see what we have. What is it you’ve thought about so far, Hiccup? It’s probably easiest to start there.”

Next to him, Astrid relaxed noticeably, presumably now that she knew Eret wouldn’t try to separate them after all. Her tight grip on his arm loosened and her body seemed to sag as she snuggled against him more comfortably. Hiccup turned his head to place a kiss onto her hair, deeply inhaling her wonderful mayweed scent, and drew strength from her closeness before he answered.

“I’ll try, but I doubt it’ll be of any help,” he said, his voice trembling. “We’ve already covered that my original plan to gain a title through Daniel’s favour won’t work. Maybe we can hope on his support once he’s back, but that’s a flimsy hope at best. That would be awfully close to the day Astrid has to choose for real, and even the Prince himself can’t create a title out of nowhere. And as for other options… I can’t see any. Uncle Eret already made it clear that, even though he might want to, he won’t be able to provide me with a title, family or not. He has enough vassals who already requested compensation for their lost lands, worthy men who’ve earned their place. And the only land he actually had to distribute was the farm in Sunhill which is part of Ester’s dowry. Aiming for that would be both pointless as she’s betrothed already and would kinda defeat the purpose anyway.” He laughed, shakily. “I never placed a request to the other Grand Dukes, but their situation is hardly different, and they have even less reason to help me anyway – despite the blood relation to House Jorgenson. And the King…” He gave a helpless shrug. “Likewise. He has enough requests for titles as it is. There simply is no land left for titleless noblemen like me. That’s the whole problem, isn’t it? The reason why the Kingdom is at the brink of a civil war. There’s no point in joining that struggle, no hope of success at all. Even if I was willing to enter those fights and to further tear at the Kingdom’s foundation, I’d be going in there naked, with no manpower, no money, no allies.”

“And what are we?” Dagur threw in, a little offended, but Hiccup didn’t even need to reply as Eret beat him to it.

“We wouldn’t be of much use,” he grunted. “Not yet. We might count as powerful allies in case we can bring our fathers on our side. But even then we can’t enter the title disputes, not without making it all so much worse.”

“Worse how?” Ruff asked, sounding curious.

Eret scoffed and affected a high, simpering, overcultured voice. “‘But sire, why won’t you come to my aid in defence of my claim on that title? You helped that titleless squire, after all!’” He twisted his torso as if turning to look at the man who had been ‘speaking’ and said in a much more gruff tone, “‘That was a special situation. I’m sorry, but I can’t be of any help.’”

Then Dagur jumped in, with an imitation of the high overcultured voice. “‘Well, fine then, sire. But I and my kin will remember this in the future!’” He coughed to clear his throat as Eret motioned towards him with a there you go gesture.

“All we’d be able to do is support him with trade contracts and the like, but not with manpower. We can’t help him gain a title, only support him once he has one.”

“So what about the North then?” Tuff asked from where he lounged in his chair, his legs dangling off one side. “I mean, he is the heir to one of the most powerful Houses there, aren’t you? Even
with the struggles about who’s to become the new High Chief and all, that has to count for something, right?”

Hiccup hadn’t known how well Astrid’s servants were informed about his situation and identity, but he decided to not focus on that point. It didn’t really matter now anyway. Instead, he concentrated on facts, on staying calm enough to explain, and was incredibly grateful for Astrid’s supportive hand reaching for his own. He would have to rely on her strength some more tonight.

“There’s nothing there to gain either,” he replied in a strained voice, aware of how Eret and Dagur leaned a little closer. He couldn’t even blame them; he hadn’t really told them anything about what had happened. “I’m an outcast from the Tribes. Even if I don’t return to the islands and tried my luck with one of the dukes on the mainland, at the coast or even further south somewhere amidst Wodensleya... they wouldn’t dare to support me. Not with the threat of the Tribes’ retribution looming over their heads.”

“‘Their retribution? What would they do, toss you over the side of one of their ships and make you swim?’ Tuff suggested, breezily dismissing his words with a languid wave of his arm. Hiccup scowled at him. “Yeah, maybe... about thirty miles from shore in a storm. But more likely is something like ‘midnight raids with flaming torches’ and then let’s work our way up from there.”

Tuff snorted. “I’m always up for a bit of drama, but that certainly is a bit too dramatic, don’t you think? I mean–”

“No, it isn’t,” Hiccup cut him off directly. He remembered what had happened, even though he wished he didn’t. But the bewildered looks everyone threw him at his strong reaction made it clear that he would have to relive it all again now. “It happened about a season after... after my family died,” he said through clenched teeth, eyes pressed shut. “Some idiot popped up at Grunberg, one of the biggest settlements on the coast, and claimed that he was me. The ‘supposedly dead ducal heir of the Tribes’ he said, and tried to gain support for a bid for the ducal seat.” Hiccup remembered having heard that, still recovering with the crude bandage around his leg; he hadn’t known whether to laugh or to weep. “He lasted about two months. Now the opportunist’s head is on a spear on Berk.” He gave Tuff a glare that made the man shrink down in his seat. Yeah, one does not mess with the Tribes...

“We’ve heard about that,” Dagur muttered into the silence that followed. “It was then when we realised that you had to be dead for real, even though only the bodies of your father and brother could be identified without a doubt.” He threw a worried look at Eret, who nodded.

“Yeah, that was a dark day. Although... I thought the Tribes reacted that strongly because someone dared to use the name Haddock to gain power, as some form of paying tribute to their former High Chief. But I guess that wasn’t all that was about then?”

With a pained grimace, Hiccup shook his head. “The Elders made it clear that, if I ever showed up again and tried to regain power in their domain without their consent, they would not show mercy again. Not toward me and not to whoever would be with me or supported me.” Swallowing, he glanced at Astrid next to him. “So trust me when I say that House Haddock is worth nothing, not anymore, and there’s no realistic way to change that.” He hoped this would be enough to let this particular topic drop, but he should have known better.

“No realistic way?” Eret asked, his voice quiet but serious. Apparently, he still hadn’t given up on this idea.
With a deep sigh, Hiccup closed his eyes. “If I could prove that I had nothing to do with my family’s death – mainly my father’s – then they might be willing to lend an ear to my claim; probably not to become High Chief and Grand Duke, but maybe for some form of compensation. But patricide is one of the severest crimes among the Tribes, and even a sneaking suspicion was enough for them to distrust me. And I can’t even demand a fair trial. I’m not young enough to be under their protection as a minor, but since I failed my initiation I’m not a tribesman either, not legally. Under normal circumstances, I would’ve been allowed to try again or prove my worth in another way, but with the attack happening so soon afterwards…”

He trailed off, consumed by the pictures rising in his mind. The burned remains of his home. The flames and the heat. The pain and the loss. The accusations. With Astrid in his arms and the prospect of their shared future – no matter how insecure it was at this point – the memories had lost some of their bite, but they still stung. If only things had gone differently that day…

“I can see the dilemma,” Eret, who was at least a little familiar with the way of the Tribes, muttered. “That’s why you tried so desperately to find information about the attack.”

Hiccup nodded. “But it’s been futile. I literally found nothing, nothing in over two years. Whoever was behind it was incredibly careful. They left no trail at all, no witnesses. It almost looks like it might have been an accident after all – except that that makes even less sense.”

“So the North is not an option,” Dagur summed it up, closing this topic to Hiccup’s utmost relief.

Eret nodded in agreement. “Yeah. I’d thought that might be the easiest solution, but apparently, it’s not. Now I get why you thought there wouldn’t be a way. But I’m sure there is one, somehow. Let’s see…”

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For nearly two hours, they threw ideas and suggestions around, but without getting anywhere. It was just as Hiccup had feared: none of their friends was able to think of something he hadn’t thought about already.

However, it was actually good to get it all off his chest, after all, to talk it through without having to hold back. And even though he felt incredibly tired and drained, he also felt lighter. Having support, no matter how little they might be able to actually help, was good.

Astrid had been rather quiet throughout the entire discussion, but that wasn’t really surprising. On more than one occasion, she’d expressed her annoyance about how little she actually knew about politics and the Kingdom in general, so there probably wasn’t much she was able to contribute. Every now and then, she threw in a question, asking for clarification or making a random suggestion, but over time, even those became less frequent.

It took him a while before he noticed why, though. At some point, she had fallen asleep. Hiccup only noticed when he tried to shift into another position and her body, draped halfway across him at that point, had simply followed the motion like dead weight and her only reaction had been a cute little grunt before she drifted back into slumber.

It was something that made him smile despite the rather fruitless discussion, something so light and simple as falling asleep in each other’s arms. Oh, how much he’d missed this! Only last night, he’d lain on this very couch and had despaired over how much he missed her, how he would do everything to get her back, to hold her again. And now, the impossible had happened; she was here, warm and cosy against his side, her head resting on his shoulder. It was a wonderful moment, one he hoped to experience again. Often.
But for now, he knew that he had to end it. Reluctantly, he cleared his throat to draw the others’ attention, then nodded toward her sleeping form. From one second to the other, the room fell silent, soft smiles on everyone’s face.

“I guess that’s our cue then,” Dagur murmured, a crooked smile on his lips as he gazed at his little sister. “Odin knows it’s been a horribly long day anyway.”

Yawning in agreement, everyone rose from their seats. But when Hiccup made attempts to wake Astrid, as carefully as possible, her maidservant stopped him by placing a slim hand on his free shoulder.

“Don’t,” she whispered. “Let her sleep. I haven’t seen her this peaceful in a while and I think she needs this. Needs you,” she added with something between a smile and a smirk. “The night isn’t long enough for us to get enough sleep as it is, so I’d rather she gets at least some restful sleep. I’ll be back before dawn to get her back into her rooms, your usual time.” Her words were followed by a mischievous wink, one that made clear she was talking about when Astrid had sneaked back to the castle after their shared nights. It again made him wonder just how much the twins knew, but this certainly wasn’t the time to ask.

And it didn’t really matter anyway.

With a nod and a grateful smile, Hiccup shifted until both he and Astrid lay on their sides, her head resting on his arm and his free hand lightly wrapped around her back. The couch certainly wasn’t as comfortable as a real bed and even in his sleeping stall in the stables they’d had more space, but it was still luxurious and wide enough to easily hold them now. It wasn’t as if he wanted to leave much space between him and her anyway.

Behind him, he could hear Eret and the others move and whisper, probably putting the chairs back into their places and discussing how and when to meet again. But Hiccup didn’t pay them any attention. With his body shielding Astrid from the noise and the faint light, he simply watched her sleep and got entirely lost in her features. Ruff was right; she looked incredibly peaceful, relaxed with a small smile on her lips. Hiccup couldn’t help but smile as well as he fished for the blanket folded somewhere above their heads and then covered them both, encasing them in their own little bubble.

Before he could truly settle for something like sleep though, someone clearing their throat behind him drew his attention again. Carefully so as to not wake her, he turned his head and found Eret standing a few steps away. With a somewhat tense expression, he waved him over, indicating him to follow into the other room.

Hiccup suppressed a sigh but worked his way out their little nest nonetheless. There were things he and Eret had to talk about, things that were nobody else’s business. And yes, it was better to clear those right away instead of waiting any longer, but that didn’t change how much Hiccup dreaded this conversation. In the doorway, he turned to throw another look at Astrid though, warmth spreading from his heart through his chest. She was worth everything.

Eret was already waiting for him, leaning against the desk and with his arms crossed in front of him. As expected, the room was otherwise empty, everyone else having left by now. Hiccup made a step inside, then closed the door behind him, unsure whether to wait for Eret to start or do so himself. He didn’t get any time to ponder though.

“I’m sorry,” Eret began, direct and straightforward.

It made Hiccup’s mouth clamp shut as he fought to keep the beast that were his feelings for his
cousin contained. There was just too much right now, everything jumbled together.

“I know that I should have said something sooner. I knew that something was up with you two.”

“You tried,” Hiccup muttered without knowing how to really feel. The truth was that learning about how Eret had known about their feelings – or however else he called it – and hadn’t done or said anything to help them had left marks in their friendship, and he couldn’t say yet of what kind they were.

But Eret just shook his head. “I didn’t try hard enough. I knew how miserable she was and that you were hardly any better off. I feel horrible and keep asking myself how much pain I could have spared you if only I’d made you talk to me. It’s all just—”

“It’s okay,” Hiccup interrupted him, even as he had to avert his gaze. He knew the truth of the matter, knew that Eret wasn’t to blame, not really. But a part of him wanted to blame him, for everything. And it was this part of himself he had to fight now. “We’re not your responsibility. It was me who gave up too soon, who pushed her away and hurt her. And… well, as painful as these two weeks were… I think we needed them. I needed to feel the weight of that loss, if only to know what I’m fighting for. You heard what she said, and the same is true for me, too. I can’t live without her. I know that now…”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Eret muttered. “Even though I don’t really understand it.”

Chuckling, Hiccup lifted his head to give his cousin a strained smile. “Let’s just say: It’s complicated!”

Eret snorted. “Isn’t it always complicated?”

Hiccup’s lips twitched, but he didn’t comment further on this topic. He didn’t feel like explaining the whole soulmate bond again, didn’t want it to be played down just like Cami had only yesterday. And there were enough others, after all, enough other beasts to battle. So instead, he gave a heavy sigh and said, “I’m sorry too, by the way.”

“For what?” Eret seemed truly puzzled now.

Hiccup shrugged, inwardly steeling himself. “For stealing your bride. I know how many hopes you’ve put on your future with her.”

“Ah, that.” Eret’s smile turned sad. “Well, she never really was my bride to begin with, was she?” Chuckling, he shook his head. “This whole betrothal… I have to admit that, yes, I’ve been looking forward to this relatively easy solution for my problem. But I never should have let her go that far. She wasn’t happy with this arrangement, and I knew that it was because she wanted you. I thought that… that she surely knew what she was doing, that you’d broken up, maybe that it’s just been some silly infatuation anyway. I’d thought that we could help and support each other, that I could cheer her up again. But I should have known better. I should have known her better!”

Gulping, Hiccup clenched his hands into fists, hoping that Eret wouldn’t notice. “There’s no point in you blaming yourself for this,” he said as steadily as he could muster. Damn yes, the thought of her marrying Eret had hurt like barely anything else. But he couldn’t let Eret see that, couldn’t let that beast of stupid jealousy and hurt loose. It was unfounded anyway, wasn’t Eret’s fault. “Logically, her marrying you would be the most prudent solution, even now. I have to believe that there is a way for us to be together or I’d go insane – but you’ve just seen how hopeless it is. And if I hadn’t stumbled into her life like this, then I know that you and she could be happy together. Which is all I want for her.”
Now, it was on Eret to give him a strained smile. “Welcome to the club.” Then he sighed. “It’s all a mess, isn’t it?”

“It certainly is,” Hiccup agreed. However, he found that, inside, the jumbled mess of emotions was calming down. Because everything he’d told Eret was true. He wasn’t angry at him, not really. Eret was just as much a pawn in the Gods’ games as he and Astrid were – maybe even more so. “But we’re good, I’d say. We all should have said something so we’re all to blame at least a little. But now, all that doesn’t matter anymore anyway. We’re good.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” Eret said, nodding. “But now that we’ve cleared that… there’s one other point I need to know. Not… Not for myself, but… Odin, she really is like a sister to me. And Daniel explicitly left her in my care, so…” He hesitated, but then turned even more serious than before. “What was it Ruff and Tuff were referring to earlier? About her sneaking out of the castle and to the stables, about the noises Tuff overheard. The truth, Hiccup. You owe me that much.”

Hiccup bit his lip and turned away from Eret. He still didn’t want to talk about this, but he had a point. As her brother, he had a right to be worried. “You know what they meant,” he said in a low voice, the memory of those wonderful nights with her heavy on his mind. “Yes, she spent nearly every night with me at the stables. And yes, we did more than just peacefully sleep side by side. But… there was no penetration of any kind, she’s still untouched in the way that matters – which is what you’re concerned about, I assume. I’m not that stupid. Besides, if I’d gone that far, Cami would’ve skinned me alive,” he added with a weak laugh.

“Cami knows?”

At his surprised exclamation, Hiccup threw Eret a sheepish look. “She does. Although, until yesterday, even she didn’t know who. Just that I was meeting someone; I asked for her advice on more than one occasion, so…”

“I see,” Eret replied as Hiccup trailed off, his lips twitching. “Well, I’d say that’s going to be a fun conversation the next time we meet her – whenever that’ll be.” He sighed. “Either way, that’s enough reassurance for me. And… well, I didn’t really expect you to do more. I just had to make sure, you know?”

Grimacing, Hiccup nodded. “Yeah, I get that. I… I probably would have done the same.” If my sister would still be alive, he added mentally but suppressed that thought directly.

“Good. Then I don’t need to emphasise that it had better stay that way now, too. It’s complicated enough as it is, even without adding an unplanned pregnancy.”

At that, Hiccup laughed, though without any humour. “Don’t worry. I’ve learned my lesson.” He hadn’t forgotten, after all. He didn’t know what the Gods’ plan was, but the timing of their separation was still too precise to be a coincidence. He wouldn’t risk getting parted from her again just for a little intimacy. There was too much at stake. However, he didn’t explain himself at Eret’s questioning look, just shook his head and asked, “Is there anything else?”

“No, I guess not. So yeah, it’s time to at least get a little bit of rest. Sleep well, Hiccup.”

“Thanks. You, too.”

Once back in the other room, Hiccup quickly slipped under his cover again, and couldn’t help the soft sigh at taking her back into his arms. Gods, how much he’d missed this! Just her weight and her warmth, her soft breathing and familiar scent. Just being that close to her again and, hopefully, never having to truly part.
“Hiccup?” came her sleepy voice, barely more than a sigh. She didn’t even open her eyes, just shifted a bit at his movement.

“I’m here, Milady,” he whispered back, and brushed his lips over her forehead. “Now sleep.”

Humming, she complied, and not even a minute later, she lay still and quiet again, the soft smile still on her lips. The sight made him smile too as he settled comfortably at her side.

However, he also couldn’t completely smother the tiny flickers of doubt in the back of his mind. He remembered the words of the Goddess, about how there was always hope and about how he only needed to do what came naturally, only needed to do the Gods’ work to get his reward.

But what did that even mean?

So far, *everything* he’d done had come naturally to him, hadn’t it? It had all felt like the right decision, at that moment at least. And even though things had turned a little brighter now, it could still all go wrong again at any moment. There still was not even the slightest hope for a solution…

Well, pondering about it now wouldn’t get him anywhere. He would have to wait and see what the following days would bring them, whether he, Astrid, or one of their new supporters would come up with some new ideas or whether, through some miracle, another path would reveal itself to them.

Now, all he could do was enjoy the moment, enjoy being reunited with her when he hadn’t thought that to ever happen again. He was incredibly tired after this endless day of emotional turmoil with the ball and the ride and after the previous night where he also hadn’t slept all that much.

But somehow, he couldn’t bring himself to get the rest he needed. He didn’t want to fall asleep, to close his eyes. All he wanted was to watch her sleep, smiling in her dreams, and not miss a single moment of the time they had.

Chapter End Notes

So, that was that... The situation really doesn't look good, does it?

And to everyone who keeps insisting Hiccup and Astrid should just run away and don't care about anything else... here's what my co-writer/alpha-reader athingofvikings has to say on that matter:

There are several issues /which have been brought up already in the fic/, but to emphasize them: Yes, they could run away. But they are in the center of the kingdom, and they are two people. So the next morning—or two mornings, if Ruff and Tuff manage to lie their asses off that the Princess is 'indisposed' (which would probably get them executed when it comes to light)-Astrid is discovered to be missing. Now, a horse with a rider can make about 15 km/hour (10 mph, for the Americans in the audience) if you're not running at a flat out gallop (which quickly exhausts the horse).

So lets say they get 100 km away on the road with that head start. So that next morning, when they realize she's missing, /and so is Eret III's squire/, along with two
horses, the King asks Eret II to borrow ALL his horses to mount a search party for the kidnappers. And Eret II, his house looking at dishonor and arguably a /treason/ charge, not only says yes, but offers to lead the search. And /they/ don't care about exhausting their horses; they'll bring spare horses to swap out when the first gets tired, so they'll be going twice as fast, if not faster. Bounties get posted, and everyone knows that the Princess is out there. And while Hiccup and Astrid don't know this, the conspirators would /leap/ on the chance to do a bit of bride abduction, and send out their own search parties. So where do they go? Any village will note that a man and a woman on /fine horses/ came through just yesterday, and if they avoid the villages, that slows them down even more and makes it easier for their pursuers to follow them. And once they get caught, Hiccup would have to /hope/ that he's just hung from Odin's Tree.

But let's say that, through some miracle, they manage to escape the search parties. Then what? They can't really settle down; they'd have to flee the country or risk recognition, and if someone else figured out who they were, then Hiccup would be killed and Astrid ransomed back.

And that's just the practical aspects, even before getting into the fact that Astrid and Hiccup have a sense of duty to their stations, and wouldn't just abandon them. But those practical aspects have already been addressed by Hiccup, and barring a change in circumstance or situation, they're stuck. Right now, Astrid is in a gilded cage, and while the bars aren't necessarily visible, they /will/ run into them if they try to fly to freedom.
Ah, here we finally are with the new chapter. Again sorry that I couldn't update last week, but well... Life...

Anyway, a huge THANK YOU to you all and your congratulations on my pregnancy! I really didn't expect that strong a response and it completely overwhelmed me. But also on this point and maybe to soothe some worries: this is already my third pregnancy; I already have to kids at the age of 6 and 8. So this isn't my first and I already have a good idea of what awaits me once the baby is there. Yes, I'm probably going to have even less time and nerves to write for a while. But I picked writing as a hobby because of my kids. Because it gives me the chance to be something else than just a mother all day. So I definitely won't stop writing! :)

In this chapter now, things happen that have been planned for ages again, and I'm really excited that we've reached this point by now.

This chapter's title comes from 'Love Is A Shield' by Camouflage. It wasn't a title I'd decided on before and for a while, I actually struggled with how to name this chapter. But when I heard the song on the radio a few days back, it all clicked into place and afterwards, the chapter went through some heavy editing again. xD But I really like how it turned out now.

Furthermore on the topic music: I also stumbled across the song 'Brother' by Kodaline (again, I should add. I know that I've heard it before). And I feel like it's the perfect song to describe our Chaos Squad.

(And I'm going to adjust the chapter numbers here according to how I numbered them... Just in case someone might gt confused ^^)

Only slowly, awareness seeped back into Astrid’s mind as she woke. She was someplace soft, with someone holding her, and a familiar scent in her nose. Denial almost rose in her, but then the memories of the previous night came back as well. She wasn’t dreaming that she was in Hiccup’s arms, his warmth seeping into her, his shallow breathing ruffling her hair.

With a sigh, she turned in his arms and cuddled closer against his chest, basking in his closeness. Everything would be okay. These horrible two weeks of separation were over, and from now on, they wouldn’t let go of each other ever again. She didn’t know how they’d manage that yet and last night’s discussion hadn’t brought up anything either, as far as she’d noticed at least. But she just knew that it would work out. Everything else was unacceptable.

For a short while, Astrid just watched him sleep. It was something she’d rarely seen before, with how they’d usually been equally exhausted when falling asleep and in a hurry when they’d woken up. But now, she had the time to really look at him, the light of early dawn falling through the window. He looked so peaceful and soft, as if nothing could bother him, and she wasn’t able to put
into words how… how soothing that sight was. There had been so much pain and hurt and desperation on his face lately, so much sorrow – but now, it was all gone.

Unable to hold back, she reached up and brushed a strand of his unruly hair out of his face. At her touch, Hiccup stirred with a soft grunt. His arms around her tightened as if on reflex, before he slowly opened his eyes, his lips stretching into a warm smile at her sight.

“Good morning,” he mumbled, blinking a few times before his eyes were truly able to focus and his mind seemed to clear a little. “So last night wasn’t a dream after all. Or am I still dreaming?”

Chuckling, Astrid shook her head. “No, you’re not.” she murmured back and caressed his face to prove that she was real.

His smile widened and he leaned closer to place a soft kiss on her forehead. Astrid closed her eyes, humming at the intimate gesture, before she stretched to seek his lips with her own. When they kissed, it was calm and reassuring, his hand eventually roaming upwards to cradle her face. Smiling against his lips, she basked in the familiar touch, content in the perfection of this moment.

But just like every moment, it had to end eventually.

Too soon, a knock sounded from the door before it carefully got pushed open and Rachel poked her head inside. “Milady, it’s time,” she said in a low but urgent voice. “It won’t be long now before the rest of the castle wakes up.”

Astrid didn’t want to go, but she understood why it was necessary. Reluctantly, she peeled herself out of the nest of blankets and limbs she and Hiccup had slept in. It didn’t take her too long to get ready to leave, despite frequently getting distracted by his hands on her arms or his lips on her skin. And if Ruff minded the delay, she didn’t say anything for which Astrid was incredibly grateful.

“When can we meet like this again?” she eventually asked as they were about to leave, unsure whether she’d meant to ask Hiccup or Ruff. Since Hiccup could only shrug with a somewhat insecure expression, it was Ruff who answered after a short pause.

“Dagur and Eret suggested to meet again in two or three nights; we all need rest tonight and also need time to think or look up other options. And don’t look at me like that, young lady,” she added when Astrid’s face fell, “I know perfectly well that you can’t wait to get under his clothes again.” With a sly smirk, she glanced from her to Hiccup and back again. “I mean, I know that we won’t be able to keep you apart. But after all the sneaking through the castle you already did, I’d rather you’re meeting somewhere safe from now on. Tuff and I are looking into options there. The easiest would probably be to sneak him,” she nodded at Hiccup who had a somewhat stony expression on his face, “into your rooms. Nobody goes into your bedroom without my say-so anyway.”

“And what if someone does?” Hiccup asked.

“Well, there’s space under the bed. I’ll knock and give you time to hide, and sneak you out later.”

Tuff snorted from outside the room. “Putting the cart before the horse, sis. How do you plan to get him in there in the first place?”

“I have an idea. But no promises for tonight,” Ruff rebutted.

Astrid nodded, trying to express her gratefulness, even as waiting for another day or two felt like an eternity. But at least she would be able to spend more time in Hiccup’s arms again. That was all that mattered. She turned to Hiccup again and stretched to give him a hurried kiss goodbye, giggling at the contrast of his soft lips and the rough scraping of his stubbles.
His hands held her tight though, unwilling to let her go just yet. “See you later,” he rasped into her ear, his fingers at her waist twitching.

Again, Astrid nodded as she retreated enough to look at him, her fingers raised to trace his lower lip. “Yes, later,” she breathed before she retreated for good.

_Later_ meant today’s tournament. They wouldn’t be able to interact in any meaningful way, but at least they would _see_ each other. That – and the memories of this wonderful and peaceful morning – would have to be enough for now.

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Yes, she was certain that, eventually, she would need the reminder of waking up in Hiccup’s arms to cheer herself up. But for a while, everything was fine. After Ruff had escorted her back into her rooms, she’d lain down to get a little more sleep, before she was to meet everyone for breakfast again.

“I can’t believe how much your mood improved.” Tuff muttered as they walked down the corridors and stairs, her steps lighter than she’d felt in a very long time. “I mean, it’s not as if you’ve actually found a _solution_ to your problem yet.”

He spoke quietly so as not to risk anyone overhearing them, and Astrid replied in the same manner. “Oh, I know we haven’t yet. But I’m positive that we _will_ find one eventually.” Despite Eret’s warning and Hiccup’s reluctance, she hadn’t yet ruled out simply running away. Maybe Eret was right and they would have to somehow _prepare_ their disappearance – somehow avert all the consequences he’d painted out – but that would certainly be manageable… somehow. Either way, she would _not_ let anything come between her and Hiccup ever again, would trust in their love and in the certainty that it would overcome everything. Besides, it wasn’t as if she was _important_. She wasn’t the heir to the throne, the one who would have to lead the Kingdom one day. No, she was only the _spare_, nothing less – but also nothing more.

With something of a fond snort, Tuff shook his head but didn’t comment further. They’d almost reached the breakfast room by now, and from some side corridor in front of them, hissed voices could be heard. Curiously, Astrid threw a glance in that direction as they passed the opening and was surprised to spot Snot and his father standing a little distance away. From the way Spitelout towered over his son and Snot’s stony expression, it looked like a scolding. The sight surprised her, but Astrid quickly averted her gaze and hurried on. What happened between Snot and his father wasn’t her business. Although… maybe, if Snot’s behaviour really had returned to that of her joking and funny brother, she’d ask him about it later.

With the truest smile in what felt like ages, she entered the breakfast room and found everyone else already in their seats. After cheerfully greeting the assembled men, she took her seat next to Eret, and gladly accepted the bread roll, butter, and honey as he handed her one after the other. It wasn’t much different from how he’d usually behaved, but she was aware of the fond smiles the older men threw them, of how their interactions would look to them. When she tore into her food with gusto – not even remembering when she’d last eaten, much less when she’d _enjoyed_ eating anything – it even earned her some low but friendly chuckling from the end of the table where her father and the Grand Dukes sat. But she didn’t pay them any attention either. Of course, they thought her good mood originated from Eret, and for now, Astrid was happy to keep it that way. Well… it wasn’t her fault when they drew the wrong conclusions, was it? It meant that nobody would pay Hiccup any mind, that he was safe.

Thinking about him made her smile even brighter, remembering how she’d spend this night, short as it was, safely encased in his arms. She really hoped Ruff’s idea to get them more nights like this
together again would work. She couldn’t wait to go back to him, his warmth, the soothing reassurance that they wouldn’t part again. And, to be honest, she also couldn’t wait to feel him again, his hands and lips on her skin, searching and exploring, pouring heat and pleasure into her body until she couldn’t take any more. She didn’t fool herself, knew that they would need a little time to reconnect to that part of their relationship – not to mention the mortifying realisation about how Tuff must have overheard them in the past and how she wouldn’t want to risk that again. But all that were questions for later.

“I’m glad to see you smile like this again, Astrid,” came her father’s voice, tearing her out of her daydreaming. “Up until yesterday, I was truly worried about you.”

His words made her grimace, which she quickly hid behind taking a sip of her tea. Yesterday… The ride… Markor… Her heart stuttered painfully at the reminder, but she quickly fought down the pain and instead retrieved the happy memory of her morning with Hiccup, of his kisses and caresses, his smile. She even preferred thinking about the awkward ride back to the castle, about how much easier that could have been if only she’d given in to the urge to lean back against him and let his closeness comfort her.

The distraction helped her focus again. With everything else that happened, she didn’t yet have time to truly mourn Markor’s death, the loss like a bitter taste in the back of her throat now. But now was not the right time either.

With a bit of effort and Eret nudging her beneath the table, she managed to smile back at her father and reassure him that she felt much better than yesterday too. Which was true in its own way.

And… she had to admit to herself that lying to her father didn’t bother her as much as it used to. Deep down in her heart, she understood that he hadn’t meant to hurt her. But that didn’t mean that she was yet ready to forgive him or forget about it.

After this small exchange, the breakfast continued uneventful for another couple of minutes, until the door opened again and Snot and his father entered the room.

“Good morning, everyone,” Spite greeted them as they looked up, a tired smile on his face. ”I apologise for the delay; looks like I slept in. Though, after last night, I don’t think you can blame me.” He laughed, followed by consenting chuckling from all around the table.

Astrid, however, frowned. Why was he lying? Her eyes wandered to Snotlout behind his father; his expression was plain, not showing any reaction, not as they walked along the table and not as he took his seat next to her.

Well, maybe Uncle Spite was just being lenient, she mused as she reached for another roll. Whatever he’d scolded Snot for, there probably was no reason to expatiate on that here in front of everyone again.

Her gaze glided over the table, trying to decide what to put on her roll this time, when Snot all of a sudden held out a pot filled with red jam to her.

“Here, I recommend you try this,” he said with a smile that was too smooth for her taste. “It only arrived last week with a merchant. The berries used for this only grow in the higher regions of Westhill and are considered a delicacy.”

Astrid took the pot, even if a little hesitant. The jam smelled delicious, sweet with a slightly tart note in it, and she wasn’t averse to giving it a try. However, what bothered her was the way Snot was again advertising his home – and thus himself – with this recommendation. Was he still trying to flirt with her? She’d thought that, after last night, he’d given up, that she’d made it clear that she
wouldn’t choose him. But apparently, she’d been wrong…

The jam was as tasty as it smelled, and with a tense smile, she thanked Snot, but then directly
turned toward Eret on her other side, engaging him in some Smalltalk or other. Hopefully, Snot
would eventually stop these fruitless advances. Last night, she’d been happy to have him back as
simply her brother, but that seemed to have been a little premature.

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The tournament that day was a good opportunity to talk to Eret in relative privacy. Though talking
about any sensitive topics in her open pavilion still wouldn’t be prudent, and even though Astrid
wished she could also invite Dagur and Hiccup, she couldn’t do that without it seeming odd. So
instead, she brought up another topic, hoping to get some clarification from Eret. But it seemed as
if he was just as bewildered by their brother’s behaviour as she was.

“I don’t really know what’s up with Snot either,” Eret said with a shrug. “He hasn’t really talked to
either of us since all this started, and only runs around in a bad mood all the time. He’s not his
usual self.”

Astrid nodded, noticing the deep-seated confusion on Eret’s face. Apparently, Snot’s behaviour
didn’t make any sense to him either and was possibly even more confusing to him. She knew that
the boys had always been a tight group; Snot not talking to anyone these days was just weird.

“I just don’t get it,” she eventually sighed. “I didn’t have the impression that he was in love
with me, not like that. There never were any indications, were there?”

Eret shook his head, though hesitantly. “I… don’t think so. But from what I’ve got, he hasn’t flirted
with a single woman except for you these past two weeks – which is odd as you have to admit. And
even though I can’t believe I’m actually saying this, it almost seems as if he’s serious about
wanting to marry you, for… for better reasons than mine or Dagur’s…” He sighed, a sad
expression on his face, but then frowned. “Except… that makes even less sense given his past
behaviour. I mean, he vehemently refused to spend a night with Cami, and…” he trailed off,
frowning at that memory, but then shook his head again. “No, I can’t even guess what’s on his
mind lately.”

The thought made Astrid sad somehow. Had Snot, her brother, really harboured some hidden crush
on her all these years? The idea felt weird, but given how little experience Astrid had had on that
matter before she’d met Hiccup, who was she to tell? But even if… Even if her heart wasn’t bound
to Hiccup’s in so many ways, the idea of marrying Snot of all people had never even crossed her
mind.

She kept brooding over the thought in silence, comparing Snot’s too-smooth smile this morning
with Hiccup’s warm and loving one, until Eret sitting up straighter drew her attention. He was
avidly watching the fighting ground below them, making Astrid pay it more attention for once, too.
Today, the participants got paired randomly and were supposed to fight two versus two, showing
how well they worked with a partner. And now, it apparently was Dagur’s turn. They watched him
entering the arena with three other men, watched them pull coloured marbles from a small bag to
decide on the pairings, watched the men take their positions.

Next to her, Eret grew visibly tense, and Astrid couldn’t help herself but place a comforting hand
on his upper arm. Dagur was a good fighter; surely he would make it out of this unscathed.

And he did. He and his partner fought well, working together to keep each other’s backs clear
while the other two just tried to gain their own advantage. The duel was over quickly, Dagur and
his partner the undisputed winners of the match.

“Did you really doubt his skills?” Astrid teased Eret as he relaxed again.

Eret snorted. “These fights aren’t just about skill,” he emphasised. “Sure, having it helps, but it’s also a lot about luck. And, in this case especially, about your partner and how well you work together. And no matter how much luck or skill one has, injuries or worse are always a possibility.”

Astrid nodded, grimacing at the point. She’d grown a little numb in this regard over the last two weeks but that reminder had torn off the bandage anew. Eret was right, of course. Injuries and accidents were possible; she’d even seen them happening practically every day during this tournament; one man just this morning had slipped in the mud and gotten run through by his opponent’s sword. Said opponent had been shocked and jumped back from the dying man as if burned. And in the melee the day before yesterday, another man had lost his eye, gashed open by his opponent’s shield. Still others had lost fingers or toes or worse. Fortunately – if such a word could be used to describe such waste – these accidents mainly seemed to happen to men she didn’t care about at all, and who weren’t the most loyal vassals anyway, according to Eret.

“Right, I need to get ready now,” Eret interrupted her musings as he got up from his seat. “It’s supposed to be my turn soon. Wish me luck that I get a sensible partner,” he added with a wink that probably was meant to be reassuring and cheerful.

Astrid grimaced; after his words from only minutes before, this now wasn’t exactly encouraging. But she played along, if only to not make him nervous now. “Oh, don’t you dare get killed on me now, Sir Eret,” she called after him, making him grin before he slipped out of sight and into the tent where Hiccup would be waiting with his gear.

Exhaling deeply, she sat back into her comfortable armchair and watched the current fight with little interest. Oh, how she wished these fights and tournaments and hunts would stop now that she’d supposedly chosen her future husband. She wasn’t going to change her mind, not because of some man or other proving to be an impressive fighter, at least. If only Hiccup could somehow be allowed to participate. It would be a long shot; to make her change of mind believable, he’d have to be outstanding – which, according to his own words, he wasn’t. But it would at least be a possibility.

With a soft shake of her head, she let out a sigh. There had to be a way! Hiccup had yet to tell her what exactly he’d seen in his vision, but if it had been enough to revive his hope, then it was enough for her, too. There was a way, a solution. They just had to find it.

For a little while longer, she pondered and brooded until Eret entered the arena, followed by Hiccup who carried his spare shield and weapon – and also followed by Snot and his squire Gustav!

Astrid felt herself sit up straighter in surprise at that; she hadn’t thought it possible for two of the ducal heirs to end up together in one of these duels. But then, even that decision came by drawing lots, and it had happened before already with Eret and Dagur fighting together in that melee a week ago.

However, she had a bad feeling about this, somehow. If they ended up as opponents, would Eret be able to fight Snot for real? Only last months, she would have laughed about such a coincidence; her brothers were used to sparring with each other, after all. They’d probably knock out the other two fighters and turn it into one of their usual training fights.
But that had been then. Today, Astrid had no idea how Snot would behave. Anxiously, she awaited the drawing of the marbles – and exhaled in relief when it turned out that Snot and Eret would fight together instead of against each other. A little calmer now, she leaned forward, watching as all four men took their places and the referee gave them the go to begin. This was the best option she could’ve hoped for. She didn’t want her brothers to actually fight against each other, especially not with Snot’s weird behaviour lately. But if they stood together to fight, then nothing could go wrong, right?

Except that Snot didn’t stand with Eret.

It only took a couple of seconds before it became clear that Snot had no intentions to work with Eret in this. He charged forward at his opponent, leaving Eret to fend on his own against his. She could even hear Eret’s curse as he realised what had happened, saw the surprise and then the anger on his face, even through his helmet’s visor. Yes, fights like these didn’t only depend on skill, but also on luck and on your partner. And at least in that last regard, Eret had just lost.

“Stupid, stupid, stupid!” Astrid hissed under her breath, her eyes never leaving the fighting men below her. Anxiously, her hands clenched at her skirts, her whole body moving along with every one of Eret’s parries, dodges, and strikes. Damn it, this wasn’t the first time she had to watch him fight, and so far, he had yet to be beaten by anyone. Why was she so nervous now? But even though Snot’s stupidity gave the match a bad taste, Eret seemed to stand his ground just as well as usual – in the beginning, at least.

Astrid only saw it from the corner of her eye, her focus on Eret. But from one moment to the other, Snot was on the ground. He wasn’t bleeding, wasn’t even unconscious. But he’d lost his weapon, and judging by the uncoordinated way he tried to get back on his feet, his head must have been hit pretty hard. His opponent didn’t waste any time. He kicked Snot into the side, sending him back to the ground, then charged to where Eret and the other man were still fighting. Before anyone truly realised what had happened, he attacked Eret’s unguarded back. Astrid yelled out a warning, but it came too late, was only enough for Eret to turn but not enough for him to fully evade the blow.

Astrid’s scream of denial was drowned out in the general uproar that ran through the crowd as blood splattered the ground. It all happened incredibly fast. Eret whirled at her shout and saw the man coming up at him. He parried, desperately, and the man’s sword, which would have buried itself in his back, cut across his chest instead. Astrid saw his chainmail part under the blow.

But Eret’s parry was a masterstroke. Operating on what had to be reflex, his blade sliced open the other man’s arm down to the red-stained bone from his wrist to his elbow.

Gasping, Eret stood, his blade at the ready, even as his shirt and mail were stained with his own blood, and watched his other opponent warily. The man that had attacked him was bleeding profusely and had dropped his sword.

Dimly, Astrid became aware of the referee’s horn blowing, and he and his men, members of the King’s Guard, waded in to separate the fighters, as they always did when the tournament turned bloody, followed by Hiccup and Dagur. They carried Eret off to the healer’s tent, his arms slung over their shoulders, Eret’s opponent getting similar treatment from the guards, as the judges conferred on the scoring.

As order was restored, she was, at first, stunned and shocked. This shouldn’t have happened! Eret had said it so often, had been so sure that his rank as ducal heir would keep him safe from such an open attack. But the risk had come from ‘accidents and injuries happened.’ And not even men of high rank were safe from those.
And that hadn’t been an *accident*, anyway.

With her head spinning, she got up on shaky legs, her arms reaching out for something to stabilise her as she stumbled away from her chair. She *had* to get to Eret, had to know that he was okay. This was her fault; by singling him out, she’d painted a target on his back. A target the man he’d fought – some firstborn son of a count from Westhill, she vaguely recalled – had tried to score on.

“I have to get to the healer’s tent,” she muttered as Tuff tried to bar her from leaving her pavilion.

He didn’t seem happy about that idea. “Milady, I don’t think—”

But she cut him off directly with a determined gesture of her hand. She could imagine all the reasons he might come up with for why that wasn’t a good idea. This tournament was *for her*, and she should stay here and watch. A healer’s workspace could be an ugly place with blood everywhere – not the right surroundings for a lady. And since the patient was her public betrothed-to-be, she would do good at staying away when he very likely got stripped to get treated – for both propriety’s sake and to keep that target from getting bigger.

But none of that mattered.

“Get me to Eret!” she ordered, and there had to have been something in her voice or her expression that kept Tuff from objecting further. It also kept any guards and servants from blocking her way, even made the men outside the healer’s tent step aside as she approached with sure strides.

“How bad is it?” she blurted out as soon as she entered the tent, even before she could take in anything else. Offhandedly, she registered the scene in front of her; Eret was lying on a bench in the middle of the room, naked from the waist upwards and groaning in pain, with Fishlegs examining the gash on his upper chest and Hiccup hurrying about, his arms laden with healing supplies – while Dagur was sitting on Eret’s other side, holding his hand and murmuring encouragements.

Right… Fishlegs might not *officially* know about Eret’s and Dagur’s feelings for each other, but thanks to Heather they certainly weren’t a secret to him either. At least in this regard, they wouldn’t have to keep up appearances around him.

“It’s not as bad as it looks,” Fishlegs commented absentmindedly, still entirely concentrated on his work at hand as he reached for a piece of cloth to clean the wound. “It’s a deep cut, but luckily nothing but a flesh wound. The ribs beneath are unharmed and no sinews or major blood vessels were hit, either. It’ll scar, but he’ll live, barring infection.”

The words were reassuring and part of her former tension floated out of her. She stepped a little closer, her eyes trying to examine the wound herself. But even though she understood the meaning of Fishlegs’ explanations, all of his lessons had only been theoretical so far, and all she saw was a gaping wound and too much blood. She thought about sitting down at his side as well to lend him support and comfort, but quickly decided against it. Dagur was doing a great job there already, clearly enough.

So there was little she could do but watch in silence as Fishlegs cleaned the wound, flinching every time Eret grunted or groaned in pain. A part of her, the part that she’d tried to ignore during the past two weeks and that now was stronger than ever, was acutely aware of Hiccup’s presence, of him standing only a few steps away now that Fishlegs had everything he needed to treat his patient. But this wasn’t really the moment to seek his closeness, not while Fishlegs could notice and not when all she could worry about was Eret and his wound.
The only warning then was Fishlegs throwing a quick telling glance up at Dagur before he applied a good amount of willow bark tincture onto the wound. Before, Eret had been able to stay relatively quiet despite the pain he had to be in, but with the sting and burn of the tincture, he couldn't do so any longer.

"Oh, fuck!" he cursed, his entire body going rigid, trembling with the effort to at least hold still.

Astrid whimpered, her hands clenching at her skirts. "I'm so sorry!" she whined once Eret’s shouting had calmed down to laboured panting only. "This is my fault. If I hadn't chosen you, hadn't put that target on--"

"Nonsense," Eret interrupted her through gritted teeth. "Accidents happen in tournaments."

"Bullshit," she spat. ‘I know that, but that's not what I'm talking about. This man, he was trying to kill you. I saw him! He went straight for you after he knocked Snot down."

"Given that I was fighting his partner, of course he did! He’d already taken Snot out, as you said--"

"Eret, you didn’t see him, he was going to stab you in the back!"

Eret scowled. "Maybe. And thanks for the warning, by the way. But it could have just been the heat of the moment, with his blood up. It wasn’t necessarily about you."

She scowled and crossed her arms. “Uh-huh. Complete coincidence that the man publically favoured as the Princess’ betrothed-to-be almost comes down with a bad case of ‘sword in the back’? Pull the other one, it’s got bells on it."

"He is right in one thing, though," Fishlegs threw in, and she turned to glare at him. He met her gaze with equanimity. "It could have just been the heat of the fight," he continued, rummaging about with his tools. "I've certainly seen worse wounds lately, without such a possible motivation. It’s pure luck that neither of you got injured before, if you ask me."

"That’s true. Or if that’s not good enough for you, Swanja: it also could have been purely politically motivated," Eret added, grimacing as Fishlegs probed his chest. "Could you be a little more gentle there, my good healer?"

“I’ll go get my feather-needles,” Fishlegs deadpanned, and Eret snorted.

"Just keep the red stuff on the inside," he joked, and Astrid rolled her eyes.

Dagur smirked. "This is an excellent opportunity to prove something I've been wondering for a while, actually."

“What’s that?” Astrid asked. She threw Dagur a quick glance, and saw that he was feeling just like she did: not in the mood for joking at all, but playing along for Eret’s sake.

“Well, we know his granddad doesn’t have a heart, and his dad has pragmatism instead of blood, so..."

“I think I can say that I have both,” Eret grunted, and looked back to Astrid. “Look, it might have just been someone stupid enough to think that taking out a ducal heir would gain him some recognition. Instead, he'll probably get excluded from the tournaments, maybe even punished further.”

Fishlegs, threading a needle with a focused look, said, “No need for that.”
“What do you mean?” Eret asked.

“I saw his arm when he was carried in,” Fishlegs said. “Why do you think the junior healer is attending to you, Sir Eret, ducal heir of a grand duchy, and not the senior healer? It’s near-certain that the man who attacked you will lose the arm, and also possibly his life if the bleeding can’t be brought under control,” Fishlegs said grimly.

Silence reigned for a moment, and Astrid wasn’t sure how to feel about this. Another unnecessary death, one that also might or might not be her fault… but it certainly wasn’t hitting an innocent man!

Then Eret coughed, thankfully breaking the silence. “Either way, the only one to blame for me getting hurt is that man, and probably myself – but definitely not you, Swanja. I should have paid better attention to the entire fight and not just my opponent.”

"Or, if you want to put the blame on somebody else," Dagur growled, "then my suggestion would be Snot. What was that idiot thinking? It's not as if he doesn't know how duels like these work. Thor, we've done play fights like this with Daniel ever since we were able to hold sticks. There's literally no sane reason for why he fought on his own like that. Gods, I want to head over and punch him in the face for this idiocy!" At that, everyone just grunted in agreement.

Biting her lip, Astrid didn't object any further; she knew that they would only come up with more reassurances anyway. But that sense of guilt still lingered.

When Fishlegs was done with his preparations, he handed Eret a sturdy piece of leather with bite marks on it already, and when she spotted him holding a needle and a thread covered in more willow bark tincture in his hand, she realised what would come next. Her anxiety grew as she saw Eret bracing himself against the pain, clutching more firmly at Dagur’s hand, and she tensed as well.

“I’m so sorry,” she repeated, urgently, half expecting to get told off again. But with the leather already between his teeth, Eret couldn’t say anything, only rolled his eyes and threw a strange nod in her general direction. Astrid didn’t know what to make of it, but as soon as Fishlegs had turned all his attention to Eret’s wound again, she understood that the gesture hadn’t been meant for her at all.

She jumped as a pair of arms wound around her shoulders and waist and pulled her to the back of the tent, though not out of direct fear as she recognised them as Hiccup’s right away. No, it was the fear of how Fishlegs would react as Hiccup pulled her into his arms and against his chest that made her want to draw back at first. But, of course, Fishlegs was too absorbed by his work to notice anything else right now and he had his back toward them anyway, so she gave in.

Hiccup held her tightly, turning her so she couldn’t watch and murmuring reassurances into her ear to drown out Eret’s noises of pain. They all knew that it was necessary to suture the gash, but that didn’t make it any easier – for anyone. No, all she could do was try to not make it harder for Eret by showing how much his pain affected her too.

Instead, she pressed harder into Hiccup’s embrace, clinging to his formal squire outfit, and let his presence soothe her. A small voice inside her head was scolding her for this, for seeking Hiccup’s comfort when Eret was suffering because of her, of them. But she vehemently pushed it aside; Eret’s pain certainly wasn’t Hiccup’s fault. The target on Eret’s back was there, regardless of whether her choosing him was real or not.

She fought to calm herself, but no matter how sensible all their reasoning before had sounded, she
couldn’t shake off the feeling that Eret getting wounded today was her fault, and hers alone. It didn’t matter whether one wanted to put the blame on Snot or Eret’s attacker; in both cases, the reason behind it certainly was Astrid’s choice. She didn’t believe in an otherwise politically motivated attack, not with this impeccable timing.

Thuggory had even warned her that something would happen to her chosen if she didn’t choose him. Was it possible that he somehow was behind this? Eret had been lucky in that the attack had only caused such a relatively light wound, but so easily it could have been a lethal blow. And obviously, his high rank wouldn’t have saved him either.

She didn’t get the chance to further ponder on this, though. Hiccup did his best to distract her from such gloomy thoughts. Despite her worries over Eret’s well-being and flinching at every muffled noise of pain, she eventually gave in to Hiccup’s efforts. She made herself focus on every single one of his light touches and even enjoyed the way he caressed her and covered her face and hair with soft soothing kisses. It wasn’t enough to forget what was happening behind her or why – but it felt good nonetheless.

She wasn’t sure for how long she stood like this, closely encased in Hiccup’s arms and with his lips on her ear murmuring sweet nothings, with Fishlegs patching up the wound with moss and a tight bandage, with Dagur and Eret engaging him in a conversation to keep him from paying much attention to his surroundings, and with Tuff conveniently standing in the way should Fishlegs turn around anyway. It could have been only minutes or maybe it was over an hour. She knew that she was pushing her luck by refusing to step away, but she just felt as if she needed Hiccup’s closeness to cope. Last night and this morning had been good, but it had been far from enough to fully chase away the anxiousness and the pain of their separation before. It might have been her worries for Eret that had made her come here, but now that she knew he would be okay – and already was fairly okay with Dagur comforting him – she couldn’t help but give in and bask in Hiccup’s warmth. Their love was like a shield to ward off all the pain and misery around them, impenetrable and keeping them safe no matter what.

But she really shouldn’t have pushed her luck.

She didn’t even notice as the entrance of the tent flapped open and someone came in. In fact, nobody seemed to notice at first, the men caught up in their conversation, until a loud exclamation and the noise of a plate breaking on the floor drew all their attention.

“No!”

With a spark of her old panic, Astrid whirled around and away from Hiccup, just as everyone else turned toward the newcomer as well. Tuff even made a hasty step to the side to stand between her and Hiccup and the entrance, but it was too late.

Heather had seen enough to understand and, judging by the anger on her face, didn’t like what she saw. Before anyone could react, she stormed through the tent and grabbed Astrid by her arm. “Don’t you dare,” she shrieked, apparently not caring for her rank in the slightest as she pulled her away from Hiccup’s side with enough force that it hurt. “Don’t you dare ruin this.”

Astrid could do little but stumble along, bewildered when she spotted tears forming in Heather’s eyes, accusation and a kind of pain on her face that made her tremble. But before she could even try to make any rhyme or reason of her behaviour, Heather let go of her arm, nearly causing her to fall if Tuff hadn’t caught her, and turned toward Hiccup instead.

“And you,” she continued without pause, making a baffled Hiccup take a step backwards at her approach. “Stay away from the Princess. I don’t care how impressive your seduction skills might
be; she’s not for you! Do you hear me? Get lost, there’s nothing to gain here for you except the noose!”

At that, Astrid froze, eyes wide in panic. No! No, Heather couldn’t tell anyone, couldn’t get Hiccup punished, not now. She couldn’t! She wanted to interrupt Heather’s tirade, wanted to order her to be quiet, to make her understand. She wasn’t sure why Heather was reacting that strongly or what it was exactly she could do to keep her from running directly to her father, but she just had to do something. However, before she could make any attempt at getting her body to react as it was supposed to, Dagur beat her to it.

“Heather, what–” he tried to interfere, to distract or even to calm his half-sister. But all it gained him was her turning on him and Eret next. Her angry expression grew even more intense as she stomped through the tent until she loomed over them, ignoring her brother and glaring down at Eret instead.

“I can’t believe it,” she hissed. “I know it’s all just an act, but still. Setting your squire up to seduce your bride, using him as some kind of bait or toyboy for her to fool around with, and all just because you’re not interested and don’t want to face reality – you should be ashamed of yourself!”

“Heather, calm down,” Dagur interrupted her again, more firmly this time. “That’s not what this is about at all. Listen, I–”

But he got no chance to explain further.

From one second to the other, Heather became eerily quiet, and even though Astrid couldn’t see her face, it had to be quite intimidating as not only Dagur but also Eret and even Fishlegs clamped their mouths shut as she turned toward him.

“Don’t you dare!” she spat. She was shaking now with livid rage. “Don’t you dare tell me to calm down or that this is not what it looks like. I know exactly what this is about. It’s about you being a selfish ass, about to ruin my life without even batting an eye. Or can you look me in the eye and swear on all that’s sacred to you that this is not about you all pretending for Astrid and Eret to get married, when in truth, you’re only looking for a way to circumvent your responsibilities.”

A stunned silence spread through the tent. Dagur had his mouth open to protest, but couldn’t get a single word out. And Astrid couldn’t even blame him. Heather had nailed it – even though in a completely different way than she thought. His eyes darted from Heather to Eret then to her and Hiccup and back to Heather before he closed his mouth again.

“That’s what I thought,” she said bitterly. “But if you think I’m just going to stand and watch then you’re wrong.”

She turned and was about to leave when Dagur caught himself again. “No, wait!” he exclaimed, reaching out and catching her by the arm. She fought against his hold, but he wouldn’t budge, even pulled her back until he had his arms around her.

“Let me go,” she wailed. She was still fighting her brother, but without any true force anymore. Instead, she looked as if she was about to burst out into tears at any moment.

“Not until you tell me what all this is about,” he grunted. “What do you mean by ‘ruining your life’? I’d never do something to harm you, don’t you know that?” Still holding her tight, Dagur turned her around in his arms as Heather seemed to deflate until her head leaned against his chest and her tears were soaking his tunic.
After all of these years married, Astrid guessed that Fishlegs knew by now that it was better for him to keep out of any arguments between the siblings. But even as he’d clearly wanted to support his wife just now, still being busy with Eret’s wound had kept him from interfering – until now. “It’s… because of your father,” he threw in, cautiously. “And the succession.”

Astrid was on edge, watching the scene in front of her intently. Dagur seemed to have Heather under control for now and he certainly was the best one suited here to talk sense into her anyway – but that didn’t mean that Astrid would let her ruin everything. She was tense, trembling even, and ready to jump in should Heather make another attempt to run away.

So, at first, she didn’t quite appreciate Hiccup approaching her again, much less wrapping one arm around her waist from where he stood half behind her and half to her side. Didn’t he understand how much was at stake right not? But when she turned to look at him, to make him understand why she had to interfere, he shook his head.

“Let Dagur handle this,” he whispered with a strange expression in his eyes. “If it’s about their father, you can’t do anything here.”

She wanted to argue – but after only one heartbeat, she closed her mouth again and nodded. He was right; if this was in some way about House Berserker and their family, then they had to clear this up themselves.

Still ready to interfere if needed, she let Hiccup pull her closer to him. It wasn’t an obvious gesture that would draw Heather’s attention again, but still soothing enough, and only now did Astrid realise how much she’d been shaking. And despite the disturbing scene in front of them, she couldn’t help but lean even more into him, seeking his closeness as she tried to make sense.

What was all this about? House Berserker’s line of succession? How was there any room for arguments? Dagur was the sole heir and that was it. Wasn’t it? Astrid was relieved that Heather didn’t seem to care about her and Hiccup directly, but that only eased the situation so much.

Dagur seemed equally puzzled though. “What?” he asked, bewildered, and kept glancing from Fishlegs to Heather and back again. “What’s that supposed to mean? What has Father to do with any of this?”

Heather scoffed, her eyes growing hooded and angry. “You don’t get it, do you?” She pushed herself away from him again, and this time he let her as it was clear that she wasn’t about to run away again. Not yet at least. “If you know how and where to listen, the rumours are clear enough. Even I have heard about you moaning into a cup of ale by now, about how you’d rather get a clean death on the battlefield then die slowly of a broken heart married to someone you don’t love.” She laughed bitterly. “So, of course, Father heard about that too, that you’re considering taking the warrior way out. He even came up with an emergency plan already, a loophole. And a while ago, he came to our home to tell me about it.” She made a subconscious step toward Fishlegs, one arm wrapped tightly around herself. “If you died or,” she glanced at Eret, “did something else that would keep you from inheriting, then my child will be on hook to take your place.”

Astrid’s eyes widened in disbelief, and judging by the silence that followed her words, she wasn’t the only one who felt that way.

“Y-your child?” Dagur eventually inquired, puzzled. “But that doesn’t make any sense. If you or any other of our sibling could inherit then there wouldn’t be a problem at all. Aren alone would make for an excellent leader in my stead,” he went on, referring to their younger brother who’d joined the Order of Odin, if Astrid remembered correctly.
Heather sobbed, even though she still sounded angry. “Yeah, we can’t inherit. We might be his acknowledged children, but the Law says that any child born out of wedlock or by an Ástir cannot inherit, or be a part of a noble House,” she spat bitterly.

Dagur shook his head, confused. “But… you’ve known that, and you’ve even told me that you’re happy about that. Haven’t you said – more than once if I recall – that you’re even glad not to be noble, with all those puffed-up lords and ladies in Southshore?”

“Aye. And that’s still true,” Heather huffed. “But think it through, brother. Children born out of wedlock or by an Ástir can’t inherit.”

Dagur nodded hesitantly, obviously trying to find what the loophole was. Then Astrid had to muffle a gasp when it hit her.

“Yes, the Princess got it,” Heather said sourly. “My child wouldn’t be the child of an Ástir.”

“And born in wedlock and an undisputed descendant of our father… apparently that’s good enough,” Heather confirmed in a bleak voice before it grew thick with tears. “He said he’d only… only take them if you were to die on the battlefield before you produced an heir, but…” again, her eyes flickered to Eret, “but we both know that’s not the main problem. You don’t want to marry, ever, so it’s inevitable. He’ll take my baby away from me! Justin and I wouldn’t even be allowed to come too; he’d just take them away and raise them as his own. And all just because you are too selfish to stand up to your responsibilities!”

Her voice had become thinner with every word, and for another heartbeat or three, all that could be heard was her sobbing before Dagur apparently caught himself again. “I didn’t know that,” he muttered, a troubled grimace on his face. Then he shook his head. “It’s true that I said something like that once, but… but I didn’t mean it!” Heather just stared at him with teary eyes, and he started to babble. “Odin! I’d never actively try to kill myself, no matter what. And even though I’m not exactly looking forward to a political marriage, I know about my responsibilities. But with knowing this, I have even more reason to stand up to them. I-I will take my place and prove to Father that he doesn’t need to bother you with this. Believe me, Heather, I won’t let anyone take your child away should you ever have one; not even our father!”

Another sob tore itself from her throat, louder and more urgent. Fishlegs, who’d just finished patching Eret up and had cleaned his hands, finally stood up, and Heather accepted his embrace gladly. She muttered something that sounded like “But that’ll be too late,” though Astrid wasn’t quite sure whether she’d understood it right. Dagur seemed equally confused, but before he could react, Eret preempted him.

“You’re already pregnant, aren’t you?” he said quietly. His skin was still covered in cold sweat from before, but despite the slightly dazed expression on his face, there was a clarity in his eyes that left no room for doubts. And it made sense, Astrid realised. The way Heather had begged her to marry Dagur or Eret, to separate them so that they would focus on their duties as heir instead. But also how she’d been overly tired, how she would wrap her arm around her midst in something of a protective gesture, how Fishlegs would jump up and prepare a cup of tea for her whenever he thought she needed one, and even the fact that he hadn’t needed that box of moss meant to deal with moonblood anymore – it all made sense now.

Weakly, Heather nodded. “Five months now,” she breathed. “We didn’t even plan for it to happen, knew how risky it was ever since he visited us. But when it did happen… we were so happy.” She leaned closer against Fishlegs, snuggling into his embrace in a way Astrid could emphasise all too
well. “We were worried how Father would react if he learned about it, but when Astrid’s wedding was announced… I thought that was a sign from my Goddess herself, a reassurance that I wouldn’t need to be afraid anymore. That everything would be fine, that I would get to keep my child. But now…” She broke off again as fresh tears welled up in her eyes.

With a heavy sigh, Dagur stepped closer to them, his hand reaching for that of his sister. “I’m truly sorry, Heather. I didn’t know any of that. But… but I promise you don’t need to be afraid, okay? You’re my sister and I’d do everything for you. I meant what I said and I gladly repeat it again for you. I vow, by the life of the woman who raised us both and who we both love dearly, that I won’t let anyone take your child away from you!”

A faint smile crossed Heather’s face but didn’t reach her eyes. “I’d like to believe you,” she whispered, and then glanced at Eret on his bench. “And yet, here you are, still holding on to your impossible feelings for each other and even luring Astrid into your charade to cover for you. All just to stave off the only option that won’t end in even more people getting hurt. It’s only a few months now, why-why can’t you just accept it?”

Dagur opened his mouth to reply but closed it again right away. And what was he supposed to say anyway? Astrid vividly remembered Dagur placing his weapon to Eret’s feet during the tournament a week ago, remembered the short conversation they’d had afterwards. Eret and Dagur already had accepted their fate, long ago. Their love wasn’t what Heather needed to be concerned about...

“But he’s right,” she interjected on Dagur’s behalf, drawing everyone’s attention. Maybe it would be better to let Heather believe what she’d just said… but she owed it to Eret and Dagur to set this right. “What you saw… that wasn’t about Dagur and Eret at all. It… it’s my fault. It’s me who…” She trailed off again, unsure what she even wanted to say. It was her fault that everything was so complicated – because she couldn’t bear the thought of a life other than at Hiccup’s side.

Trying to make a point, she blindly reached for his hand on her shoulder, weaving her fingers through his as she held Heather’s gaze. She wanted her to understand. That she loved Hiccup, that he was more than just a distraction, her end of a deal. He was her soulmate. They loved each other, couldn’t live without each other. This had nothing to do with Eret or Dagur or her or anyone else.

And really, there was understanding in Heather’s eyes – but not the slightest hint of compassion. Mutely, she wound herself out of her husband’s arms, crouched down to pick up the shards of the plate she’d dropped earlier, and then turned to leave.

“Wait!” Dagur quickly caught her by the arm again, not with as much force as before but still enough to make her pause. “What are you going to do now? Will you… tell anyone?”

Oh, please not! Astrid prayed inwardly. If Heather told anyone… No, that couldn’t be happening. They had to stop her, somehow, just–

But Heather shook her head. “No,” she said in a bleak voice. “No, I won’t spill your secrets. I… I trust in your integrity, Dagur, that I can rely on your promise. But just to make this clear: if I ever have to choose between my hard-earned happiness and my loyalty to you nobles who wouldn’t stand up to your responsibilities… then I know my choice already.” She gave them all a last hard glare, then pulled her arm out of Dagur’s hold and left the tent. And even though Astrid wanted to be angry at her for this clear show of defiance… some deeply buried part of her couldn’t even blame her.

Responsibilities…
Yes, they all had a lot of them. Their lives came with many privileges compared to those of lower birth, and even though it wasn’t always easy, it certainly was simpler than that of many others. But this life came with a price, with responsibilities they all had to the people. They had to keep up stability and peace, had to follow the rules…

Needing his support, she turned to look at Hiccup again. She hoped to find comfort in his eyes, the reassurance that their love would endure every storm. As long as they had each other, nothing could go wrong, their love shielding them from everything.

But instead of that reassurance and comfort, all she could find in his eyes were desperation and pain.

He didn’t give her the chance to drown in those emotions, though. Instead, he pulled her into a tight embrace, his panted breaths heaving against her neck – but Astrid had seen enough, understood.

What had just happened with Heather… it didn’t affect her and Hiccup, not directly at least. Marrying Dagur had never really been an option and she fully trusted in his integrity anyway, so her and Hiccup looking for a way to be together didn’t make a difference there.

But that wasn’t the point anyway.

Their last resort… it wasn’t something they could do for real, she understood that now. Hiccup’s reluctance and Eret’s warning from last night, it all made sense to her now. No matter how strong her love for Hiccup was, it wasn’t worth everything. Even though she might want to, she couldn’t just run away from her responsibilities, not when that meant putting others in harm’s way.

And Eret had been right. Eloping just like that would not just be risky and most likely not work; it would also cause some serious political consequences, for House Jag’r but also for the Crown in general. Maybe things were different, maybe nobody would suffer from her actions as directly as Heather might suffer if Dagur wouldn’t be able to keep his promise. But that didn’t mean that she could take that risk lightly. There would be accusations and possibly even actions against Eret and his House, and people would lose their trust in House Hofferson too, in her Father and in Daniel. No, those weren’t things she could risk. Their love might be like a shield, but that didn’t mean she could hide behind it and ignore everything else.

With a low whimper, she pressed herself closer to Hiccup’s chest, felt how his arms around her tightened. A future without him wasn’t an option, but how could they reach it, that vision of their simple home?

More of Eret’s words from last night crossed her mind, about how there might be ways to prepare their disappearance. So far, she hadn’t let herself think about that too much, but now… How could they prepare her running away with Hiccup without it causing such a political uproar?

The answer was as simple as it was impossible. The only way for her to escape her golden cage was the same Dagur had apparently also already thought about. She’d have to die – except not for real, of course. Because in opposition to Dagur, her death wouldn’t harm anyone. She’d only have to fake it convincingly enough so that nobody would have any doubts.

Something like a hysterical laugh escaped her, one that directly changed into quiet sobbing. How were they supposed to pull that off? How could she make people believe that she was dead without a body? Because killing someone else who vaguely resembled her and mutilate their body to hide the differences was out of the question.

No, this wasn’t a sensible option either. She’d probably ponder more on this, but…
She pulled back, catching Hiccup’s wondering gaze for a heartbeat before she stretched to press her lips to his. He caught up to her mood without a pause, hurling her as close as was physically possible and kissing her with the same desperation she felt, too.

There had to be a solution! There had to be a way to make her choosing Hiccup as her husband possible. There still would be people who’d complain, but as long as he was legally eligible that wouldn’t matter.

They just had to find it…

Chapter End Notes

So, erm... that was that. I honestly never thought the day would come where I shed even one tear for Heather... But writing this chapter certainly made me do so a lot!
Woohoo! I actually managed another chapter, hard to believe, I know...

I think at this point, it would be more sensible to remove any scheduled updates, and I just post the next chapter when it’s done. Fair warning though: November is fast approaching now and with it NaNoWriMo. I’m not going to participate in that this year, but my alpha-reader does. So I don’t know how much time he’ll have for editing and helping. And after NaNo, I’m very close to my delivery date already, so no promises about updates then, either. However, I solidly plan to at least post one more chapter before that! Afterwards, I don’t know how quickly I will get back to writing. If you have questions though, you can always contact me through comments here, on Tumblr (@shipmistress9), or through the ATOV Discord server. And without a regular update schedule, subscribing might help to not miss an update. 😊

I feel positive about this other update though because a good part of it is already written as I’d originally planned to have that scene in this chapter. But as it is, the chapter got pretty long already so I split it again. This time, the ending feels much more solid than the last time I had to do that, and I hope it feels that way for you, too.

This week’s title comes from the song *Warriors* again by *Imagine Dragons*. After splitting the chapter, I again had to come up with a new title, and after a bit of thinking, this one felt exceedingly fitting. 😊

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Throughout the following few days, Astrid kept pondering over it all; Eret’s *accident* and everything that had happened afterwards. It wasn’t entirely by choice; she much rather would have thought about Hiccup and how they could be together instead. But she was at a loss there, only having Hiccup’s renewed optimism to hold on to, and repeatedly going through the same pointless plans wasn’t exactly productive. Thinking about other problems instead wasn’t necessarily more pleasant, but it was still… *easier*.

And thinking about those incidents certainly had a grounding effect. The more she mentally reviewed the attempted stab in the back against Eret, the more certain she was about one thing – from the fierceness and aim of his attack, the now-dead nobleman had intended for it to be a killing blow. It was a hot topic of gossip among the nobles, with many supporting her opinion – without her ever having stated it openly – and being outraged on her and her future husband’s behalf, aided by more witnesses speaking up about their view of the man’s dishonourable attack. Tournament or not, melee or not, stabbing a man in the back was seen as low and cowardly. Some had even called for action against the man’s family, such as fines or other punishments. But as he was already dead, the King had dismissed the idea, saying that they’d been punished enough. However, the entire topic, with the number of witnesses essentially corroborating Astrid’s opinion, was enough that even Eret and Dagur had to admit that it probably hadn’t been an *accident* at all.

At first, accepting that fact had made especially Dagur’s anger at Snotlout grow even hotter, though not for long. Snot hadn’t gotten through that fight unscathed either, despite initial
impressions. The hit against his head had caused a mild concussion, and the kick to his side had cracked a rib. If he’d lost on purpose somehow, then he’d made an incredibly bad bargain.

Both Eret and Snot had been confined to bed rest on the healers’ orders for the following few days, making Astrid anxious for both of her brothers. No matter how irritating Snot’s behaviour lately had been, she still cared for him. But now, two days later, Master Mulch had been willing to state that he was relatively certain that both ducal heirs would fully recover. Eret had even insisted on riding out for today’s hunt again; not to actually participate, but at least to show that he was recovering, that he was still there and the place at her side not vacant again.

And no matter how much Astrid – and practically everybody else – had scolded him for this unnecessary show of bravado, she was also grateful for it. Eret could be pretty foolhardy, she knew that perfectly well. But she also knew that he wouldn’t risk his health and life for something as superficial as this. No, she trusted in him, in his assurance that he was doing fine, and let it soothe her enough not to worry about his injury too much. His safety was another matter altogether, but there was little she could do about that. Right now, he was out in the forest, accompanied by Hiccup and Dagur, and probably with a few of her father’s guards keeping a close eye on him, too. That would have to be enough.

Sighing, she turned the next corner. For once, she had nothing to do; with her suitors being out on that hunt and with her governess being done lecturing her for today, she was at loose ends, for a little while at least. But as there wasn’t enough time to go anywhere, she’d opted for a stroll through the castle instead, with Timothy walking a couple of steps behind her.

Well, there was one place she could go, and if things were different, she would have gone to visit Fishlegs as soon as her governess had let her leave. But of course, that wasn’t an option these days. Just thinking about Heather made a bunch of twisted emotions rise inside Astrid. There was the fear that she might expose them, despite her declaration that she would keep their secret. She’d made it clear, after all: she didn’t feel any fealty to them, not when their actions might threaten her own little family. And no matter how much Astrid tried to avoid that thought; she was acutely aware of the fact that, if Hiccup wasn’t a consideration, she probably would have married Eret without question – and thus make Dagur more inclined to focus on his role as ducal heir as well.

But beneath that fear, she could also relate to Heather. The threat of having the future she’d been so sure of ripped away from her, of losing those she loved, and being ready to do everything to keep them… yes, she could sympathise with that all too well. She just hoped that it wouldn’t come to that, that Heather wouldn’t feel threatened enough to take actions against her relationship with Hiccup. Because Astrid wasn’t sure what she’d do then, was even afraid of how far she might be willing to go.

If only they would be able to come up with something of a plan, some way to achieve their goal without tearing anyone else down with them. She just wanted to be with Hiccup, to be able to love him in peace and spend her life with him. Was that really too much to ask for?

To soothe her anxiety at least a little, she pressed her hand to her chest, focusing on and basking in the warm glow of Hiccup’s soul. They would find a way! Somehow… Maybe running away really wasn’t an option, but that didn’t mean that there couldn’t be other ways.

With her hand still resting over her heart, she paused at one of the high windows and gazed out over the land around the castle. It was beautiful, with the lake to her left, the edges of the forest in the distance, and grassland in-between, littered with solitary trees and shrubs here and there. It was still early in the year, but it was obvious that spring was coming quickly now, trees and bushes showing first signs of green and some early flowers growing everywhere.
Yes, it was beautiful… But that didn’t change that it was nothing but a cage, binding and suffocating her.

She was about to turn away when a bit of movement caught her eye. There, on a meadow to the right, a handful of horses pranced over the grass and chased each other around. Some grooms were there, too, watching over the animals, all clearly enjoying the sunlight.

The sight gave Astrid a painful sting. Usually, visiting the stables on a day like this would be an option too, but… but not yet. Someday, she certainly would have the strength to enter the stables again. She was even looking forward to riding and generally being around horses again. But for now, the pain of losing Markor was still too strong. It had all happened so fast. In one moment, everything had been as usual and in the next, he’d just been… gone. She missed him with a dull ache in her chest, one that only worsened when she remembered how she hadn’t even been able to say goodbye in any way and had no way of remembering or mourning him.

Except… that wasn’t really true, was it? she mused with something of a grimace. She still had the statue Hiccup had given her as a Midwinter gift. As a reminder, he’d said… Her lips twitched into a sad smile as she contemplated the irony. He’d meant that it would be a reminder of him for when he couldn’t be with her, and not of the horse it depicted. But somehow, she felt like this was the perfect way to remember Markor: frozen yet so alive in this tiny figurine – as if he was about to turn and run around at any moment. The thought made a lump rise in her throat, but she managed to keep any tears at bay. She would miss him, would always remember him. But no matter how pointless his death had been, endlessly crying over his fate wouldn’t revive him, either.

Tearing her thoughts away from that path, they inevitably landed where she hadn’t wanted them instead. It wasn’t even farfetched, her mind quickly drawing the connection between Markor and Hiccup, of him giving her that figurine, of the nights she’d spend in the stables, so comfortable and optimistic about their future. She still trusted in the Gods, or whatever force had woven their fates together, but even that didn’t really help when faced with the hopelessness brought by rejecting one impossible idea after the other.

Maybe Dagur and Eret had been right after all and approaching Daniel with a request for help might work. But even though he certainly had been fond enough of Hiccup during the winter, Astrid wasn’t sure whether she could rely on just that flimsy hope, especially as he wasn’t to return for at least another week anyway. That would be hitting awfully close to when it would be too late…

She also was aware of a certain piece of parchment that was still safely stored away in her new treasure box. She was ready to use her father’s boon for this; they would probably need every bit of help they could get. But without a plan, she was afraid of revealing her feelings to the King. She just couldn’t predict how he would react. All she knew was that simply ‘requesting to marry Hiccup’ wouldn’t work. The King had made it clear that his announcement of her marrying one of the eligible noblemen currently courting her wasn’t something he could or would take back. And ‘giving Hiccup land and title’ was equally hopeless. Because Hiccup had been right, there was no land even the King could easily give away just like that.

It all seemed overwhelmingly hopeless, but she had to have faith, had to trust that they would find a way. Eventually…

Later, Astrid would be sure that what happened next had to have been the Gods who guided her steps. Meeting the Grand Dukes Oswald and Eret II in the vast labyrinth that was the castle’s corridors couldn’t have been just a coincidence – the timing was too perfect.

At first, she only heard a familiar voice from around a corner, one that made her feel a little more
at ease in an instant, thanks to her mind associating it with enjoyable vacations in the South and
days spent at Southshore’s sunny beaches. The voice spoke quietly, but as soon as she focused, the
words became easily understandable.

“...just received a letter from Lord Gregson. Apparently, it is as I feared.”

“That’s unfortunate,” came Eret II’s muttered reply. “What exactly did he— Oh, hello Astrid,” he
interrupted himself as she stepped into view, a fond smile spreading across his weathered face at
her sight. “How are you, lass? Are you bored to death by all these tournaments and suitors yet?”

Astrid’s face twisted, unsure how to react to that. Of course, Uncle Eret knew her well enough to
know that she didn’t exactly enjoy all this fuss, just like she in return knew that he wasn’t any
better when it came to overly formal events. But on the other hand, he’d been in on this plan, so it
felt a little two-faced for him to complain about them now. Either way, she couldn’t ignore the
fatherly smile on his face and not the usual sense of ease it gave her either. And it again reminded
her of how, under different circumstances, she’d be about to join his House, his family, and do so
happily.

“You know me too well,” she played along, plastering an indulgent smile on her lips. “I’m just
glad it’ll all be over soon.”

“Aye, it certainly will be,” Oswald agreed with a light snort. Beneath his own smile, he seemed
troubled though, making Astrid wonder what the men had been talking about before she’d
interrupted them.

Cocking her head, she tried to look as innocent as possible. “But enough of that. What was it you
were talking about just now? It seems to bother you, is anything the matter?” She wasn’t even sure
what kind of answer she expected. But asking couldn’t hurt, right?

“Oh, that,” Oswald waved her off with a forced smile. “That’s just politics. Believe me, you
wouldn’t be interested in this, lass. If you really think tournaments are boring, be glad that it’s not
on you to deal with such things, too.”

Astrid had to bite back any comment on that. It was so typical that the men wouldn’t tell her
anything.

Eret II grunted in agreement and shook his head. “Yeah, this really is nothing you need to be
concerned about. But it’s good that we met here. I wanted to ask whether my son is already settled
in his new rooms. I hardly get the chance to talk to him these days, he’s always so busy.” He
chuckled and winked at her.

Because of… reasons, Eret had been made to relocate into other rooms, reasons that made her have
to hide a smirk. “As far as I know, he’s relocating today,” she replied as calmly as she could. “A
group of servants should be transferring his belongings to the new room as we speak. At least I’m
supposed to meet him there for a private dinner later – with a whole entourage of chaperons, of
course.” She forced something of an amused grimace onto her face, hoping that it was an
appropriate reaction. Deep down, she was glad over this development, though. With having made
her unofficial choice at the ball came a few privileges that certainly were to her liking. Like being
allowed to spend time with her future husband in a more private setting, with only her warder or
maidservant and Sir Eret’s squire as chaperons.

Apparently, her reaction had been what the men had expected from her as they both chuckled
fondly at her comment. Even Timothy behind her couldn’t stay completely quiet, covering up his
laughter as coughing. Of course, his amusement had an altogether different reason, but that was
something the Grand Dukes didn’t need to know about.

“That sounds about right,” Eret II eventually commented, sobering up again. “Then we better not delay you, wherever you were heading to. See you soon.”

The men nodded at her with something of an insinuated bow – more of a polite nod with a bit of a bend at the waist – which Astrid dutifully returned with a curtsy of her own before she took the obvious dismissal and continued on her way. The fact that she’d again been excluded from any political knowledge bugged her though, so when she reached another junction only a few steps further down the corridor, she went there, giving the Grand Dukes a last friendly smile as she turned around the corner. As soon as she was out of sight though, she made a step to the side to hide in a doorway, indicating Tuff to be quiet and follow her lead. Maybe, just maybe, she could learn something about the political situation of the Kingdom after all.

And for once, she couldn’t believe her luck.

“So, what was it Lord Gregson wrote to you in that letter?” Eret II said, picking up their conversation.

There was a low, unamused snort from Oswald. “Basically, that he’s giving up. He used so many fancy words that I think he asked one of Frigga’s Gythias to help him compose it. All of these wonderful, florid turns-of-phrase, on and on. About how honoured he felt that we put such trust into him and how he’d wanted to give his best to live up to these expectations and so forth.”

“Aye, I know the type of report,” Eret II said. “I think I’ve even written a few in my time, back when we were younger.”

“I know. I helped, remember? But you were drunk at the time, so I’m not surprised that you don’t,” Oswald said tartly but fondly. The pair of them walked past the doorway, and Astrid gave Tuff a look of dire threat if he so much as blinked loudly. Outside, Oswald continued. “But it all boils down to the fact that he doesn’t feel up to the task of rebuilding County Ravenledge. And at this point, it doesn’t even matter whether it’s because he feels as if the people there deserve better after all they’ve been through or whether he just realised how much work that would be and is too lazy to stand his ground under such circumstances. At least he’s honest enough to admit that he doesn’t feel up to the challenge. But that means that we have to find someone else to take it on, and I fear that the reasons for Lord Gregson’s pull-out will become publicly known sooner rather than later. Which also means that in a week or two, it’ll become increasingly difficult to find a replacement. Everyone is hungry for titles, yes, but that’s because they’re all spoiled brats who want to live like, well, nobles, not have to work with me looking over their shoulder.”

"Yes, I see your problem," came Eret II’s reply, his voice getting lower and lower as the distance between Astrid and the Grand Dukes grew. "I wish we could spare Osmond this problem in addition to everything else, but he has to know about it."

"No doubts about that. But maybe, this can even come in handy." Oswald laughed harshly. "Although, while it would make for a great white elephant, it’s getting the poor sap to accept it that’ll be the tricky part. We…"

The voices grew too low for Astrid to understand more, but she felt as if she'd heard enough anyway. Stunned, she stood in her doorway and stared at Tuff, unsure whether she was ready to believe what she'd just heard. But in his eyes, she spotted the same excited gleam that was buzzing in her mind as well, and tentatively, she let hope take roots inside her.

County Ravenledge… the name alone was enough to make her cringe at the reminder of Harold, of
his foul breath on her skin and his filthy hands on her body. But he was the past and that wasn’t what truly was on her mind anyway.

The man her father and the Grand Dukes had instituted as new Count Ravenledge had resigned his office. And now, it was back in the hands of the Crown, free to be distributed to whoever was deemed fit or worthy of the job.

Astrid's heart was pounding rapidly against her ribs and she was incredibly glad for the hard wood in her back keeping her upright. *This was it!* This was what they'd been looking for, the solution to their problem, the way out. If Hiccup became the new Count Ravenledge, then he *definitely* would be of a high-enough rank for her to marry him. Nobody would dare to object to such a choice.

"I assume you want to meet with Eret as soon as possible?" Tuff needlessly asked, emphasising the name to let her know that he knew who she really wanted to see. Astrid could only nod, her mind whirling with countless possibilities. "Then I suggest we return to your rooms and Ruff and I see whether we can help to get his new rooms ready. The sooner you all can talk this through the better."

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The *reason* why Eret had to move into other rooms was the source of a wide range of emotions to Astrid. It had all started with some whispered mutterings on the morning after the ball, whispers Astrid herself hadn’t learned about until a day later. Apparently, some people thought it was inappropriate for Eret, the soon-to-be-but-not-yet-husband of the Princess, to spend his nights in such close proximity to her. After all, he inhabited an entire suite of rooms in the family wing of the castle, only separated from his future wife by three corridors. Why, behind two sets of thick oak doors, all sorts of... *things* could happen in his bedroom!

Yesterday, when Astrid *finally* had heard them from Eret, she’d initially laughed before another thought had struck her, making her irritation smoulder. Apparently, people were *serious* about the insinuations against Eret’s character. Eret had slept in that suite for *months* now, ever since he’d arrived in the capital last fall. And back then, people had already believed them to be a ‘couple’, and had for *years*. But *now* it was a problem? Just when things were heating up to the point that Eret was surviving attempts on his life?

It was an *obvious* smear campaign, and her fury had started to kindle–

–Only to vanish like smoke in a high wind when Tuff had burst out laughing at her indignation and Ruff had, after fighting her own mirth, explained that she and her brother had started the whispers. But even this confusion – and granted, Eret’s and Dagur’s as well – hadn’t lasted long.

The rumours and public demands for decency had apparently all been part of their plan; a few comments down in the kitchens and washer-rooms and elsewhere had spread like a wildfire on open grasslands. With the castle still being unusually packed from the celebrations, there weren’t exactly many other places for Eret – and Hiccup – to move to. House Jag’r’s townhouse certainly was an option, but with Eret still healing and having to participate in the events again as soon as he was recovered, it was more sensible for him to stay at the castle. So, after some discussions – discussions in which the twins were included, in their positions as Eret’s apparent-betrothed’s personal servants – it was decided that Eret would relocate to the so-called *haunted rooms*.

At that, Eret had merely raised an eyebrow, and Dagur had made an encouraging gesture, all of them waiting for Ruff to continue in her explanation.

“The ‘haunted rooms’ are what the staff call the Greatpine Suite,” Ruff explained. “Two floors
down from Astrid’s suite and on the other end of the building. Everyone thinks that they’re haunted because there’s this eerie whistling that everyone who stays there hears.” She met Eret’s eyes with a smirk. “So you’ll trade with the men currently barracked there; they’ll be happy to get out, even though your current suite is smaller. But surely a brave knight like Sir Eret of House Jag’r won’t mind, right?”

Laid out in his sickbed, Eret gave her a dubious look that made the twins burst out in even more laughter. Slapping her knee, Ruff gasped, “Don’t worry, there’s no draugr buried under the floorboards or anything else that people say about the rooms.”

“In fact, be honoured that we’re telling you,” Tuff snickered. “Because it’s a secret.”

“What is?” Astrid demanded.

“Why, the secret passage, of course!” Ruff said innocently.

Astrid blinked. “Secret passage?”

“Yup. The one that ends behind that particularly warty painting around the corner from your rooms, Princess,” Tuff said cheerfully. “It was probably meant to be an easy escape route in case of an attack, but hardly anyone knows about them by now.”

Astrid gave another blink as Eret protested. “But you two can’t be the only ones that know about them. Secret or no secret, it’s really hard to hide a whole passageway, even in a building this big. Someone else will make the connection and complain – and it’s too big a risk to use them, if the servants use them, too!”

“But the servants don’t use them,” Ruff emphasised.

“Present company excepted,” Tuff corrected, grinning. “They’re too small,” he mimed a space only a bit wider than his shoulders and lower than his head, “and filled with cobwebs and... gunk.”

Astrid rolled her eyes. “And you use them for prank getaways?”

“Milady!” Ruff exclaimed, faux-scandalized. “Such accusations!” She smirked and said, “Besides, even the ones that do know...” She shrugged and looked at Astrid and Eret. “They’re all caught up in the romance of it all. I know at least one cook gave me a wink when I made the suggestion.” Spreading her hands out helplessly, she looked between the two of them. “They know what’s up and are rooting for you two.”

“Greaaat,” Hiccup drawled.

“It is, because it means that we can smuggle you in without a problem,” Tuff said, crossing his arms. “So say ‘thank you.’”

They had thanked the twins for their work. And now, two days later, all Astrid felt was a deep sense of gratitude and a good amount of anticipation, giddiness, and nervousness. If everything went as planned, Hiccup would spend this night with her again, and in her bed no less! Oh, if only it was that late already! She couldn’t wait to feel his hands on her body again, to kiss him and to lose herself in his touch.

But it was only mid-afternoon, with Astrid sitting at her decorated tea table, drinking tea, and nibbling at some light pastries as she waited for the hunting parties to return and for her private dinner with Eret to begin. And before she could enjoy feeling Hiccup’s closeness again, there was something else she had to do anyway.
Aside from making sure that they’d all made it back unharmed and wanting to be close to Hiccup again, she also couldn’t wait to tell them about the conversation she’d overheard. A part of her warned her to be cautious, to not get too excited yet. The idea of Hiccup becoming a full Count in only a few days, of him legally joining those participating in the tournaments and hunts to court her… it felt too good to be true.

Nervously tapping her fingers against the porcelain cup between her hands, she tried to imagine the reactions to her officially and openly changing her mind and choosing Hiccup instead of Eret. Would it be possible for her to ask her father to excuse Hiccup from participating in any fights, just to keep him safe? After what had happened to Eret, that certainly wasn’t an unreasonable concern, right? But would the King even support such a request? Would he support her choice at all? Or would it be better if she only made her choice public at the very last moment, not giving anyone even the slightest chance to take action against Hiccup?

For hours, her mind circled around those same thoughts, over and over, until a knock on her door drew her attention. Astrid heard a servant girl delivering a message to Ruff and it made her heartbeat quicken almost unbearably.

“Are they back?” she asked as soon as Ruff approached her and got up from her seat, unable to sit still any longer.

Her maidservant smirked. “Yes, they’re all back, unharmed, and Sir Eret awaits you for your dinner in about half an hour,” she replied in a ridiculously formal voice. Astrid’s lips twitched but she didn’t say anything and simply let Ruff dress her for the occasion, waiting impatiently for her to be done.

Walking along the corridors and down the stairs to Eret’s new rooms seemed to take forever. She knew that this distance served a purpose, one she supported wholeheartedly, but right now, the prolonged walk was driving her insane in her impatience. Eventually, Tuff halted in his strides though and turned to knock on a door to their right. As Eret’s only servant, it was Hiccup who opened them, the sight of him enough to somewhat calm Astrid’s unquiet mind. He was clearly happy to see them, his eyes nearly flowing over with love as they met her own. But there also was a certain tension in them, in his every movement, and after he’d closed the door behind them again, it became clear that Eret and Dagur were just as tense as he was, the atmosphere overall enough to make her forget everything else.

“What happened?” she asked anxiously, looking around from one man to the other. In a corner, she spotted a table set for two even though it was laden with enough food to last at least twice as many people. But where before she’d been looking forward to this informal meal with her brothers and Hiccup, she now couldn’t even think about eating anything.

“Nothing, really,” Eret eventually mumbled, looking up from where he sat on his bed’s edge. Astrid wanted to scoff at this obvious lie, but he lifted his hand to directly ward off her protest. “Nothing that changes anything, at least. It’s just been… let’s say, it’s been a rough day.”

Astrid still wasn’t inclined to let the topic drop, but before she could demand a more thorough explanation, Dagur already jumped in.

He was sitting backwards on a chair, his arms crossed over the backrest, but she suspected that he was still ready to jump in case Eret needed help. “A new rumour was spreading like wildfire during the hunt,” he grumbled, shaking his head in annoyance. “The rumour that… well, that Eret and I are more than just close friends since our childhood and that the whole betrothal is nothing but a charade to cover for us.”
Astrid could do little more than gape, her eyes wandering from Dagur to Eret and back again. They both looked heartbroken, hunched over and with their arms defensively crossed in front of them.

“Okay, but why’s that a problem?” Tuff commented after a few more uncomfortable seconds had passed. “I mean… it’s true? And it’s not as if that’s unheard-of; we have Freyr’s male Ástir for a reason, after all.”

With a heavy sigh, Eret raised his head to look at Tuff. “You’re right, it shouldn’t be much of a problem. But that didn’t make this day any easier. Every time we encountered some of the other men in the woods, they made comments about how I should be ashamed of myself for leading the Princess on like that. That I should openly stand to my preferences and tell her the truth, decline her choice, and leave her to someone who can truly satisfy her.”

“That’s a nice way to describe their insults,” Dagur scoffed angrily, but Eret just shrugged. “It’s what it all boiled down to,” he replied, sounding tired. “And they’re right. I mean… Aside from Hiccup and this charade of a betrothal not being real anyway… It could have become real. And they would’ve been right; you’d deserve better than that, Swanja. Better than me.”

With the lump forming in her throat making it hard to say anything, Astrid made the few steps to cross the distance between them and sat down next to Eret on his bed. She wasn’t sure whether she was even capable of comforting him right now, but she at least had to try.

“Hey, don’t say that,” she said softly, reaching to squeeze his hand. “I… When I agreed to marry you, I knew about all this, remember? So whatever they said, it’s nothing but bullshit. And no matter how things are now… I rather would have spent my life with you, as my partner and best friend, than with any of those idiots who only see me as a trophy to be added to their glory.”

Imagining a life where Hiccup didn’t exist felt weird. Wrong! But she also knew that what she’d just said was true. If it wasn’t for Hiccup, she would have gladly married Eret.

She wasn’t sure whether her words were able to help him though, or whether they would only make it worse instead. But after a short pause, Eret squeezed her back. “Thanks,” he muttered with a weak smile. “I just… well, I just hope that whoever Father might eventually pick as my wife will think the same. So maybe it’s even good that this cat is out of the bag now. It means whoever it might be will know what to expect right from the beginning.”

To that, Astrid wasn’t able to say anything. It was because of her that this was something to worry about again, and there was nothing she could do to help him there. But instead of letting the awkward silence linger, Eret shook his head and put on an almost scarily dark expression.

“But that’s not really the problem here,” he went on in a far graver voice than before. “The question is who started this ‘rumour’. And why now?” He motioned for her to sit down at the set table, gladly accepting her help to get up himself without straining his bound chest too much.

“Could it have been Heather?” she asked as she sat down on her seat, her worries over the other woman and how much harm she could do resurfacing again.

But Dagur vehemently shook his head. “That wouldn’t make any sense. That was a secret she would have wanted to keep, in her own interest. With everyone now knowing that I’m not interested in women, me producing an heir to get her and her child off the hook became just that much more complicated.” He sighed. “And I have no idea who else could be behind this, either. I mean… we tried to not let anyone know but it certainly wasn’t an ironclad secret either. Everyone could’ve found out.”
Astrid wasn’t entirely convinced though. “Are you sure? There were quite a few people who knew, after all. Could anyone–”

“Maybe,” Eret interrupted her, though directly contradicted himself by shaking his head. “But I don’t think anyone here started that rumour, and I can’t see why Cami would do so, either.” He paused, taking a deep breath, before he continued in a darker tone. “And I don’t want to suspect Snot. He’s acting weird, but… we still know him, right? And I don’t see why he’d do it anyway. Certainly not to separate us; he knows that you know, after all. No, I don’t think he would go behind our backs like that. Especially not with him still being not allowed to get up anyway. He didn’t even have the chance to spread such a rumour without it being too easy to trace it back to him. Anyway,” he went on, noticeably aiming to change the topic and mood to something more cheerful. “People know, and we’ll have to deal with it from now on. Which doesn’t really change anything; it’s just annoying.”

Dagur huffed. “Yeah. Just as annoying as your grandfather making the effort to come and meet you this morning only to yell at you two. I’m just glad this circulating rumour hadn’t reached him yet. But who knows? Maybe he’ll have a heart attack once they do. That would make so many lives easier.”

At the mentioning of his grandfather, Eret winced and threw an apprehensive and apologetic look to the side – or, more precisely, to where Hiccup was leaning against the wall next to her. Astrid turned too, and easily spotted the pained grimace that crossed Hiccup’s face. Their grandfather… As far as Astrid knew, this had to have been the first time Hiccup even met the old goat with the old man also knowing who Hiccup was. And judging by his reaction, it hadn’t been a pleasant meeting.

Without even thinking about it, she reached for his hand, letting her thumb glide across his knuckles in a way to comfort him. “What did he want?”

Hiccup seemed to appreciate the gesture, squeezed her hand in his and even let something of a weak smile tug at his lips before he said anything. “He scolded Eret for choosing what had to be the worst squire in history,” he said in a low, but clear and almost emotionless voice. “‘It obviously was the fault of that failure that your armour wasn’t in a good-enough state to deflect the blow like good chainmail should. That idiot might as well have tried to kill you himself and he should get executed for his sloppy mistakes.’” he quoted, and let out a harsh laugh. “‘He didn’t even deign to look at me or to talk to me directly.’”

“And just like the old pigheaded asshole he’s always been, he didn’t even listen when I explained that that had only been my decorative armour anyway.” Eret grunted bitterly. “In opposition to all these noblemen who came here because your Father invited them and who knew about the upcoming tournaments, I didn’t bring my heavy battle armour from Eastervale when we came here last fall. That piece of ceremonial chainmail I was wearing was never meant to withstand such a blow, and we didn’t expect… Oh, whatever. He didn’t even want to listen to any of that anyway.”

“Yeah. You said that it wasn’t your good chainmail, and his response was ‘And whose fault is that!?’” Hiccup added, sounding pained.

“My father’s,” Astrid murmured.

Eret shrugged. “Yes and no. It’s not like we should have expected the armoury here to have chain in my size.” He flexed sarcastically, showing off his physique, and Astrid had to agree with the point; Eret was taller and broader in the chest than most men. “But let’s be honest here. This wasn’t about me,” he continued. “This was about him being upset that all of his dynastic game moves almost got wasted because his last playing piece got a dent. He wasn’t doing it to listen to
anybody, just to vent his frustration that we’re not doing what he wants us to do, like good pawns.”

“Well, he never listens, does he?” Tuff threw in, mirth saturating his voice. “Although I’d love to make him listen, especially if someone told him about you and Dagur. Loki, I’d love to see his face.” He shared a dark grin with his sister, but quickly turned serious again, his gaze shifting to Astrid again.

“Anyway,” he went on, the changed tone of his voice and expression on his face showing that he was about to start an entirely different topic. “Wasn’t there something you wanted to tell the others, Astrid?”

For a heartbeat or three, she just blinked at him in puzzlement. But then, her mood brightened. “Right! There’s something I have to tell you,” she exclaimed at the reminder. The dark atmosphere had distracted her when she’d arrived, had made her focus on her friends’ – no, her family’s – problems instead of what lay ahead of them. But now, it was all back at the forefront of her mind.

Eagerly, she turned to look at the others again, her hand still holding Hiccup’s squeezing him. “I was lucky this morning,” she began, cheeks heating with excitement. “Tuff and I overheard a conversation between your fathers,” she nodded at Eret and Dagur. “Something about Ravenledge – the county, not the man. Apparently, the man who was supposed to become the new Count resigned – because it was too difficult a job for him, or something – and now, it’s back in the hands of Uncle Oswald and my father. If we can convince them to install Hiccup in that position, then that would be the solution, wouldn’t it?”

At first, all three men just gaped at her. They seemed to need a few moments to wrap their heads around this news, but Astrid couldn’t blame them; she was hardly able to believe in this simple solution either. And that was after she’d already had hours to think about it all.

“That… that could actually work,” Eret eventually muttered after a seemingly endless pause, something like cautious optimism swinging in his voice. “If Hiccup becomes a count, he automatically should become eligible for you, too. The only question is how we can convince them to–”

“I can use my boon for that,” Astrid interrupted him. Her gaze darted up to Hiccup, eyes filled with excitement. He knew that she was more than willing to use her father’s promise in his favour. This was the solution they’d been searching for!

Hiccup was looking at her in return as well, but with a somewhat wavering expression instead of the hope she’d expected to see. As if he wanted to let that hope take over but didn’t quite dare to accept it.

Dagur seemed more confused though. “Uh, what boon?”

It took her some effort to tear her eyes away from Hiccup, from assuring him that this could work, and look at Dagur instead. “After… after Harold’s execution, my father granted me a wish,” she explained, grimacing at the renewed reminder. “A royal boon. He said I just need to name what I want and as long as it’s within his power, he’ll grant it to me. And I don’t see why naming Hiccup the new Count Ravenledge would not be in his power. Odin, from how it sounded, they even expected to have trouble finding someone who’d be willing to take this position.”

Eret nodded at her explanation, thoughtfully turning his attention to Hiccup. “What do you think?”

Hiccup’s eyes wandered from one waiting face to the other across the room. He still seemed hesitant though, reluctant even, and Astrid could read his thoughts as if he was saying them out
loud. This is too good to be true!

She got up from her chair and turned toward him, heart singing when his hands glided around her waist practically on reflex. Capturing and holding his gaze, she tried to assure him that this was real. There wasn’t much to be misunderstood from the conversation she’d overheard, after all.

For an endless moment, they gazed at each other, silently communicating. Astrid didn’t need words to know what Hiccup was thinking and feeling, his love for her and the growing hope crystal clear in his eyes. He nodded ever so slightly, probably only visible to her, and his expression softened, his lips stretching into a cautious smile. “There was a time where I wouldn’t have felt comfortable with this solution,” he murmured, voice rough with emotions. Swallowing, he glanced past her to where Eret and Dagur had to be watching them. “I openly admit that I’d hoped to gain this title back when it was vacant a few months back. If… if things had been different that night, if I’d known you’d distribute the county right away, then I’d probably come up with some reason to stay. I would have tried to recommend myself as best I could, hoping…” He trailed off, his eyes gliding back to Astrid as he lifted one hand to caress her cheek.

She remembered that night, the first night she’d sneaked out to meet him at the stables. Missing out on those hours they’d spent together that night would have felt devastating back then… but if it had meant that he’d had that title already, it would have been worth it.

“But unrelated to that, I also wanted to gain this title, or any other, with my own means;” he continued in a low voice, his eyes back on her now. “I wanted to prove myself worthy of you. But now, I know how stupid that was. Now, I won’t turn down such an opportunity. So yes, I’m okay with this idea. More than okay. I’d do anything to be with you, no matter whether it includes gaining a title without my doing or accepting any difficult circumstances that might follow.” He gave her a loving smile. “Because it will be worth it.”

From one moment to the other, Astrid felt as if every bit of space between them was too much, every thought about decency unimportant. Before she could think about it, she’d stretched, her mouth pressed to his and her hands on his back and in his hair pulling him even closer. This was it! They’d found their solution, the way to be together. This was really happening.

And it seemed as if Hiccup had accepted this truth now, too. He was kissing her back with equal eagerness, holding her close with one arm around her back and the free hand at the nape of her neck – still reflexively mindful of her hair as it seemed, but also unwilling to part from her anytime soon. From behind her, Astrid thought she could hear noises of amusement, chuckling and low voices talking, but she wasn’t in the mood to pay the others any mind. All she wanted to focus on was Hiccup, his body pressed so tightly against hers and his tongue dancing along her own, playful, teasing, joyous.

But it seemed as if at least one of those assembled in this room wasn’t quite as optimistic as the rest.

“When you listened in on my father and Uncle Eret,” Dagur asked, apprehensively but in a voice loud enough that it drew even her and Hiccup’s attention, “did they say anything about why exactly Lord Gregson resigned?”

Reluctantly, Astrid parted from Hiccup, though just enough to turn in his arms and give Dagur a thoughtful look. “I… don’t think so,” she said, her forehead wrinkled as she scoured her memories. “Just that there apparently were some reasons to it, but not what those were. Oh, and they said something about an… an elephant, but I don’t know what that was supposed to mean. Elephants are these weird animals in the Southlands, right? Big, with ridiculously large ears and noses?” She threw Hiccup a look and spotted his lips twitching. Clearly, he remembered how they’d looked at
that book together, too. Especially the last pages.

“An elephant?” Dagur inquired, his brows furrowed. “That... Was that all they said?”

Astrid shrugged. “I… think so?”

But Tuff shook his head, drawing everyone’s attention when he pushed himself off the wall he’d been leaning against. “No, that wasn’t all,” he said with a thoughtful expression. “I remember because it sounded so odd, as if it meant something completely different. So I memorised it to find out later. Lord Berserker said that ‘while it would make for a great white elephant, it’s getting the poor sap to accept it that’ll be the tricky part’.”


Eret cocked his head, clearly intrigued by his lover’s reaction. “What is it, Dag? Does that mean anything to you?”

Dagur nodded, lips pressed into a thin line. “A ‘White Elephant’ is something of an idiom we took over from the people of the Southlands,” he explained in a pressed voice. “It means it’s a… a trap, you can say. As in, they give the county to some rival they want to get rid off, knowing that the effort of rebuilding it will ruin them.”

From one moment to the other, Astrid’s good mood fell, her stomach feeling as if it was dropping down to her knees, not helped by Tuff nodding and mumbling something like, “When something looks too perfect, it probably sucks.”

“So… so it’s not a sensible solution after all?” she asked meekly. All this had sounded too good to be true… did that mean it had been nothing but wishful thinking after all?

But Dagur shook his head, albeit reluctantly. “I… didn’t say that. I mean, let’s be honest, it’s not as if you have much to lose anyway. It’s not as if Hiccup would put some major fortune into this county or risk his high reputation if he wasn’t able to succeed.” He gave a harsh snort. “But I’ve read a few of the reports that came in from Ravenledge over the past weeks. The county really is in a horrible state. You’d have to rebuild the entire main city, along with some smaller ones, and that’s not even counting the long-term damage from the old count’s rule.” He started ticking off on his fingers. “You’d have to do all that without having the craftsmen nearby because they have no place to live or to work yet. And without being able to organise the work, because you don’t have any administration. Not even the Orders can be of any help with organising or manpower, because there are no central temples anymore. And in addition to all that, the people won’t easily trust yet another nobleman who comes to rule over them, especially not after Lord Gregson now gave up.”

He shook his head. “I’m not saying it’s impossible, but...” He shrugged, looking grim.

Astrid felt the weight of Dagur’s words pressing down on them, noticeably dampening the good mood from only moments before. But before she could work through them and try to come up with reasonable objections, Ruff beat her to it. “Not trying to downplay the problems you just mentioned,” she said dryly. “But I think Hiccup and Astrid have an advantage your Lord Gregson didn’t have.”

Dagur cocked his head at her, puzzled. “And that would be what exactly?”

Ruff gave a snort. “Astrid is the Princess! It’s not just any other nobleman who comes to these people but the daughter of the King herself. That alone should give the people there a little hope, the trust that, this time, their problems get taken seriously. And I’d be surprised if the King wouldn’t send some more serious help in the form of goods and men and money when it comes
down to ensuring his daughter’s future.”

“She’s right,” Eret threw in before anyone else could say anything, a grin on his face now as his eyes met Astrid’s. “And that’s not the only advantage you might have.” He took a moment to look from one to the other, his grin widening. “Remember what we talked about the other night? We might not be able to get Hiccup a title... But once he has one, we’re definitely in a position to support him. We’d still have to talk to our fathers, but I don’t think they’d be against drawing up trade contracts and assurances of support in advance. Hiccup might not have much to offer all on his own, but he sure as Hel has friends in powerful positions.”

Slowly, Dagur nodded. “That would make a difference, indeed,” he agreed, his face brightening. “It still won’t be easy, though. It’ll probably take years before something like normalcy or routine would come back to your life. Are you sure you’re feeling up to such a task and the responsibility?” he asked, his eyes firmly on Hiccup.

Hiccup nodded, though a little tense. “I’m prepared to take that kind of responsibility.” His eyes dropped to her, his lips forming a soft smile. “So yes. I’ll do whatever it takes.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh, wow! Looks like there's an easy solution after all. 😊

Or... is there? *evil laughter in Author*
Chapter 46: I'll Make It Up To You

Chapter Notes

Yay, finally a new chapter! ^^ I'm truly sorry that I couldn't finish this as announced in November. But my daughter decided to come a little earlier than expected, throwing off many of our plans... We're both doing fine though. :)

This chapter... Is, for the most part, self-indulgent fluff. I hope you won't mind. ;) But there's also another bit, one I know many of you have been waiting for since forever. ;) The title comes, again, from an Imagine Dragons song, 'I'll make it up to you' this time. It's a rather fitting song for Hiccup right now, don't you think?

See the end of the chapter for more notes

After their long discussion about how County Ravenledge could be claimed and improved, Astrid and the others having left, Hiccup was left with a chaotic whirlwind of emotions.

On the one hand, he was excited and elated by this apparently simple and direct solution to their problems. They had a plan, and if everything worked out, there was nothing in the way of him and Astrid being together. It would be a difficult path to follow, for sure, with the overwhelming prospect of ruling an entire county of people whose culture and customs he hardly knew. It was more than a bit intimidating, the more he thought about it, especially given the conditions of the place. But if that was what the Gods demanded of him, then he would do it.

But on the other hand... he was anxious, so much so that his hands wouldn’t stop clenching nervously, no matter what he did to distract himself. Eret, Dagur, and even Astrid seemed convinced that Grand Duke Oswald and the King would agree to give him the title without much resistance, but in the privacy of his own thoughts, he wasn’t so sure about that. Those powerful men knew about his life, knew enough to know how much of a failure he was, in pretty much every aspect. Why would they agree to support him so openly?

It wasn’t as if they could win anything out of this, could they?

Later, as he helped Eret get out of the elaborate and dust-and-sweat-fouled day-clothes he was wearing, he couldn’t keep from asking the question which had buzzed in his mind like a bee. “Why are you doing all this for us?”

With a pained groan, Eret laid back on his bed as Hiccup brought the bowl of warm water over from the hearth. It was essential to keep the wound on Eret’s chest as clean as possible, and since it was difficult for Eret to do so himself, it was Hiccup’s responsibility to help him. “What do you mean?” he replied, sounding puzzled and tired after a long exhausting day.

“Everything,” Hiccup said after a short pause, shrugging. “I understand that you care for Astrid and want to see her happy. But all this goes far beyond that. Supporting me in this… You know as well as I do how that could backfire and weaken you, politically I mean. So… why?”

The plan was that Astrid, Dagur, and Eret would speak with their fathers in the morning, during or
possibly even before their common breakfast. It made sense, of course; it was better to wait until
then instead of approaching them now in the middle of the night and dealing with them while they
were grumpy. They’d talked for a long while and by now, half the castle had to be asleep already.
But waiting until the morning to get the confirmation was hard. And even though Hiccup knew
that Eret might have his own reasons for supporting him, reasons that wouldn’t necessarily
convince the most powerful men and leaders of the Kingdom, he still hoped that his answer would
ease his mind at least a little bit.

Eret chuckled, interrupted by the occasional wince as Hiccup cleaned the area around the cut on
his chest. “Two reasons,” he eventually replied. “First: I know you. And I trust you. We trust you.
You’re a good man, Hiccup, honest, reliable, and diligent. You’re going to be a good leader to
those battered people. As Dagur said, it’ll take time. But I’m sure that, under your leadership,
County Ravenledge and its people can thrive again. So supporting you is definitely not a waste of
time or effort. It’s for the good of the people, and that’s what our main interest should be, right?”

Hiccup nodded, inwardly hoping that he could live up to this trust, these expectations. “And… the
second reason?” he asked cautiously.

Eret sighed, his eyes falling closed. “The second reason is that we know only too well how it is to
love without hope. Dag and I… we knew right from the start that our love had no future. We were
prepared. But even though we always knew our time would be limited… Actually having it come
to an end with the wedding just… just hurt! And even though we’ve got a reprieve of some sort
now, we know it’ll end someday. Just thinking about it is driving me insane.” He paused and took
a deep breath before letting it out again. “For you, it’s different though… for you, there’s hope. It
might be a slim hope and the road to reach it will be hard, but it’s possible. So we want to help you
in whatever way we can, simply because that is something we can do.”

Hiccup nodded again, putting the water away and handing Eret a piece of cloth to dry himself up.
“Thank you,” he murmured. It was far too little to convey the gratitude he felt, but it was all he
could come up with.

However, it seemed to be enough for Eret. “Anytime,” he replied in a light voice. “But now, you
better leave. Tuff should be here any minute now. And I want to say ‘Have a good night’, but… but
I’d rather it not get too good if you know what I mean, so…”

Hiccup was incredibly glad that he wasn’t facing Eret at the moment, that he wouldn’t notice the
blush on his face. “Don’t worry,” he mumbled awkwardly. “I won’t risk losing her again.”

He hadn’t meant to say those last words out loud; they’d slipped off his lips before he’d been able
to think about it. And, as expected, there was a confused frown on his cousin’s face when he
turned back to face him. But since he didn’t ask, Hiccup didn’t feel obliged to explain himself and
quickly changed the topic. “Is there anything else you need? Before I leave, I mean?”

Still frowning, Eret shook his head, so Hiccup quickly bid him good night and left the elaborate
bedchamber.

Once the door closed behind him, Hiccup exhaled deeply. Eret’s brief explanation had soothed
him, but only a little. His reasons were understandable enough, and Hiccup wanted to believe that,
if the situation was reversed, he and Astrid would also do whatever they could to make it possible
for Eret and Dagur to stay together. And as for the other reason… He could only hope that Eret
was right and that he would be able to provide a better life for the people of Ravenledge one day.

If he even got the chance to try.
He’d been right, Eret hadn’t been able to provide him with the answer he longed for, but at least his words had settled his anxiety to a bearable level. But that helped to ease his chaotic emotions only so much. Because the excitement and anxiety over their plan had only been part of his emotional turmoil. The question about what the months and years to come would bring them was certainly important, but right now, the more immediate future was a little more pressing to him.

He’d promised Eret that there was no reason to be worried and he was dead set on keeping this promise, to Eret and to himself alike. But there were more facets to that promise than Eret thought.

Sticking to what Eret was concerned about and not having sex with Astrid until they were truly married wouldn’t be a problem. They’d managed relatively well so far, and the prospect of not having to wait two more years but only a couple of weeks would make holding out even easier. Theoretically, at least.

Practically though, just thinking about tonight – and if it worked as planned the following nights as well – made his entire body tingle in anticipation. Hours of being alone with Astrid, of being free to kiss and to hold her... Gods, how he missed feeling her soft body against his own, his hands exploring her, tasting her lips and her skin, listening to–

With a low groan, he shook his head, chasing those thoughts away. He couldn’t– no, mustn’t indulge in those fantasies! “Just a few weeks,” he reminded himself in a low whisper, biting his lip in the hope that the pain might help him focus. He had no confirmation of his fears on this matter, no certainty that their getting intimate before had somehow caused their separation. But he also couldn’t shake off the suspicion that that might have been the reason, that his overconfidence had angered the Gods and the temporary separation had been a warning. And he wouldn’t risk losing her again! Even if it meant going weeks or maybe even months without touching her like he wanted to – he would take that unresolved longing over possibly losing her forever at any time. He just hoped Astrid would understand his reticence.

Because on top of everything else, there was one other aspect that might make keeping his promise to Eret a little more complicated. Knowing Astrid, Hiccup suspected that she was going to disagree with him on this point, but he just knew that it was his fault she’d been through so much pain during the past weeks. If he hadn’t been so stupid, hadn’t given up too soon, hadn’t given in to his longing for her in the first place...

Sighing, he shook his head. No matter how much he wished it were otherwise, he couldn’t undo the past. But he was going to do everything to keep any more pain away from her from now on. And furthermore, it meant that he’d do everything she asked for, that he would follow her every wish. To make it up to her.

He was aware of the possible contradiction of these two urges, and his thoughts were still running in circles when Tuff appeared behind one of the elaborate tapestries a little while later. Hiccup rose as he silently beckoned him to follow. Just as Ruff had said, the passage was narrow and clearly didn’t get used regularly, with dust and cobwebs everywhere. But Hiccup didn’t pay much attention to the condition of the space, nervousness and anticipation settling in his stomach. At the end of this walk, he would see her again, be alone with her. And while he was unquestionably looking forward to it, his breath coming fast and even his bad leg moving without complaint in the cramped passageway, there was the point that, as so often before, the night would be a tough balancing act between what he wanted to do and what he had to do.

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Agitatedly chewing on her lower lip, Astrid sat at the edge of her bed, her eyes glued to the door. Any minute now, Ruff would lead Hiccup in here. It wouldn't be long anymore, she knew that. But
still, every single second of waiting felt like an eternity.

Gods, she was such a mess.

Ever since she’d overheard the Grand Dukes’ conversation earlier that day, all her thoughts had circled around County Ravenledge and how this could be the solution to their problem. But now that she’d presented this idea to Hiccup and their friends and they’d agreed on a plan, practical reality was catching up with her again.

She and Hiccup would spend the entire night together, and in contrast to that night after the ball where she’d fallen asleep in his arms, this time they wouldn’t be too exhausted to do… whatever they wanted to do. The thought made her heart beat faster and she balled her hands into fists to keep them from trembling, crumpling the blanket and her nightgown in the process. Gods, why was she so nervous? This wasn’t the first night she spent alone with him, after all.

But no, she wasn’t nervous. She was excited. And it was because she’d been with Hiccup before that she was so looking forward to this, couldn’t wait for him to finally be here.

What would the night bring?

Would this night be a loving reunion after these painful weeks, with slow caresses and exploring each other anew? She could picture it, softly entangled between the sheets of her bed, celebrating their love until the sun rose again.

Or would they jump right back to how it had been before, heated passionate kisses without preamble? She wouldn’t mind that either. Oh, how she longed for his touch and to feel again the exhilaration only he could bring her.

But maybe… maybe they would continue where they’d stopped more directly. If Hiccup remembered to bring that pot of scented oil, then… She sucked in a quick breath and bit down on her already slightly swollen lip to keep herself from moaning. All too well she remembered how it had felt to have his fingers inside her. Would he insist on preparing her again for tomorrow night or could they… jump right in? Heat rose to her cheeks, and she wondered whether she could manage to stay a little quieter or what Ruff and Tuff would say in the morning.

Although… there also was another option. Not that she expected this night to go that way, no certainly not. But maybe… it was a possibility, wasn’t it? Now that the solution for their problem was within reach, maybe they could even go a step further. They would be married in a few weeks – she vehemently refused to entertain the possibility that it could be otherwise. The date for her wedding was set, irrevocably. Nothing would delay or prevent that, her father had made that clear. Was that also true if an inspection by one of Freya’s Gythias revealed that her maidenhead was broken already? That could have happened at any time, during that accident on the ride for example. Or when she vowed to Fyrir Gothi herself that she’d never been intimate with anyone but Hiccup, her husband-to-be? That could work, couldn’t it? Nobody would want to risk a scandal, after all. So even if she fell pregnant tonight… that wouldn’t really matter, would it?

Astrid’s blood was boiling hotter and her throat went dry at that idea, her vision becoming a little blurry. Gods, why wasn’t Hiccup here already?

In the next moment, she nearly fell off her bed, her heart jumping into her throat and beating furiously, when a knock came from the door. Hastily, she scrambled to her feet, bare on the plush carpet, and called for Ruff to come in.

“Tuff brought something for you,” Ruff announced, smirking when she noticed Astrid’s state, and
stepped aside to allow Hiccup behind her to enter. “I’d say I wish you a good night… but—”

“But I’d like to sleep for once,” came Tuff’s voice from somewhere behind her. It made Astrid blush even harder.

Snickering, Ruff shrugged. “There you go. See you two in the morning.” And with those words, she left, pulling the door closed behind her – and leaving Astrid and Hiccup alone in her bedroom.

A heavy silence fell over them, only interrupted by their audible breathing. This was truly happening. Hiccup was here, in her bedroom! A place where – except for the occasional exception of a healer or her actual brother – nobody but Ruff was allowed. Not even Tuff would enter this room without a damn good reason. And now, she was alone here with Hiccup, with the man she loved, the man she was going to marry. The man whose touch and closeness she craved beyond anything else.

And they had all night…

.o O o.

Hiccup barely noticed how the door closed behind Astrid’s maidservant. His head was entirely empty, wiped clean since the moment he’d entered. He’d expected that spending the night with Astrid would be intense, but just being here was so much more than he’d anticipated. This room, so personal with pictures and decorations that just screamed Astrid, the bed, so big and inviting, and Astrid herself, hair loosely bound in her usual nighttime braid and dressed in only a thin night shift – it all made for an incredibly heady atmosphere.

“Hey,” Astrid eventually breathed a little shyly after he’d done nothing but stare at her for... he couldn’t say how long. Long enough, probably.

“Hey.” Swallowing hard, Hiccup managed to reply in the same manner. If she’d hoped for more of a reaction though, he couldn’t help but disappoint her, unable to form coherent thoughts or even to move. His eyes lingered where they shouldn’t, on her parted lips, plush and inviting, begging him to kiss them, and on the curves of her breasts and hips barely hidden by the thin fabric around her.

Freya, how much he wanted her…

His mouth went dry, even swallowing again and licking his lips to wet them not helping in the slightest. He still knew he couldn’t let anything happen, not for real. But it was nigh on impossible to remember that when she slowly came closer, bright eyes filled with warmth and longing holding him hostage.

When she stretched to kiss him, her lips on his felt so soft, somehow softer even than only hours before or during the one night they’d spent together on Eret’s couch. They drew a low groan from somewhere deep in his chest, and without his doing, his hands curled around her waist, pulling her closer. Her response robbed him of the last shred of coherence when her hands grabbed at his hair, fingernails scraping, and she tilted her head to deepen their kiss.

Hiccup momentarily lost track of everything. All that mattered was the feeling of her lips, the taste of her skin as his mouth wandered down her neck, and the lovely sound of her gasping his name into his ear, silk and lace bunched up between his fingers as he hurled her closer still. Gods, he’d missed this so much, this closeness and heat, the intimacy of reconnecting with the missing part of his soul, with her, and it felt so completely right.

How couldn’t it be right?
Somewhere in the back of his mind, a small voice was warning him, but it got lost in the flood of sensation she elicited when she gently but determinedly tugged him along. His thighs hit the edge of her bed and without really noticing he kicked off his shoes before they both tumbled onto the soft mattress.

It was all just a blur. They rolled around on the bed until she lay beneath him, her lithe body tight against his and her hand tugging at him until he was where she wanted him. Her hands were everywhere, in his hair, running down his sides, clutching at his back while her lips stole every coherent thought from his mind.

Hiccup shook with desire, her touches sending sparks like lightning strikes through his entire body. Heat pooled in his lower belly, so close to where he could feel her against him. Resisting her was impossible.

Astrid uttered the softest moans when his hands roamed over her body in return, making his head spin and the thin fabric wasn’t enough to keep him from feeling her inviting warmth. He couldn't get enough, was addicted to every noise and every sensation, now after their separation even more so than before. Leaning down, his mouth wandered down her neck, kissing and tasting her, feeling her heartbeat pulsing against his tongue.

A shudder ran through his body when he felt her touch on his bare back beneath his tunic, not hesitant at all where fingers dug into scarred skin. It reminded him of how scared he’d once been of how she would react to his mangled body, to the signs of his failures, and of how much he trusted her now.

But the reminder also brought a brief moment of clarity to his mind, making him realise what they were doing. He lay on top of Astrid on her bed, with her thin night shift making a poor job at covering her body – especially with the skirt bunched up somewhere around her hips and the neckline nearly dropping off her shoulders. With the way she gazed up at him through dazed eyes and that pink flush on her cheeks, she looked breathtakingly beautiful, almost agonizingly. All he wanted at that moment was to give in, to feel her eager touch on his skin, to let her take off his tunic like she was trying just now, and to not care about the consequences.

But he did care, and greatly so.

"No," Hiccup gasped, fighting to keep his clarity of mind and not give in to her oh so tempting touch. He shook his head as if to clear it and then rolled off her with a groan, hands moving to cover his face. "No, no, we can't… mustn't… no…"

Gods, he was an idiot! Why had he let it come this far when he’d known to be wary of the temptation? With brutal force, he pulled up the memory of how she’d looked when he’d left her standing in the armoury, of all the pain he’d put her through. No matter how sweet her skin tasted on his tongue, it wasn’t worth risking her being in such pain again.

Although, it might be too late already. He clearly remembered the pain and confusion on her face whenever he’d pulled away from her before, her insecurities and fear of rejection. Why, oh why, hadn’t he resisted right from the start? If he’d only kissed her without getting carried away and explained himself right away… But he hadn’t resisted, had given in to his desire so readily, and now, he’d done it again, had–

“What is it?”

Her voice pulled him out of his whirling thoughts like nothing else could.
He’d expected her to be disappointed and hurt, but there was none of that. Instead, she sounded mostly calm and even a little curious, throwing him off track completely.

Gulping, he lowered his hands, his eyes finding hers in an instant. They were big, her pupils dilated, and there was a distinct flush on her cheeks, her breath coming a little faster than was normal. But aside from those obvious signs of arousal, she seemed surprisingly composed.

“I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t mean to… to hurt you or reject you.”

“I know you didn’t,” she replied, her expression turning soft but also a little sad as her eyes dropped back to his lips for a heartbeat.

Hiccup swallowed again and sat up, turning around to better look at her. “You’re not… upset? That I wouldn’t…” Breaking off, he only nodded at her, her bare shoulders and neck so alluring that it was hard to even look at her.

Unintentionally taunting him further, she took a deep breath, her chest rising and falling with it, before she sat up as well. It made her shift slip even further down her arm, but she caught it before it could slip off completely and pulled it back up over her shoulder when she noticed him staring at exposed skin. When he looked up at her face again, she was smiling softly, her eyes gleaming.

“Hiccup, I know that you would never hurt me,” she said, that soft smile becoming even more beautiful somehow. “And I… I trust you, you know? In you and in our feelings, in our bond and our fate. Nothing will ever separate us again.” She frowned as if looking for the right words. “It’s… it sounds silly, I guess. Cocky. But I know that you… want me. There were times where I worried, yes, but those are over. So, if you refuse to touch me now… well, then I know it’s not because you don’t want to. I trust that you have a reason, something I just don’t get yet. But I also know that… I know that I can ask you everything. That I don’t need to be afraid or embarrassed, not ever. So… what is it?”

Hiccup could only gaze at her in awe, lips parting but unable to come up with a response. By the Gods, she was perfect! Once again he wondered what he’d done to deserve having her in his life.

Instead of answering, he leaned in and kissed her again. Maybe that wasn’t the wisest thing to do given how much his heart was still racing from their heated kiss only moments before. But he was more careful now, the kiss more controlled this time, fueled by gratitude and love instead of desire as he lifted his hand to cradle her face. She really was amazing. His thumb caressed her cheek as he ended the kiss and he instead leaned his forehead against hers. “I love you,” he whispered hoarsely.

Chuckling, Astrid retreated. “I love you too,” she replied, the warmth in her eyes almost enough to make him melt then and there. Then they lit up with a teasing spark. “But if that’s the reason why you retreated, then you’ll have to elaborate.”

Hiccup couldn't help but snort in amusement at her remark, even as he grimaced. He just hoped she would still be this understanding after he’d laid out his reasons. With a slight nod, he stood up, putting a little more space between them. He needed to explain himself and getting distracted by her closeness wouldn’t do him much good now.

"You're probably going to think I'm overreacting," he began, taking a few steps up and down her room. Casually, he looked around, taking in random details without really registering them. Doing anything just to not get distracted again. "But, this separation... Somehow, I feel like it was some kind of punishment. Or a warning maybe. I mean, sure, Cami said that what we did, getting intimate and all, wasn't against the rules. But even she can't know what the Gods really want."

Hiccup paused, warily glancing over at her. But she didn't say anything, sitting at the edge of the
high bed and watching him with her head cocked in confusion, so he quickly went on. "It's just…
the timing, you know? Right before we were about to take that huge step and do anal sex, this…
this major obstacle was thrown into our way." Agitatedly, he threw his arms up, gesturing wildly.
"And I'm having a tough time accepting that to only have been a coincidence. What if it was a sign
instead? A sign that we're supposed to wait until we're truly married. Not just with actually having
sex, but also with… well, with everything else."

He could feel her disappointment now, even though she tried hard to not let it show. "Uh, okay?"
she replied, a little insecurely. It was as if he could see the cogs in her head turning until she spoke
again. "That's… well, maybe you’re right, but…" She paused again, thinking, then shook her
head. "I don't think that makes much sense. I mean, it didn't just happen because of what we did.
Me getting married and all that, it had been planned for months, since just before the Midwinter
ceremony."

Hiccup nodded; she had a point, after all. But something about what she'd just said still poked at
something in his mind. "Since before Midwinter?" How could she be sure about that?

"At least that’s what Eret mentioned," she confirmed with a slight shrug. "Something about how
Daniel had acted differently from one day to the other. Since that day you all went to meet Cami
that first time, remember? He said that Daniel opted out of that visit at short notice and had a long
talk with Father instead, and after that, his behaviour changed?"

Hiccup paled, his heart stuttering painfully. "That..." he muttered. "Gods, that’s even worse." He
took a few deep breaths to calm himself and tried to put order into his jumbling thoughts as it was
clear that Astrid didn’t understand. "That night... Don’t you remember? That’s when we started.
When Cami told me it would be all right to get intimate with you if we didn’t go too far and when
you were waiting for me at the stables then, when we--"

"- when you made me come the first time," she completed his sentence. There was understanding
in her voice now, regret in her eyes.

He nodded again, gulping. "Exactly. And if that’s the night when your father decided to pull your
wedding forward and to thwart all my plans to gain a title... Yeah, no, I really don’t believe that’s
a coincidence!"

Astrid still didn’t seem convinced though. Chewing her lower lip, she slowly shook her head,
thinking. "I don’t know, Hiccup. That’s just--"

"Exactly," he interrupted her gently, stepping closer and reaching for her hand. "I don’t know
ever either. But I’m not going to risk losing you again."

At that, all her doubts and worries melted off her features and got replaced by something
immeasurable softer. She pulled him closer and firmly intertwined her fingers with his. "You won’t
lose me. Ever."

Hiccup couldn’t help but return her soft smile, squeezing her hand but not replying directly. He
wouldn’t take her or their future for granted again.

"So," Astrid went on after a short pause, "what exactly does this mean now? Will you stay here
tonight?"

Sighing, Hiccup nodded. Of course, strictly thinking even him being here and alone with her went
far beyond what he should do. He should apologise to Astrid, thank her servants for their help, and
leave, should not risk getting overwhelmed by temptation again. It would be the prudent thing to
do. But even with all logical reasoning and pondering, there were things he simply couldn’t do – and staying away from Astrid was one of them.

“Yes, I will. I don’t know anymore which rules apply to us, so… Well, in that vision I had, the Goddess told me that I’d have to do what comes naturally to me. So I’ll just have to trust in my own judgement, I guess. And as long as we don’t get carried away, I don’t feel like being here is wrong.”

Astrid visibly relaxed. “That’s good. Because I don’t think so either,” she replied with a breathy little chuckle, but then became serious again. “But what else does it mean? Where would you draw the line? Just… just so I know?”

She sounded so vulnerable…

Hiccup gulped, reminding himself once more of how easily he could hurt her, of the power they both had over each other. He raised his hand to brush a strand of hair out of her face, caressing her soft skin as gently as he could. “I think this is all right,” he murmured, leaning closer. “And this, too.”

His lips brushed over hers and she hummed, mouth twitching into a smile as his tongue poked out to taste her. Slowly, almost despite himself, his hand rose to cup the back of her head, pulling her closer again, deeper into their kiss. Astrid responded with a happy sigh, lips parting to welcome him.

Quickly, the kiss grew firmer, more heated with breathless groans, tongues swirling, and teeth nipping at soft lips. Hiccup trembled with repressed desire; she was just so wonderful, perfect, everything. But he was careful this time, making sure that his hands stayed near her head, dropping only to her neck and shoulders and not lower. He could feel that Astrid wanted more, wanted to melt against him, to touch him, and he greatly appreciated that she held back nonetheless. His ability to resist temptation only reached so far.

When he pulled back again, there was a warm glow in her eyes, something that hadn’t been there just a minute ago but which he felt, too. After the months of exploring each other before her birthday, sticking to only rather innocent kisses like this one felt like not enough. But at the same time… it was enough. The closeness and assurance were all they needed, for now at least. Everything else would come back to them over time.

“Yes, I think it’s okay for me to be here,” he repeated, his voice a little rougher than before. “It’s okay for us to kiss, to cuddle, and to hold each other through the night.”

She nodded and he pulled her closer into his arms, just as she leaned against him too, not resisting when she guided them to lie down again. It wasn’t so they could continue to make out, so it was all right. And it felt so good to hold her like this again! His nose was in her hair, drowning him in that subtle scent of mayweed he’d missed so much, and his arm lightly rested around her waist, her warmth against his chest. He wouldn’t have minded spending the rest of the night like this.

“I missed this,” she whispered after a while. “This closeness, feeling you, and…”

She trailed off, squirming a little in his embrace. It made her rub against him in an incredibly enticing way, and with a small grunt, his hold around her waist tightened, keeping her still. Gods, he wanted…

He could feel how she actively restrained herself, almost trembling beneath his hands with the effort of keeping herself from moving further. “I’m sorry,” she chuckled, embarrassed. “I just…
well, I’d hope we… that…” She broke off, biting her lip. Then she sighed. “But it’s… it’s okay. I understand. I think. And it’s only a few more weeks.” She turned her head to look up at him, smiling. “I can wait that long.”

Hiccup’s breath caught in his throat. Lying beneath him with that smile on her face, strands of her golden hair all around her on the pillow, illuminated only by the flickering light of the lantern, and with soft understanding glowing in her eyes… Gods, she was so beautiful, inside and out, irresistible. Almost.

“I’m sorry, too,” he murmured. “For disappointing you and–”

“Hush!” Astrid placed her hand over his lips. “You didn’t. It’s fine.”

Sighing, he closed his eyes and kissed her fingers, softly. It made her giggle, and when she pulled them back again after a minute, he opened his eyes again to look at her. “I love you, Astrid. And… and I promise to make it up to you.” He hesitated for a moment, taking a deep breath, but then brought his mouth to her ear, his hand caressing her neck. “Every night, I’ll make it up to you, I swear…”

Astrid’s breath hitched, and for a heartbeat, Hiccup considered stretching his own rules a little, just once. Just letting his hand glide down her barely covered body, playing with her breasts and toying with her clit, just lazily getting her off while stealing the breath from her lungs with his kisses, just this one time. And he almost did it. When she turned her head and her lips found his again, there was a moment when his resolve crumbled and nearly failed him. She clearly wanted, how could he resist her?

But then he remembered the armoury again, the pain in her eyes as he’d left her standing – and pulled away.

“Mmh, I can’t wait,” Astrid hummed, her eyes dazed and dreamy as she looked up at him, panting.

Hiccup resisted the urge to watch her chest rise and fall and instead lay down next to her again, eyes firmly on her face. She didn’t need to know how close he’d been to giving in, how much he wanted to give in.

They made themselves more comfortable and for a long while just cuddled and enjoyed each other’s company before Astrid broke the silence again. “Can I ask you something?”

Hiccup frowned. “Of course. Whatever you want.” Hadn’t she just said herself that she could ask him everything? What made her think she couldn’t ask now?

Nodding, she turned around and eyed him somewhat curiously. “It’s… well, you mentioned a few times now that you had another vision. And I was wondering what it was about. I mean, you don’t have to tell me. I had none, so this one clearly was only for you. I’m curious though and thought, maybe, you could tell me about it? Only if you think it’s okay and want to…”

Understanding sparked in his mind and his features softened. “Sure. I don’t feel like it was meant to be a secret.” He shifted into a sitting position that made it easier to talk which Astrid mimicked, leaning against his side. “I was back at that small house we both saw, in the middle of a forest,” he began, trying to remember as many details as possible. “At first, I thought it was just the same vision again, then I noticed the differences. The door wouldn’t open to reveal you, and…”

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Over the course of about half an hour, he told her of the dream-vision the Goddess had sent him,
about how he’d needed Astrid’s key to open the door, the Goddess wearing her face, and what she’d said to him. He told her everything he could remember and once he’d finished, Astrid was silent for a minute or two, processing what he’d told her.

"How did you know it wasn’t just an ordinary dream?" she eventually asked.

Hiccup shrugged. "I didn't," he admitted. "Not right away. I spent the entire night and most of the following day pondering. I’d been so convinced that… that there was no hope left for us. But the night before, I’d talked to Cami and she’d said something that made me hope again, even as that wasn’t how she’d meant it. She’d said that, if we really were connected by a true soulbond, then not even the meddling of a King could separate us. She’d tried to convince me that our bond couldn’t be real because you would marry Eret, that I should let you go and move on… But I couldn’t shake off the thought that it also could mean something else, that nothing can ever separate us, not even your father. Because no matter what she said, I knew that our bond had been real. Is real.” He let his hand drop to her chest, and for once it was easy to ignore how close he was to touching her in a way he mustn’t do. Their bond was more meaningful than any physical aspects of their relationship.

“When I had that dream then…,” he went on. “You’re right, I couldn’t be sure whether it had been only a dream or not, and I spent the rest of the night and most of the following day thinking about it. What it could mean, whether I really was supposed to kill someone or whether that’s just been some imaginary task born from my desperation. I just couldn’t be sure, not… not until your accident and Markor…”

Astrid froze at his words, and he winced when she inhaled sharply, understanding what he was talking about.

“I’m sorry.” He wasn’t sure what exactly he was apologising for, ending Markor’s life or bringing up his death in the first place. Both in a way. She hadn’t brought that topic up so far, but he could imagine how much losing Markor must have hurt her. And Hiccup literally had his blood on his hands, the image of red sticking to his skin etched forever into his mind.

She nodded, shifting closer and eagerly leaned against him when he hesitantly opened his arms and offered a comforting hug. “It’s okay,” she mumbled after a while. “Not that he’s… but I’m okay. You couldn’t have changed anything of what happened and… What I mean is… I don’t blame you, you know? On the contrary, I’ll never forget him and I have you to thank for that.”

She nodded to the side of the bed and Hiccup spotted the wooden horse he’d given her as a Midwinter gift standing on her bedside table. He wasn’t sure how to react, whether to be sad or happy that this gift, that had only ended up in her belongings by chance, now served such an oddly fitting purpose. He’d wanted it to be a reminder of him, but now… It had been him who’d brought Markor into Astrid’s life on that first day at the stables and it had been him who’d taken him away again. Now, this figurine he’d given her was all that was left. Odd how some things fit together sometimes.

“So, until you… until you ended Markor’s suffering, you didn’t know whether what you saw had been real or not?”

Astrid was clearly trying to change the topic and distract herself, so Hiccup complied. “No, I couldn’t be sure. I spent hours pondering whether it had been merely a dream, wishful thinking, or a true vision.” He paused, taking a deep breath, and reached for Astrid’s hand before he went on; though whether to draw strength or offer comfort, he did not know. “I thought about what the Goddess had said… and whether I was capable of killing someone if it meant I could be with you again.”
“And… did you arrive at a conclusion?” she asked, her tone sober, unreadable.

Hiccup gulped, then shook his head. “No,” he whispered. “I mean, I’d do everything for you. But this… I don’t know. Maybe? Depending on the circumstances? I don’t think I could… could simply murder a helpless innocent in cold blood. But…” he paused again, averting his face from her scrutinising eyes. “But now that I know how it feels to lose you… I’d be capable of a lot to keep that from happening again.” He knew that she despised unnecessary deaths, so he wasn’t sure whether that was the answer she’d wanted to hear. But it was the truth nonetheless.

At first, she didn’t respond. After a few endless heartbeats though, she shifted on the bed, leaned closer, and lifted his head with her hand cradling his jaw. “You’ll do what’s right,” she whispered, a sincerity in her eyes that left him breathless. “The Goddess said you’d only have to do what comes naturally to you and I trust your judgement. Everything will be all right.”

Sighing, he closed his eyes and leaned more heavily into her touch, nuzzling against her fingers and softly kissing her palm. “I hope you’re right,” he murmured.

She kept caressing his face, her touch soft as a feather. “I’d go with what the Goddess told you. There’s always hope,” she said lightly, and even though his eyes were still closed he could hear her smile easily enough. “I do wonder what you’re supposed to do for them, though. That bit about them having a purpose in their selection sounded pretty ominous.”

Hiccup nodded, having wondered about that several times already. “I know. But all we can do is wait and see. She didn’t tell me about anything specific I’m supposed to do – except for that ending a life part.” He shrugged, then grimaced. “I mean, maybe it’s just rebuilding Ravenledge and providing a better life for the people living there. That’s going to be enough of a challenge I’d say.”

“Well, you won’t be alone with that task,” Astrid reminded him, leaning forward until her forehead rested against his own. “We can do this, together. No matter how difficult it will be.”

Smiling, his mouth searched hers for a string of light kisses. “Yeah,” he mumbled in-between against her lips. “Together.”

It was a heady thought. The last couple of days still hadn’t been enough to completely wipe away the hopelessness and pain of the two weeks before, and thinking about how they would spend their future and meet every obstacle together from now on – sometimes it still felt like too much to wrap his head around.

“I’ve got to say though,” Astrid interrupted his thoughts, giggling as they lay side by side again. “I’m surprised nothing else happened in that dream-vision of yours.”

“What was I supposed to do? Should I have kissed her and made out with her? With a Goddess?”

She giggled again, a little more teasingly. “Well, you met the Goddess of Love herself! And even though the situation warranted more, you did nothing but talk and cuddle for a bit? Most people would call that a wasted opportunity.”

“Why not?” She was still giggling. “She looked like me after all. Nobody could have blamed you, and you said it yourself, you didn’t even know that it wasn’t really me in the beginning. Or that it
was more than just a dream to begin with. It would have been perfectly justified.”

Bemused, he shook his head. She couldn’t be serious, could she? Or was there a hint of jealousy behind her amusement, some underlying worries? But no, that wasn’t like her. When he looked at her though, he noticed the teasing gleam in her eyes, the twiching of her lips. Right...

Smiling, he rolled around until he was on his side, propped up on one arm and leaning over her. Astrid looked up at him, eyes so soft despite the mischievous spark and the deep blue almost enough to lose himself in them again.

“You want to know why?” he whispered before he brushed a few strands of hair out of her face and then leaned down to kiss her again. “Because she wasn’t you.”

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In many aspects, the night hadn’t been what Astrid had expected and yet she wasn’t disappointed, not really at least. Without a doubt, she missed Hiccup’s hands on her body, his touch on sensitive skin, the heat of intimacy. But somehow, she didn’t mind. The night had passed by in another kind of intimacy, with soft caresses and relatively innocent kisses and with a lightness that she found meant even more to her. They’d talked for hours and about so many things, important and trivial alike, and while it hadn’t been the reconnecting she’d craved, it was the one she’d needed.

When she woke in the morning, she couldn’t keep a broad smile from spreading across her face. Even through her still-closed eyes, she knew that the sun was already rising, but in opposition to their usual routine, there was no need for them to hurriedly wake up and part. There was nothing keeping her from enjoying his arms loosely wrapped around her waist, his low and even breathing in her hair, and the incredibly comfortable heat purring from his body wrapped around her back. Nothing except the loud knocking against her door and Ruff’s voice echoing toward them.

“Milady? Are you decent?” There was a short pause, then, “I’m coming in now.”

Astrid rolled her eyes and nestled closer to Hiccup behind her as he stirred awake with a low grunt. She’d talked about this with Ruff the night before and they’d agreed on a few things in advance. Mainly that her maidservant wouldn’t just barge into her bedroom like she usually did to wake her. Sadly, there wouldn’t be anything indecent anytime soon anyway, so it was a little moot, really. Unless Ruff wasn’t alone, then she would say so before opening the door so Hiccup had the chance to hide. But as it was, Ruff was alone when she entered the bedroom, so Astrid couldn’t care less. She wasn’t ready yet to leave his warm embrace.

Hiccup, however, jumped awake in an instant. He sat up straight, pulling the blanket up with him, and his face went frighteningly pale as he stared at Ruff before he seemed to remember and relaxed again. Lamenting the warmth, Astrid sat up too and snuggled back against his chest, smiling as he wrapped his arms and the blanket back around her.

Ruff threw them a smirk, raising her eyebrows at the obvious state of them still being fully dressed, but then turned to pull the curtains open. “I’d say ‘Sorry for interrupting you’, but it doesn’t look like I interrupted anything anyway. I knew Tuff was exaggerating. Anyway, time to get up. Your breakfast is waiting for you at your tea table, Astrid. Hiccup, you get yours in the kitchen as usual. Sorry, but there was no way for me to sneak in your portion without raising suspicion.”

Intending to drown Ruff’s babbling out to enjoy her last minutes with Hiccup for the day, Astrid
still perked up, frowning at her maidservant’s words.

“What?”

Ruff turned, an insinuating smirk on her face as she rolled her eyes. “I said your breakfast is–”

“No, no, I got that,” Astrid interrupted her, sitting up straighter now even as her mind was whirling in confusion. “But why? Why would I eat here? What about my usual breakfast with the King and the Grand Dukes?”

On so many occasions lately, she’d wished she could simply skip the common meal and eat alone in her rooms, but not today. Today, she had something important to talk about with her father, and not just she. Duke Oswald had to agree to giving County Ravenledge to Hiccup, too, and they needed their and Eret II’s support to rebuild it. Who knew when else she, Eret, and Dagur would get the chance to talk to their fathers? She didn’t want to wait any longer.

She looked up at Hiccup, seeking… she didn’t even know what exactly. Reassurance somehow. But he looked just as confused as she felt. And worried.

“I don’t know, exactly,” Ruff said, shrugging apologetically. “All I know is that there was a change of plan somehow. Today’s hunt got cancelled and instead, your father summoned all of your suitors for an announcement.”

Beneath her hand on his chest, Hiccup trembled. “Oh, no,” he muttered. “That doesn’t sound good,”

Astrid could only agree, but she didn’t want him to fret again. He was already carrying more guilt than was necessary. She shifted until she kneeled in front of him, for once towering over him, and took his face in both her hands. “Don’t worry, okay?” she said with as much conviction as she could muster. “Whatever it is, this doesn’t change anything. Do you hear me? We belong together and nothing will ever change that. Together to the end of the road. Promise.”

Hiccup looked up at her with conflicted eyes, clearly wanting to believe her but unable to fully do so. “I hope you’re right,” he muttered, swallowing, then leaned more heavily into her touch, his forehead resting against hers. “I really do.”

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Yes, she didn’t want Hiccup to fret about whatever her father had to announce. However, not fretting about it herself was an entirely different matter. What could be so important that he cancelled all plans for the day?

Struggling to not let her nervousness show, she was standing in the audience room, next to and a little behind her father as they waited for everyone to arrive. As her future husband, Eret was allowed to stand behind her, and now, she understood how hard the previous day must have been for him. Even though the presence of the King certainly kept many from showing their envy and disdain too openly, the looks Eret got for being up here with her were anything but friendly. But even though she wished she could spare him all this, she also was grateful for his presence. It was all that kept her from falling apart.

The last time her father had made an announcement, he’d torn apart all her dreams and plans. He wouldn’t reject her upcoming betrothal to Eret and hand her back to all these leering predators in front of her because of such a stupid rumour, would he? No, certainly not. But she couldn’t help but fear for what he had to say nonetheless.
“Do you know what this is about?” she whispered, her head tilted to the side so only Eret could hear her. Surely his thoughts had gone in a similar direction than hers.

“No idea,” Eret grunted quietly. “Father wouldn’t say anything even though he clearly knows what’s going on. He was excited though, even grinning, so I guess it’s nothing too bad.”

Swallowing, Astrid nodded weakly. At least it wouldn’t be the cancellation of their betrothal. She just hoped that he was right, that it wouldn’t get too bad. She wasn’t sure how much more she could take.

A few minutes later, everyone seemed to have arrived as two servants closed the doors, and Astrid reached behind her for Eret’s hand. She needed her brother’s support, feeling a little lighter as he squeezed her reassuringly.

“I see everyone’s here now,” her father began, smiling broadly at the crowd. He seemed to be in a good mood. “Good. I have exciting news. Even though it’s still over a week until the betrothal ceremony, my daughter has made her decision already, and while I couldn’t be happier about her choice, I also see how it affects the mood and motivation for the remaining challenges.” There was consenting grumbling all over the room, many men throwing disappointed glances at her and Eret.

“I was already thinking about how to solve this problem,” her father went on, “when a note from Oramond reached me yesterday.”

Puzzled, Astrid cocked her head. Oramond was a city located north of Volantis, about a day’s ride away. She dimly remembered having been there as a child as it was famous for its market, the only one where merchants from the Northern Tribes sold their goods. Or used to sell their goods. Over the last ten years, fewer and fewer merchants had shown up until the city had lost its significance. What message from there could be so important that her father changed his plans?

She didn’t need to wait long for the answer.

“As some of you know, the lands north of Volantis still occasionally suffer from dragon attacks. This year though, there were ten times as many sightings as usual already. Livestock was stolen, and last week, one of Oramond’s storehouses was burned to the ground. And while this development is truly unfortunate, it can also be seen as a blessing in disguise as it gives us an unexpected opportunity.”

The King made a short dramatic pause, looking around into the waiting faces before he continued, his voice a little louder now. “Three decades have passed since we last held a Dragon Hunt. But now, the Gods bless us with this impeccable chance. From today on, all upcoming hunts and tournaments until the betrothal ceremony are cancelled. Instead, everyone gets the chance to prepare themselves for in four days from today, we will all travel to Oramond. From there, the first Dragon Hunt since my father’s reign will be held. It will go on for three days before a winner is determined. My daughter’s hand, while a suitable and traditional prize, is not an option anymore, but I think I’ve found an acceptable alternative. I’m happy to announce that the winner of this Dragon Hunt, the man who brings me the head of a dragon, will not only earn himself a pouch of gold and glory beyond any other, but will also receive the right to call himself the Count of Ravenledge.”

Chapter End Notes
I can't say how regularly I'm going to update from now on. When a chapter is done, I'll post it. You can follow me on Tumblr or find me on the ATOV-Discord server if you want to stay informed. :) 

Yeah, so… we all knew it wouldn't be that easy, didn't we?

And to all those people who (repeatedly) asked about when I'd FINALLY include the dragons… are you satisfied now? O:)

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!